

# **An Ecocritical Reading of Nadine Gordimer's Fiction**

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**Abstract:**

Ecocritics seek to trace environmental crises, ideas and representations, shedding light on the interaction between man and society on the one hand, and man and physical environment on the other. The aim of this paper is to underline Gordimer's treatment of humanity's interaction with the nonhuman, to show the relationships between her narratives and the environment, to explain how the environment is represented in her fiction, to highlight how the ecological intersects with the political, social and cultural, and to articulate how far characters are able to interact and establish healthy relationships with their society and environment.

Nadine Gordimer, who grew up in a dreary environment, presents a model of the interaction between culture and nature. Despite her being one of the privileged whites, she fights against the apartheid system, which drains nature, pollutes environment, and dehumanizes the blacks. Throughout her career, there has been an interaction between the private character and the public landscape, with the landscapes conveying "a changing picture of South African veld and the ancient roots of African culture." While

Gordimer's characters, in her early novels, cannot develop a connection between their private lives and the surrounding environment, they develop , in her later ones ,an interaction with the public landscape. Gordimer presents post-apartheid South Africa as still vulnerable and plagued as before.

Gordimer's modern narratives articulate a delicate and sensitive interaction with the social and physical environments, with the ecological always intersecting with the political, cultural and social. Her fiction shows that ecological concerns are part of both the human and the non-human. Gordimer's latest narratives stress the importance of preserving and saving the environment, calling for a less threatened ecological order.

## قراءة نقدية بيئية لأدب "نادين جوردمر" القصصي

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### ملخص:

يسعى أنصار النقد البيئي إلى تتبع الأزمات البيئية في مجتمعاتهم، وإلقاء الضوء على التفاعل بين الإنسان والمجتمع من ناحية، والإنسان والبيئة المادية من ناحية أخرى.

ويهدف هذا البحث إلى إبراز معالجة الروائية جوردمر لتفاعل البشري مع غير البشري، وإظهار العلاقات بين قصصها والبيئة، وشرح كيفية تمثيل البيئة في أدبها القصصي، وبيان كيف تتفاعل الأمور البيئية مع السياسية والاجتماعية والثقافية، وأخيراً توضيح إلى أي مدى تستطيع الشخصيات التفاعل وإنشاء علاقات صحية مع المجتمع والبيئة.

إن نادين جوردمر التي نشأت في بيئة موحشة حيث عزلتها أمها عن محيطها، تقدم نموذجاً للتفاعل بين الثقافة والطبيعة. وعلى الرغم من كونها واحدة من البيض ذوي الامتيازات، فإنها تحارب نظام التفرقة العنصرية الذي يستنزف الطبيعة، ويلوث البيئة، ويجرد السود من الصفات البشرية.

إن جوردمر حساسة بيئياً، وهي تحاول أن تحدث تغييرات ثقافية في المجتمع الجنوب أفريقي. وهي تحارب الآثار المدمرة للنظام العنصري، في جنوب أفريقيا، على البيئتين المادية والاجتماعية. إن آفاق رواياتها موحشة بشكل عام، وتتسم بالكآبة، والوحدة، والصراع، والخيانة والملل.

إن سرديات جوردمر الحديثة تبرز تفاعلاً حساساً ودقيقاً مع البيئتين المادية والاجتماعية، مع تقاطع المحور البيئي دائماً مع المحاور السياسية، والثقافية والاجتماعية. كما يظهر أدبها القصصي أن الهموم البيئية هي جزء مما هو بشري ومما هو غير بشري، إن أحداث سرديات جوردمر تشدد على أهمية الحفاظ على البيئة وإنقاذها، داعية لنظام بيئي أقل تهديداً للعالم.

