Chapter I

Introduction

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself,

(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

(Walt Whitman: *Song of Myself* ll.1322-24)

If Nadine Gordimer, the Nobel Prize winning novelist of South Africa seems to inhere certain contradictions in her opinions about whether the commitment of writers is to art or ideology, it has to be taken that contradictions are endemic to such apparently irreconcilables. Living in a country like South Africa where politics is an irrefutable and un-ignorable reality, Nadine Gordimer knows that “[r]esponsibility is what awaits outside the Eden of creativity” (*The Essential Gesture* 285). She recognizes that the “society’s right to make demands on the writer [is] as equal to that of the writer’s commitment to his artistic vision” (289). The writer cannot remain in his ivory tower of isolation. Analysing Camus’ statement that “it is from the moment when I shall no longer be more than a writer that I shall cease to write”, Gordimer says that she has recognized that the “greater responsibility” of the writer “is to society and not to art” (288-289). Contrary to this, elsewhere, Gordimer speaks of a writer’s commitment to art, maintaining that a writer’s freedom is,

his right to maintain and publish to the world a deep, intense, private view of the situation in which he finds his
society. If he is to work as well as he can, he must take, and be granted, freedom from the public conformity of political interpretation, morals and tastes. (104)

Citing the example of Ivan Turgenev who refused to conform to the ‘orthodoxy of opposition’, Gordimer relates how he was lambasted by the party for being a traitor to the cause by presenting the central character in his novel *Fathers and Sons*, Bazarov, as a man full of faults and contradictions, and how Turgenev defended himself by stating that “in the given case, life happened to be like that” (108). It is quite obvious that Nadine Gordimer testifies to this view in great many of her novels for she believes that “the writer’s freedom [is] to reproduce truth and reality of life even if this truth does not coincide with his own sympathies” (108). As she says, “. . . the only dictum I always remember is André Gide’s ‘salvation for the writer lies in being sincere, even against one’s better judgement’ ” (*Conversations with Nadine Gordimer* 186). This statement endorses her belief that her first duty is integrity as an artist. This dissertation seeks to unveil this seeming contradiction in this writer, and the manner in which it is reconciled.

The commitment to art and society has been a persistent concern with artists around the world. In times of social crises and turbulence this desire endures, resulting in a yoking of these two opposing concerns. Tumultuous upheavals in a society cannot be disregarded by any socially committed artist while consciousness about the preeminence of one’s art is what makes one an artist in the first place. Albert Camus averred in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1957 that
The artist forges himself to the others, midway between the beauty he cannot do without and the community he cannot tear himself away from. That is why true artists scorn nothing: they are obliged to understand rather than to judge. *(The Other Harmony 92)*

Committed artists hence make their true avowals about the state of affairs while making a lasting testament of beauty. Works of great European writers like Balzac, Stendhal, Tolstoy, Gorky and Zola, bear testimony to this. In their writings society is depicted not simply as a backdrop to essentially individual conflicts, but as the necessary material for understanding these conflicts. Thus they transcend from being merely polemic or merely aesthetic. Gordimer too has succeeded in fusing these two aspects in her writing albeit in a self-conscious way, self-consciousness being the mark of postmodern fiction.

The present thesis titled *Ethics and Aesthetics: The Dual Commitment of Nadine Gordimer in Her Writing* proposes to show how Nadine Gordimer, being at once committed to her art as well as her ethical convictions, has strived to reconcile the conflicting demands of ethical and aesthetic values in her novels, produced in the constantly shifting political clime of South Africa. The study locates the various stages in her development tracing the slippages in this dual commitment and elisions thereof during the initial stages of her career, which were overcome in the later stages as the mature artist.

Gordimer is prolific in many forms of writing, as her novels, essays, literary criticism, some two hundred odd stories, a play, her collaborative
work in photographic studies and work for television, bear testimony. The study focuses on the ten major novels written by Gordimer, where an incremental increase in her dual commitment towards art and aesthetics becomes consistently apparent. The dissertation has not included an analysis of Nadine Gordimer’s short stories to avoid a summary treatment of these, which deserve a thorough investigation of their own, and also taking into consideration the enormous scale of the material, which would render impossible a pointed study. Moreover, it is in her novels that she attempts very complex things: “I don’t consider myself a short-story writer primarily . . . because I really do want to write novels” (37-8). For, as she avows, “The novel . . . is more flexible – and more demanding. Things alter shape as you go along” (10). And she considers all her novels one big continuum:

