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A Study of Narrative Strategies in Nadine Gordimer's 'The Conservationist'



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Introduction

Nadine Gordimer, a representative South African novelist and the Nobel laureate of 1991 has successfully depicted the contemporary reality in fiction in artistic terms. The novelist by holding a mirror to South Africa's political, cultural and emotional attitudes represents the language and voice of the people, their culture and tradition by introducing new avenues of experience for the readers. The motifs of the novels cover the whole range of human life and activity. Gordimer was recognized potentially major artist, a talented, serious and careful writer who treated important contemporary issues. Although a realist concerned with detailing the manners, ideas and changes in her society, including its politics and racial injustices, she had an unusual interest in the symbolic, the psychological and also the art of fiction. The mixture of the British fictional tradition, with its liberalism, individualism, social detail, and the European literary tradition of ideas and revolutionary demands in her novels required new forms, new techniques, a new consciousness.

Nadine Gordimer: Her Art of Narration

In Gordimer's fictional world, language assumes symbolic, psycho-linguistic dimensions in familial, social and cultural contexts. In her narrative technique, Gordimer employs two types of narrators. First, the narrator obviously implies the creator himself and secondly, the narrator at times seems to share some of the creator's views, but has obviously, his/her own separate identity. In most of the novels, Nadine Gordimer endows her narrators with separate identity, though the narrator at times shares some of her own views. One of the most striking and developing aspects of Nadine Gordimer's narrative technique is her style. Nadine Gordimer observes in an interview:

"I've always said, and I still feel, that style is something that is dictated by the subject; it comes about through looking for the right way to deal with a particular subject, or an aspect of a subject... I want to convey this constant shifting along, on very uncertain and uneven ground. .. In order to grasp a subject, you need to use all the means at your disposal: the inner narrative, the subject, you need to use all the means at your disposal: the inner narrative, the outer, the reflection on an individual from other people, even the different possibilities of language, the syntax itself, which take hold of different parts of reality."

Gordimer uses a variety of styles to suggest the often ironic relationships between the self and other, the individual and society. In her novels, the historical situation is the time and the place in which the individual acts; but the actions may be as much influenced by the emotional as by the objective or material world. Her narrative art becomes inevitable part of her writing style and for this purpose her most important novel *The Conservationist*.



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The Conservationist

Gordimer's sixth novel, *The Conservationist* was a joint winner of the Booker prize in 1974. As a critic remarks in the Observer (quoted on the back flap of the text),

"The author of this gravely beautiful book has transcended her considerable talent and produced one of those rare works of imaginative literature that command the special respect reserved for artistic daring and fulfilled ambition."

The narrative strategy of the novel is complex, and involves an equivocal treatment of the prediction of political change, the nature of a benighted white consciousness and the idea of conservation. These issues are examined through a sophisticated use of transtextuality- involving allegory, prophecy and the modernist narrative technique of stream of consciousness. The central protagonist of the novel, Mehring, the white 'colonizer', is not the narrator. A variety of different styles are used to suit varying needs in the novel. But a pre-eminent contrast may be that between present-tense narration of what are presented as Mehring's current actions and thoughts, and past-tense narration of past events, of the contemporary activities of others like Jacobus, the chief farmhand, and of enduring conditions and habitual activities. Gordimer's third-person narration is directed to the portrayal of black society here. The narrator privileges of the white personified in him, old, passionate and he is made to realize that Africa is not the prerogative of the white man alone.

The end of the novel is pathetic. It ends with the formal burial of the black man. Mehring has disappeared from the farm, he is phoned up at his office about money for the coffin, and the black workers perform the ritual that has been denied to the dead man. He has no name; no member of his family is present, yet, 'he had come back. He took possession of this earth, theirs; one of them'. (252) Michael Thorpe (1983:190) indicates that 'there is no obligation in custom to someone who is not a family member or a revered elder. The murdered man has dubious associations with the shanty town and may well be a casualty of gang warfare.' It finds Mehring alone at the end of the novel.