## ( I )

The word ecocriticism was first coined in the 1970s and since then it has become widely prominent in the literary circles. In 1992, the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment was established in the United States, becoming a major organization for ecocritics all over the world. Ecocritics has first been developed in the USA and later in Europe, being influenced and inspired by Environmentalism and particularly what is called 'Deep Ecology', which developed as a reaction to the dangers of environmental damage. Literary criticism as well as many other human sciences and issues interact with the environmentalist concerns about the destructive domination of civilization and development over wild nature. In 1996, a very comprehensive anthology, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, was published, defining ecocriticism as a literary and cultural criticism from an environmental viewpoint, and incarnating the major viewpoints and issues in US ecology until now. In *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies". Again, he adds that ecocritics and theorists ask the following questions:

How is nature represented in this sonnet? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of

this novel? Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? How can we characterize nature writing as a genre? In addition to race, class, and gender, should place become a new critical category? Do men write about nature differently than women do? In what ways has literacy itself affected humankind's relationship to the natural world? How has the concept of wilderness changed over time? In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture? What view of nature informs U.S. Government reports, corporate advertising, and televised nature documentaries, and to what rhetorical effect? What bearing might the science of ecology have on literary studies? How is science itself open to literary?"—.(The *Introduction* xviii)

In The *Environmental Imagination*, Lawrence Buell defines ecocriticism as a "study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis" (430n.20). In *Reading the Earth*, Michael p. Branch et al stress the matter of ethical commitment :-

Implicit (and often explicit) in much of this new criticism is a call for cultural change. Ecocriticism is not just a means of analyzing nature in literature :it implies a move toward more biocentric world-view, an extension of ethics, abrading of humans' conception of global community to include nonhuman life forms and the physical environment. (xiii)

Ecocritics call for environmentally sustainable human society, striving to implement cultural changes in their

societies. Michael Cohen asserts that ecocriticism “needs to inform personal and political action, in the same way that feminist criticism was able to do only a few decades ago” (Letter, "PMLA114.5: 1092 – 93 ). Environmentalist literary scholars try to show how the interaction between human culture and physical nature is incarnated in literature. On the other hand, Karen Warren, as an ecofeminist, convincingly notes " important connections between how one treats women, people of color, and the underclass on one hand and how one treats the nonhuman natural environment on the other" (Introduction xi). Ecocritics seek to trace environmental crises, ideas and representations, shedding light on the interaction between man and society on the one hand, and man and physical environment on the other. The aim of this paper is to underline Gordimer's treatment of humanity's interaction with the nonhuman, to show the relationships between her narratives and the environment, to explain how the environment is represented in her fiction, to articulate how the ecological intersects with the political, social and cultural, and to articulate how far characters are able to interact and establish healthy relationships with their society and environment.

## ( II )

Nadine Gordimer, who grew up in a dreary environment, presents a model of the interaction between culture and nature. She studies the relationship in the binary oppositions of nature/culture and nature/human and how these concepts are incarnated in her fiction. Her mother isolates her from her surroundings by keeping her away from school on the grounds of a heart complaint : " My particular solitude as an intellectual – by – inclination ... was so complete I did not even know I was one : the concept “ intellectual" gathered from reading belonged as categorically

to the northern hemisphere as snowy Christmas” (qtd. in Kanga, 1991). Gordimer's fiction incarnates a negotiation between the whites, the human, and the blacks, the non human, with the latter being looked as part of the natural environment rather than human beings in their own right. Gordimer, despite her being one of the privileged whites, fights against the apartheid system, which drains nature, pollutes environment, and dehumanizes the blacks:

I lived in this gold mining town, and there were very big mines all around us. About a mile from our house was an enormous "compound",...or barracks, where the black mine workers who came from all over Southern Africa lived... this iniquitous system was already in place. I began to think of them ... as people who were living in a really inhuman way. I think this came from reading about the conditions in the stock yards. I began to understand how people can be used as units of labor(from an interview between Gordimer and Marchant, 1986 ).

Gordimer has a keen eye as well as a strong feeling for the minute things in nature -"worms and bugs and the petals of flowers ... when [she] grew up and was free to move around [her] country ,it opened up tremendously [her] sensuous response to nature" ( Gordimer with Marchant ). On the other hand, she struggles to bring about a change in the culture of her society, stressing her ethical commitment towards the blacks. She has always tried to change the racial nature of her society, which has long resulted in social and political pollution.