I think that in effect we all write one book, but we write it piecemeal and often from very different points of view throughout our lives. You move on, you change, and your writing changes with this advancement. Or sometimes you regress and the writing appears to go back too. But in the end, for a writer, your work is your life and it’s a totality. (44)

All her novels represent the contemporary South African quotidian realities during the apartheid and interregnum period and chronologically mark the changing political and social clime. The three novels written after the democratic regime came into power have been dwelt upon in the conclusion of the thesis.
The term ‘Ethics’ as used here in this thesis, deals with the moral duties and obligations that one, as a human being, has towards one’s fellow beings as well as the society at large. Gottfried Keller, the Swiss writer has stated that “Everything is politics”, for in his view, as Georg Lukács clarifies,

. . . every action, thought and emotion of human beings is inseparably bound up with the life and struggles of the community, i.e. with politics: whether the humans themselves are conscious of this, unconscious of it or even trying to escape from it, objectively their actions, thoughts and emotions nevertheless spring from and run into politics.

(Studies in European Realism 9)

Living in the chimerical South African political context of the apartheid, Gordimer openly avows that her alliance with South Africa is not “as a writer” but “as a person.” She says,

I have no religion, no political dogma – only plenty of doubts about everything except my conviction that the colour bar is wrong and utterly indefensible. Thus I have found the basis of a moral code that is valid for me. Reason and emotion meet in it and perhaps this is as near to faith as I shall ever get. (Conversations with Nadine Gordimer 34-5)

She maintains that “the writer is also a human being, a citizen, with certain responsibilities towards the society that he or she lives in” (Conversations with Nadine Gordimer 76-7). It is for nothing that Gordimer approvingly uses the quote from Barthes from which the title of
the essay “The Essential Gesture” is taken: “A Writer’s enterprise – his work – is his essential gesture as a social being” It was this belief of hers that made her renounce the ambivalent liberal humanist stance she had espoused during the early part of her career, and become an engagé:

... but I think in the whole world today you simply cannot be an aware person without being involved. It’s so closely involved in one’s life and so far as political issues are concerned, I’ve really approached them from the inside. They are implicit in my life and in my values, and that is how I’ve come to write about them. (27)

Ethical concerns cannot be evaded in the name of pure art, for the act of writing is seldom innocent. Writing becomes inundated with various ideological discourses and the writer becomes committed inspite of him/herself. “The creative act is not pure. History evidences it. Sociology extracts it. The writer loses Eden, writes to be read and comes to realize that he is answerable. The writer is held responsible” (The Essential Gesture 285).

Nadine Gordimer distills political events into personal pain, which resonate through her writing. What she attempts is an imaginative integration of private and public experience: “my private preoccupations remain, running strongly beneath or alongside or intertwined with the influence of the political situation” (Conversations with Nadine Gordimer 35).

The term ‘Aesthetics’ in the thesis refers to the artist’s responsibility to his/her own art, the significance of which lies beyond
his/her societal existence. According to Nadine Gordimer the writer goes on writing “the truth as he sees it” (*The Essential Gesture* 105).

It’s part of my feeling that what a writer does is try to make sense of life. I think that’s what writing is, I think that’s what painting is. It’s seeking that thread of order and logic in the disorder, and the incredible waste and marvellous profligate character of life. What all artists are trying to do is to make sense of life. (*Conversations with Nadine Gordimer* 140)

The writer does not merely make photographic replications of the personages he comes across but perceives them as in what Primo Levi describes as a ‘metamir’ or a ‘metaphysical mirror’, which does not obey the law of optics, but reproduces these images as it is seen by the person who stands before them (*The New York Review* 28).

In an article titled ‘Adam’s Rib’ Gordimer speaks of the circumstances that led to the writing of *Burger’s Daughter* which were “contained in time by aleatory real events of politics and history” (*The New York Review* 29). But her novel was not a mere “inventory of elements” but had transcended those limits to become a “bundle of transformations” (29). Verisimilitude had been sacrificed for artistic freedom and autonomy, for aesthetics establishes the rules of its own game and allows the artist to say things that are not said in the ordinary course of events. Gordimer’s avowal is that a novelist may receive “from the ethos those lives give off, a vapour of the truth condensed, in which, a finger tracing upon a window-pane, the story may be written” (29). The
artist’s truth thus transcends the ordinary verities of life. As Leo Tolstoy held in his work “What is Art?”, “True art is not only sincere, but infectious, the more widespread the appeal and effectiveness of the work as a means for the communication of feeling, the better the work is as art” (*Masterpieces of World Philosophy* 723).