Irony

The writer makes judicious and apt use of irony in her writing. Irony is worked rather subtly at various levels in the novel. The association in Mehring's mind of landscape and objects of sexual desire reveals the irony of his position as 'Conservationist', and there are other instances which confirm this ironic situation. For example, Mehring's neighbour Old De Beer, a landowner, a man whose size bespeaks prosperity: "Old De Beer is a handsome man, Oh to wear your manhood, fatherhood like that, eh, stud and authority" (47). This is Mehring's view which is ironized by a co-existing authorial accent. His relationship with the farm is fundamentally ironic. It is he, as a conservation-minded master, who is obliged to clean up after his 'servants'. The black body is a kind of incarnation



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of irony in the novel. In this way, irony plays a vital role in the novel.

Pun

Gordimer makes very efficient use of the device of 'pun'. Mehring says everything in the sense of a pun. As Stephen Clingman (1986:158) argues:

"Puns in The Conservationist (as in Freudian theory) refer to a 'subconscious' level of the surface text, and at this level Mehring's future fate is present beneath his every slightest word."

Everything he says is in this sense a pun, totally laced with irony. Even language participates in the ironic structure of the novel, in particular the central pun, 'nothing'. When the body is first discovered, Jacobus says there is 'nothing for this man' (16). On a realistic level this is correct; there is nothing for the black man and all he represents. But when in a kind of humble pride of possession Mehring sits in his fields and declares that he 'wants for nothing' (159), his statement is ironic. Mehring says he wants the farm for relaxation, but look at what he 'gives away': "Time to let go, as the saying has it. It's agreed that's what a place like this is for". (156) In short 'nothing' is a central pun which refers both to Mehring's inner condition and to his coming inheritance.

Metaphor

Gordimer uses very illuminating metaphors in the novel. For example, the corpse of the obscure black is used as a metaphor. The corpse occupies a central position in Mehring's reflections. It haunts him, "A dead man, but he doesn't speak the same language... He feels the stirring of the shameful curiosity, like imagining what goes on behind a bathroom door, About what happens under a covering of earth..." (225). He is interrupted in his various moods - disgust, anger and joy. There is the macabre scene: "A pair of shoes appeared. They held still the shape of feet, like the ones put out to dry up at the compound" (245). The corpse surfaces as it is not carefully buried. In the novel, *The Conservationist*. Mehring's stream of consciousness is taken up in dialogue. Yet, this dialogue is almost entirely conducted inside his own mind in a continuous, obsessive debate with absent characters. As Stephen Clingman (1986:163) points out:

"In some respects The Conservationist might well be called The Conservationist, for Mehring is, in a sense, a compulsive conservationist."



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Stream of Consciousness

Technique is subservient to an ulterior cause. Within this limitation, of course, Gordimer makes experimentation with technique. It is the modernist-style stream of consciousness that dominates the narrative of *The Conservationist*, and through it Mehring's life, as barren as his farm, and his psyche are presented. Gordimer employs the interior monologue, which, in its limited point of view, is most appropriate to the experience of Africa as inside the white mind. We move forward and backward in the consciousness of the character. Through flashbacks and stream of consciousness. Mehring thinks back on the affair with Antonia, on problems posed by his son, Terry, and on sexual conquests both old and new - all interwoven with his experiences at the farm. The method of stream of consciousness is chosen, as Dominic Head (1994:106) points out, 'to present a psyche in confusion'. Mehring's final internal monologue represents an instant recapitulation of the issues that have occurred around his character through the novel:

"He's going to run, run and leave them to rape her to rob her. She'll be all right. They survive everything. Coloured or poor-white, whichever she is, their brothers or fathers take their virginity good and early. They can have it, the whole four hundred acres. ...That's a white tart and there was no intent, anyway, report these gangsters or police thugs terrorizing people on mine property, he's on a Board with the chairman of the Group this ground still belongs to No, no, no. RUN. - Come. Come and look, they're all saying. What is it? Who is it? It's Mehring. It's Mehring, down there." (264)