Throughout Gordimer's career, there has been an interaction between the private character and the public landscape, with her landscapes conveying "a changing picture of South African veld and the ancient roots of African culture." ( Cooke 235). She uses the landscape as a

source of her metaphors, with the signs in the physical world being the locus from which her novels of the fifties and sixties develop. In the *Lying Days* (1953) she shows nature is drained, with the first three sections of the novel being titled "The Mine". In the mid-sixties, she becomes more interested in the urban environment of Johannesburg, which is polluted by racism and apartheid. She "portrays the city as a place where a more egalitarian multiracial society was being forged, but as the racial separation there actually increased through the sixties, Johannesburg came to represent for her what Dublin did for Joyce, "the centre of paralysis" (Cooke 235). In *A World of Strangers* (1958), which is set in Johannesburg, Gordimer presents an uncongenial environment, characterized by the cruelty and idiocy of apartheid versus the weakness and vulnerability of the blacks. In *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966) she illustrates a landscape dominated by pessimism and betrayal. In *A Guest of Honour*, she employs the veld as a central landscape to portray the developing interaction of observer and world observed. While Gordimer's characters, in her early novels, cannot develop a connection between their private lives and the surrounding environment, they develop, in her later ones, an interaction with the public landscape. These characters become firmly fixed in the landscapes they try to 'hold out' :

The landscape the protagonist of *The Conservationist* inhabits is typical. 'This place', he thinks, 'absorbs everything, takes everything to itself and loses everything in itself. He and the other later protagonists can no longer confront discrete public worlds outside themselves: their landscapes become something inhabited in imagination. (Cooke 235)

The failure of characters to reconcile their private lives with public environment underlines the oppression and suppression inflicted by the apartheid system in South Africa. Gordimer's situation is the same as that of her characters:-

she was increasingly frustrated as racial separation was more rigidly enforced during the fifties and the sixties. Her response was to withdraw from her world, to examine it from an increasingly detached perspective. The detachment of Gordimer's early protagonists from their landscapes is but one of the many signs of the novelist's own detachment from the world she depicts (Cooke 235).

On The other hand, in *The conservationist*, the ecological intersects with the political, with a wealthy white industrialist being guilty of raping and despoiling the country. Again the novel articulates the return of the politically repressed. When a black body is carelessly buried on the protagonist's farm by the police, it slowly rises to the surface to symbolise that the blacks will repossess the land. *The conservationist* "offers a prophetic image of a different South African future, in the best tradition of the visionary political novel. In formal terms, Gordimer throws into sharp relief the connections between conventional representations of realism and the imposition of colonial structures on the land and landscape of Africa" (qtd. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol.161 348.)

In *Burger's Daughter* (1979), there is an example of how the human brutalizes the non-human, with the black themselves being looked at as non-human. Rosa Burger, the daughter of a jailed white activist, describes how a black man inflicts pain and suffering on a donkey :-

Suddenly his body arched back with one up flung arm against the sky and lurched over as if he had been shot

and at that instant the donkey was bowed by a paroxysm that seemed to draw its four legs and head down towards the center of its body in a noose , then fling head and extremities wide again; and again the beast curved together and flew apart. I didn't see the whip, I saw agony. Agony that came from some terrible center seized within the group of donkey , cart ,driver , and people behind him, They made a single object that contracted against itself in the desperation of a hideous final energy (qtd. in Packer 777)

The scene is intensely emotional, highlighting Gordimer's sensitivity to ecological issues, in general , and the relationships between the human and the non-human , in particular. The whites brutalize the blacks, who, in turn, terrorize animals with the cycle of violence having no end. Brutal regimes have damaging effects on both the humans and the non-humans.