Mehring is obviously the focalizer in this passage which presents 'a psyche in confusion'. It associates Mehring's sexual and geographical habits of exploitation, and his underlying insecurity, a fear of being discovered, of being forced out of his cocoon of self-absorption. His worry at being discovered committing a sexual misdemeanour produces the immediate impulse to give up the farm - 'the whole four hundred acres' - as recompense. His stream of consciousness is ruptured by internal as external forces, and this suggests that the mentality he represents contains the seeds of its own destruction. Peter Kerr-Jarrett, a critic, remarks in the Sunday Telegraph (quoted on the back flap of the text), "The sounds, smells and foliage, the weaving lights of the veld, are evoked in the passages of cool delicate prose that prove their author one of the ablest descriptive writers alive".

Imagery

The novel *The Conservationist* is made up of Mehring's reminiscences, nightmares and imaginary conversations. Gordimer makes creative use of imagery. The hero works in images. The images "Pale freckled eggs" of the guinea fowls, with which the novel opens, recur and keep the action of the novel based on the farm together. There is the macabre image - the corpse of an unknown black murdered on Mehring's farm and rudely buried by the heartless Boer police. The body's inadequate burial has been haunting him for about ten years, through he has endeavoured hard to



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forget it. The murdered man is the image of the black's claim to their land. Christopher Heywood (1983:32) states:

“The Conservationist explores its theme of sterility and renewal through the imagery of landscape and physiology...”

Mehring is allowed to live in a world of dream and also reflection. The narrative which takes us through his dreams is fascinating. Mehring is unable to communicate with both the living and the dead. His fantasy takes all sorts of shapes - he is restless, he spends of his New Year sleeping alone on the varandah of a roofless outhouse on the farm, imagining that he himself could be similarly murdered - crudely and arbitrarily. He is invested with hallucinatory power and imagines all sorts of difficulties.

Symbol

As Stephen Clingman (1986:168) argues: “The dominant impulse behind *The Conservationist* is symbolic.” In the novel, symbolism has been the dominant mode. Mehring's fate is symbolically foretold on numerous occasions. But most directly the novel's symbolism is one of nature. The central motif is that of the egg, in relation to which everyone can be measured. For Mehring eggs are for conserving; for the black children on the farm they are ‘naturally’ for eating; Mehring's wife gets an artificial egg as a present from Terry. As these examples suggest, it is the black world that is most directly connected with nature. The dead body is like a child of nature whom the storm from Mozambique returns to life. The presence of the corpse shadows the entire novel until the very end when the blacks give it a proper burial. Mehring is constantly uneasy about his right to own the farm as he feels the blacks have a more natural claim to the land. In fact, the burial of the black man on the farm, in a way, symbolizes the final possession of the land by the blacks.

Gordimer makes use of the principle of parallelism. The central character, Mehring, with his extraordinary passion for women, illustrates this. Mehring has bought 400-acre Transvaal farm as an investment, because it is the fashionable thing to do, because at heart he is a conservationist. Another important motive for Mehring in acquiring his farm is his desire to secure a place to take a woman (38), and this indicates a parallel between geographical and sexual acquisition and power which highlight a seminal feature of his character. It appears that it is almost a psychological necessity of this character that drives him mad with sexual passion. Thus sex motif provides an example of parallelism to highlight the character of Mehring in a contemptible manner.

The Point of view

As pointed out by Laurence Perrine (1959:307), the novelist uses the point of view as a device for solving his difficulties. It is the point of view from which the story is told. In *The Conservationist*. Gordimer presents Mehring's capitalist point of view. His conviction that only a productive farm can be beautiful is a mercenary view, but also one of efficient husbandry. (64) Thus, Mehring displays concern for the eco- system of his farm after fire damage. He



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articulates a concern for the inter-dependence of flora and fauna. He also lays plans for the future in planting oaks (140) and European chestnuts. (210) It means that the planting of non-indigenous varieties is both conservation and colonization. There is a sense in which his desire for the land is synonymous with his exploitative habits in sexual and economic spheres. As a 'prominent industrialist associated with the economic advancement of the country at the highest level'. (264) Mehring also represents this development. As Christopher Hope (1975:54) states: "In his international ventures, selling pig-iron to the Japanese, Mehring represents an additional penetration in this period: of a unified national capital into the international market."

The sub-text of Zulu mythology consists of ten prose quotations in italics are from the Reverend Henry Callaway's *The Religious System of the Amazulu* (1970), dealing with Unkulunkulu, or the Tradition of Creation, Amatonga, or Ancestor worship; Izinyanga Zolukula, or Divination; and Abatakato, or Medical magic and Witchcraft. The quotations are the organizing points for a sub-text which slowly comes into the foreground. The story appears to be that of Mehring, and of the white in South Africa, but reveals itself as that of the blacks. Each quotation introduces an event in the novel. The quotations begin with prayers for corn (39) and for children and the continuation of life (61), to be expected in what is the fourth or fifth year of drought. For example:

"I pray for corn, that many people may come to this village of yours and make a noise, and glorify you." (39),

I ask also for children, that this village may have a large population, and that your name may never come to an end." (61)



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Language

The point has special importance in the South African context. To write in South Africa is to use only one of many languages, each of them inextricably bound to a class, caste, or race. In the novel, Gordimer presents the problem of communication in relationship between father (Mehring) and son (Terry). Father and son appear to speak different languages: 'Were they referring to the same things when they talked together? (128) Neither engages with the real subject, Terry's impending military service. The conversation begins beside a sign in three languages, 'NO THOROUGH- FARE GEEN TOEGANG AKUNANDLELA LAPHA' (134) and progresses only as far as dead end in the fields. At one point, Mehring considers Terry's use of the term 'Namibia'. 'Why that and not another invention expressive of a certain attitude towards the place?' (132) Terry favours Namibia as a neutral term, which will not suggest that the land belongs to any of the peoples occupying it. Language attempts :o say nothing here, to be neutral, an impossible task. Terry's conversation with his father also remains a neutral surface.

Another grammatical structural device used by Gordimer in the novel is 'tense'. The first section of the novel is closely aligned to Mehring, and reports, in present tense, largely from his spatio-temporal perspective: "Swaying over the ruts to the gate of the third pasture, Sunday morning the owner of the farm suddenly sees a clutch of pale freckled



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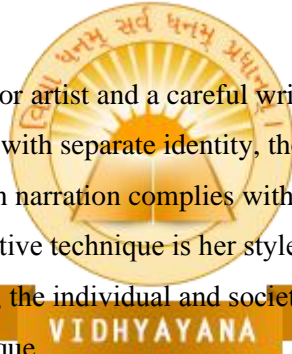
eggs....”(9) The section reports what Mehring experiences, moving from a position of considerable distance to a character-internal account of matters. In referring to his as The Farmer, the narrator uses perfective and progressive aspects, For example, “He has left the road and struck out across the veld”(10), “He is crossing a lucerne field” (21), etc. The more detached, past tense, “authorial” narrative style is used in the novel’s second section, which begins: “Mehring was not a farmer although there was farming blood somewhere, no doubt.” (20) Importantly, this subtle and continuous interweaving of detached and empathetic narration extends to characters’ speech also.

In short, *The Conservationist* has all the techniques of a modern novel; symbols and metaphor flood it, the darkened atmosphere and an ambivalence points to the future. The war between the forces of light and the forces of darkness has already begun and that for the time, Mehring is holding the fort alone. As Anniah Gowda (1997:9-10) points out:

“Gordimer has emerged a Dostoeveskian in her artistic creation of the racial situation in which one fears the other and one type of man exists simply for himself in relation to the others considered degraded below the level of existence.”

Conclusion:

Nadine Gordimer is recognized today as a major artist and a careful writer who treats important contemporary issues. In her novels, Gordimer endows her ; narrator with separate identity, though the narrator at times shares some of her own f views, The choice of first or third person narration complies with the choice of the narrator. The other developing aspect of Nadine Gordimer’s narrative technique is her style. She uses a variety of styles to suggest the ironic relationships between the self and other, the individual and society. The novelist’s use of language in the novel is another important aspect of narrative technique.



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