In *July's people*, the setting shifts from Johannesburg to a natural environment. The novel is set in an apocalyptic future, with Bam and Maureen Smalees taking refuge with their servant July's native village. Again, the novel disillusiones the Smalees and demythologizes their romantic ideas about the rural life in the African village. Maureen is defeminized and humiliated by living in a mud hut, and Bam's masculinity is degraded when his gun and truck are taken over by July and his people. The rural environment proves to be as unfriendly and disappointing as Johannesburg under the apartheid system. In a *Sport of Nature* (1987), Gordimer expands the setting to include most of Africa and extends in time to reach an independent South Africa. The novel's title indicates a natural phenomenon in which a plant suddenly changes its course from its parent stock. Hillela , the heroine, is presented as a sport of nature, " a plant,

animal, ..etc. which exhibits abnormal variation or departure from the parental stock" (Oxford English Dictionary ). By likening her heroine to an abnormal plant, Gordimer shows a highly ecological sense, with nature being a recurrent background of most of her novels. Again, she has a high sense of place, with the novel being a trajectory encompassing Tanzania, Ghana, Eastern Europe, and America. *A Sport of Nature* is "the most geographically and historically sweeping of Gordimer's novels, moving heroine , Hillela Capran ,at a dizzying pace through a disrupted childhood, abandonment by her mother at the age of four, expulsion from a boarding school, abandonment by her father, adoption by her aunts Olga and Pauline, expulsion from home by Pauline for sleeping with her cousin Sasha, and series of sexual adventures" ( qtd. in Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 161 370 ). *My Son's Story* (1990) uses both Johannesburg and the veld as a setting to illustrate the critical relationship between the blacks and the whites. A group of liberal whites enter a black township to attend a political funeral :-

No picnic party, the whites found themselves at once surrounded by , gazed at, gazing into the faces of these blacks who had stoned white drivers on the main road, who had taken control of this place out of the hands of white authority, who refused to pay for the right to exist in the decaying ruins of the war of attrition against their presence too close across the veld, these people who killed police collaborators, in their importance to stop the police killing their children. One thing to read about them in papers, to empathize with them, across the veld; Hannah felt the fear in her companions like a rise in temperature inside the vehicle. She slid

open the window beside her. Instead of stones, black hands reached in, met and touched first hers and then those of all inside who reached out to them.(qtd. in Packer 779)

This scene in the veld presents the reality of black life to the group of the liberal whites. Again, Johannesburg is the centre of political activism, an environment of tension and intense social and psychological demands. In *The House Gun* (1998), Gordimer examines the social environment of post-apartheid South Africa. Violence is still in the air with house guns being kept like house cats . It is an environment of corruption, betrayal and residual tension:

*The House Gun* explores the reverberations of violence as it penetrates the family and home , where disbelief and guilt force the characters to restructure their definitions of their relationships with each other. It is a passionate narrative. It is also an affirmation of the will to reconciliation that starts where it must, between individual men and women .Although Gordimer manages to reveal the residual tension of post-apartheid South Africa, her observation of the sustaining forces of human relationships is universal.( Exclusive Books par.5 )

The novel shows how the public environment has a damaging effect on the private mind in post-apartheid South Africa. Apartheid effects still live on, with the society being inflicted with AIDS, homosexuality and violence. In *The Pickup* (2001), the place plays a very significant role, defining and characterizing the characters' attitude towards it. Abdu, an illegal immigrant coming from the Middle East ,despises the land of his birth because it has given him nothing but misery and poverty: "It is not even a proper

country ... just a patch of desert demarcated by lines some European once drew on a map " ( Coetzee Par.5).

Julie Summers, who is a white South African from a wealthy family , falls in love with Abdu, and is ready to leave her uninteresting South African environment. She is fed up with South Africa, being " tired of the daily demands that the country , with its history of explosion and violence going back centuries, and its disheartening contrasts of poverty and affluence, makes upon the moral conscience " ( Coetzee Par.12 ). The post-apartheid South Africa is still a waste land , dominated by betrayal, violence, and danger .When a notice arrives that Abdu is to be deported , Julie readily decides to leave with him , running away from the land of her birth to a dark corner of the world. Abdu, whose actual name is revealed as Ibrahim Musa, arrives in his disdained country of origin , but he still dreams of escaping from its poverty , ignorance and misery. His country is a hell to him ,and he has " a deep thirst to shed the identity he was born into, a strategic readiness to accept the west at its own valuation" (Coetzee Par.17 ).Unexpectedly, when Ibrahim gets a visa for the United States, Julie refuses to go with him because she is now fascinated by his miserable country. Each of them is ready to run away from his/her land of birth. Julie adapts to the new environment , undergoing a significant spiritual change if not religious in nature. She is attracted by the sprit of the place, with Ibrahim's home being near the town limit. She develops the habit of rising before dawn to sit at the edge of the desert :-

Ibrahim dismisses the pull of the of desert upon his wife as silly western romanticism ... the desert has another meaning for her, which she can express only by saying that it 'is there always'. it is hard not to infer that in her lone daily confrontation with the desert , this young

woman, who has already turned her back in most ways that matter on the false gods of the materialistic west, is learning to face her own death.(Coetzee Par.26)

Julie's perception of wilderness is exceptionally high, allowing that desert to engulf and overwhelm her. The desert helps her find herself and achieve her spiritual transformation.

*Get a life* (2005) is fundamentally concerned with ecological issues, dealing with major problems threatening and troubling South Africa, mainly the AIDS epidemic, poverty and widespread crime. Paul Bannerman, a 35-year-old activist ecologist, develops an aggressive form of thyroid cancer. Paul's job as a conservationist clashes with that of his wife, Benni, who works for an advertising agency for firms that would pollute the environment. So, while he tries to protect the environment, and prevent the development of the South African bush, she supports the pollution and degradation of the environment. Paul's situation is critical, and he badly needs intense radiation treatment: "the irony of his plight becomes obvious: He's being cured by the same kind of science he's trying to stop in his country, plans for a nuclear power plant" ( Hoover Par.7 ). The final stage of treatment leaves Paul radioactive and a source of danger to others for weeks. He rejects Benni's suggestion of conceiving another child, and drifts back out to the garden of his childhood. His interest in nature is basic to his character as an ecologist. The garden of his parents' house is his personal Eden, with Gordimer making a lot of references to the Book of Genesis;-

Genesis suggests that paradise will always be lost, that mistakes are irreparable and that the older brother, Cain, will always kill Abel.

Similarly, the novel suggests that paradise will be destroyed- and regretted – that the past cannot be escaped, and that South African blacks will never catch up with the whites.( Observer review Par.13).

Paul is an ecologist concerned mainly with the fragility of South Africa, battling the siting of a nuclear reactor in Okovango Delta, an ecologically sensitive area :-

Making her hero an ecologist allows Gordimer a variety of strategies, above all, paralleling microcosm and macrocosm. The threat to Bannerman's body by a small, aggressive group of cells begins unobtrusively to map itself against the threat to South Africa from exploitation beyond that which a dry, fragile ecosystem can support...When he, too, becomes radioactive, he is forced into perceptions of the impact of radiation on even the miniature ecosystem which is a family (Observer review Par.7).

Gordimer presents post-apartheid south Africa as still vulnerable and plagued as before. She " tests out new materials; the junction of private life and an amorphous corporate juggernaut that is destroying Edenic African lands to make way for resorts and toll roads" ( Reese Par.3). South Africa is a microcosm of the vulnerable world, with nuclear reactors spreading in every corner of the globe to threaten mankind. Gordimer treats the dangers threatening the present-day South Africa, with AIDS being as fatal as the nuclear power: "when Lyndsay [ Paul's mother], in her late fifties, decides to adopt an abandoned AIDS baby whose body is disfigured by a rapist, her action could symbolize the kind of personal response needed from South Africans (Hoover Par.9).Again, Gordimer employs symbolism to

deliver her ecological message, with symbols functioning on many levels:-

A trip to a wildlife preserve to view a breeding pair of black eagles becomes a meditation on both beauty and the cruel realities of survival. 'The first egg laid hatches and is followed about a week later by a second. The two chicks, known as Cain and Abel. The first born, Cain has already grown when Abel comes out of his shell. Cain and Abel fight and generally Abel is killed by Cain and thrown from nest'. Later Paul thinks of this in relation to the dams he opposes, recognizing that the dams could end poverty for thousands of people. 'And if Abel has to be thrown from the nest by Cain, isn't that for a greater survival. The eagle allows this to happen, its all-powerful wings cannot prevail against it ( Nicol Par.3)

The second part of the novel underlines the fact that the past cannot be undone. The effects of the racism and apartheid on the social and political environment can never be obliterated. Gordimer shifts focus to Paul's parents. A 59-year-old Lyndsay, a civil-rights lawyer, reminisces about the affair she had while in her forties. This revelation leads her husband Adrian, a retired businessman, to search for a refuge, returning to pure innocent nature, through pursuing an avocation of archeology in Mexico. Both the past and the present of south Africa are vulnerable, and the south Africans need to remember their past if they seek to have a good present and a better future:-

Old south Africa was distorted by racism, but the new South Africa,... also has a potentially fatal flaw. The novel challenges the

progressivism which brashly overrides the past and insists on starting from today, on grounds both human and ecological.( Observer review Par.1 ).

### ( III )

Nadine Gordimer is ecologically sensitive, seeking to bring about cultural changes in the South African society. She fights against the destructive effects of the apartheid system in South African on the social and physical environments. The landscape of her novels are generally dreary, characterized by gloom, loneliness, conflict, betrayal, and dullness. Gordimer's ecological sense starts at an early stage of her creative career when she describes how man drains nature of its treasures, in *The Lying Days* (1953). Johannesburg is her 'unreal city', being marked by racism, oppression, crime and pollution. South Africa, under the apartheid system, is a vast waste land, where man has no relief or the least sense of security or justice. Gordimer is ethically committed to defend the rights of the blacks, and to implement political and social justice in the South African society. In her fiction, the environment means and includes the human and the non-human forms. The humans are a basic element of the physical environment. In *A World of Strangers* ( 1958), Johannesburg is presented as being an uncongenial environment to live in. In *The Late Bourgeois World*, the landscape is dominated by betrayal and corruption. In *A Guest of Honor*, the veld is used as a landscape, with the characters interacting with the surrounding environment . In *The Conservationist*, the ecological intersects with the political, with a prophetic image predicting the return of the blacks to repossess the South African land. Again, a white industrialist rapes and despoils the country. *Burger's Daughter* shows how the apartheid system has damaging effects on both the humans

and the non-humans. In *July's People*, the setting shifts from Johannesburg to a rural environment, with the latter proving to be as disappointing as the former. In *A Sport of Nature*, Gordimer likens her heroine to an abnormal plant, articulating a highly ecological sense. In *My Son's Story*, Johannesburg is still an environment of tension and political activism. *The House Gun* examines the social environment of post-Apartheid South Africa, with violence still being in the air. The society is increasingly inflicted with AIDS, homosexuality and violence. In *The Pickup*, Julie Summers develops a spiritual experience originating from the spirit of the desert environment. She rises before dawn everyday and sits at the outside limit of the desert, allowing the desert to penetrate her. She is sensitive enough to grow from the experience of living close to the desert environment. The earth and its wilderness has a fundamentally vital role in communicating spiritual illumination and wisdom to her. In *Get a life*, Gordimer tackles the environmental dangers dominating the post-apartheid South Africa. The nuclear pollution and radiation, ADIS, poverty and crime are environmental risks threatening the future of South Africa. Yet, the novel is a call for conserving and saving the present and future of the South African environment. It is a gift of regeneration, stressing the urgent need for protecting the fragile and vulnerable environment of South Africa.

Gordimer's modern narratives articulate a delicate and sensitive interaction with the social and physical environments, with the ecological always intersecting with the political, cultural and social. All ecological criticism shares the basic statement that human culture is interconnected with physical nature. Ecocriticism negotiates between the human and the non-human, having one foot in literature and the other on land. While literary theory, in

general, discusses the relations between writers, texts, and the world, with “the world” being synonymous with the social sphere, ecocriticism develops the idea of “the world” to comprise the whole ecosphere. Gordimer, in her fiction, proves that everything is interlinked with everything else, with literature playing a role in an extremely complex global system. Her fiction shows that ecological concerns are part of both the human and the non-human. Gordimer's latest narratives stress the importance of preserving and saving the environment, calling for a less threatened ecological order.

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