Moreover life itself defies categorizations and generalizations, being random and haphazard and prone to follow its own instinctual trajectory. Gordimer states in an interview, “To me, all art is an attempt to make a private order out of the chaos in life, whether you are a painter or a musician or a writer” (*Conversations with Nadine Gordimer* 211). The impulse behind this creative principle often stems from within one’s imaginative faculty as it does from the inducements from the outer world. Gordimer herself ratifies the truth of this statement: “The harsh lessons of daily existence, coexistence between human and human, with animals and nature, could be made of in the ordering of properties by the transforming imagination, working upon the ‘states of things’ ” (*Conversations with Nadine Gordimer* 4). The world of reality, which forms the matrix of fiction, is transmuted in the alembic of the artist’s sensibility. Gordimer acknowledges the importance of emotional response by stating that she “doesn’t know whether a cultural stimulus is needed to make a writer or a painter. It seems to come from inside as often as from outside” (*Conversations with Nadine Gordimer* 14).

Anette Horn avers, “Nadine Gordimer seems to have reconciled the conflicting demands of ethics and aesthetics ‘in an age when any transcendental basis for ethics (as for aesthetics) is being denied in the
name of politics’, as John Coetzee has stated” (‘Ethics and Aesthetics in Nadine Gordimer’s Fiction’ 1). In Gordimer we see a genuine attempt to reconcile these dual preoccupations, mainly because of her position as an activist-artist. For her both these concerns are not discrete but complementary. It is also apparent that Nadine Gordimer is able to bring these distinct elements together through her espousal of Marxist aesthetics. According to Marxist aesthetics, where the evaluation of art or literature is either in terms of its accurate and critical portrayal of society or in terms of its revolutionary potential, the aesthetic quality is also a moral quality. As asserted by Gordimer in her 1988 essay, ‘Three in a Bed: Fiction, Morals and Politics’,

Morals have bedded with story-telling since the magic of the imaginative capacity developed in the human brain . . . With this faculty fully developed, great art in fiction can evolve in imaginative revelation to fit the crises of an age that comes after its own, undreamt of when it was written. (*Living in Hope and History* 4)

In the view of Marxist critic Ernst Fischer, (as detailed in his book, *The Necessity of Art*, which examines the relationship between art and social reality), the notion of literary aesthetics is produced by the dialectical relationship between ‘form’ and ‘content’. Ordinarily, ‘form’ as representing stasis is conservative, while ‘content’, which embodies change, is revolutionary. According to Fischer content or the social factor is decisive in fashioning of artistic style. Form, driven by content, which becomes progressive and mutable, has a crucial significance from
the point of view of Marxist aesthetics. Gordimer displays a steady evolution in her artistry in writing fiction, where she departs from social realism adopted in her earlier works and progresses to the explicitly experimental modernist and innovative narrative poetics of her later works. But not only the form but also the stances become radically modified in her mature creations.

A creative writer is considered worthy, when he/she has historical sense and his/her fiction presents the historical conditions of the age. Nadine Gordimer as a writer has to be seen in the South African context from which she hails. Gordimer’s themes are interwoven with social, economic and political issues, which are placed within the historical, political and sociological context of South Africa. Writing in the fractured society of South Africa, a country torn apart by the vicious ideology of apartheid for nearly half-a-century, Gordimer consciously historicizes her moment and milieu. As Stephen Clingman observes, “. . . through their acute and sustained observation of the society she inhabits, Gordimer’s novels give us an extraordinary and unique insight into historical experience in the period in which she has been writing” (The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History From the Inside 1).

Gordimer’s South Africa is a plural society that reveals a vertical split. The pervading Manichean binaries of white/black, master/slave, powerful/powerless, hegemonic/subversive, reactionary/revolutionary, ruler/ruled, urban/rural, make an interminable play of endless significations in the South African context. The long and chequered history of South Africa spans the ante-diluvian times of African tribes
and clans, the colonial invasion and imperialist aggression, the apartheid, the rise of the black-consciousness, the revolutions, the interregnum and finally the independence and the emergence of a democratic nation, and the literature produced in the land follows the trajectory of happenings. It resonates with the dominant ideologies of the specific periods. Thus in the colonial period the works produced are rampant with colonial ideologies as in *The Story of an African Farm* by Olive Schreiner, a founding text of colonial experience, published in 1883. The slowly budding consciousness as to the horror of the policy of segregation and the sufferings of the blacks in their own land becomes apparent in literature at the turn of the century. Sarah Gertrude Millin’s *God’s Step Children* (1924) and William Plomer’s *Turbott Wolfe* usher in winds of change. *Mhudi* (1930) by Sol Plaatje, the first Black South African to write in English, Peter Abraham’s *Mine Boy* (1946), Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948), Dan Jacobson’s *A Dance in the Sun* (1956), are powerful pronouncements on the South African political and social clime. Cecil A. Abrahams in his essay “The Literature of Victims in South Africa” writes:

> It is generally accepted that Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society. Literature, both in its interpretative and prophetic segments, grows out of the confrontation that the artist experiences in relation to the experiences of his society. If we consider the society from
which South African writers emerge, we observe that since the European invasion of this country the society has been riddled by changing manifestations of slavery, race discrimination, and colonialism. It is not surprising, therefore, that the predominant subject matter of the writers of this country is taken from the many conflicts between victim and victimizer which exist in this society and that the art of the writers, both in action and moral standpoints, is inspired and fed by the continuous imposition of and intimidation by one group over another. (The Literary Criterion 59)

Which is true of writers who surfaced after the emergence of the concepts of Black Consciousness, Nationalism and Pan African ethos. Both in the Anglophone and Francophone Africa, strong anti-colonial sentiments welled up giving rise to concepts like the “negritude” by Senghor and also to severe indictments like Frantz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth. “Apprentice Writing” practiced by white-masked black-skinned writers, or as Sartre puts it ‘Graeco-Latin Negroes’ gave way to vehement fecundity of thought and word (‘Preface’ to The Wretched of the Earth 7). Writers who belong to this new phalanx include people like the Nigerian Chinua Achebe with his path breaking Things Fall Apart and Kenyan N’gugi wa Thiongo who wrote powerful novels like The River Between, and South Africans Ezekiel Mphahlele, Wole Soyinka and Louis Nkosi, to mention a few, the articulate products of an unjust society using their art as a subversive tool to confront a tyrannous authority. Here a plurality of
voices was raised against oppressive totalities of the colonialism. This new generation of writers problematised the very *raison d’être* of the white writers of Africa.

As early as the nineteenth century Anthony Trollope had averred: “South Africa is a country of black men and not of white men. It has been so; it is so; it will be so” (*South Africa* 92). With the emergence of the black consciousness the white ego was slowly being elbowed out. The generation of writers who tried to write an apologia for the state of things had to face the accusation of trying to temper the actual conditions. Liberal stances were slowly but inexorably being discounted as uneasy consciences caught up in their own contradictions.

“The Master, though in luxury’s lap he loll

. . . quakes with secret dread, and shares the hell he makes”

Citing the lines mentioned above from Thomas Pringle’s poem *African Sketches* (1834), Nadine Gordimer while describing what is wrong with the liberal stance, observes:

Pringle foreshadowed the contemporary South African liberal view – obliquely comforting to the white conscience, but none the less true – that any form of slavery degrades oppressor as well as the oppressed. Pringle states what has become a contemporary liberal South African view – liberal dissent is a form of privilege, which obliquely contributes to oppression – in one view it lends respectability to the ruling caste, in another view it fosters an illusion that changes of heart can
Neither do political realities change, nor do conditions for writing, which are problematic for everyone in South Africa. The literary landscape of the country that has always been fragmented by cultural and linguistic diversity becomes even more deeply divided by the abyss that separates the black and white experience under apartheid. Nadine Gordimer herself poses a problem for the liberal writer:

Black or white, writing in English, Afrikaans, Sesuto, Zulu, even if he successfully shoots the rapids of bannings and/or exile, any writer’s attempt to present in South Africa a totality of human experience within his own country is subverted before he sets down a word. As a white man, his fortune may change; the one thing he cannot experience is blackness – with all that implies in South Africa. As a black man, the one thing he cannot experience is whiteness – with all that implies. Each is largely outside the other’s experience potential. (118)

It was her conviction that the liberal humanism either did not have a clear ideological line or was indulging in ‘fence-sitting’, which led to her rejection of liberal attitude and the espousal of a more radical stance. And this stance that was subversive of the dominant ideology alienated her from the powers that were.

Nadine Gordimer represents the multicultural reality of South Africa, as she herself is an heir to more than one cultural tradition. Born
in the province of Transvaal on 20 November 1923 in Springs, a gold-mining town located near Johannesburg, to Isodore Gordimer a Jewish emigrant from Lithuania and Nan (Myers) Gordimer of English descent, Nadine Gordimer’s position in her country is doubly marginalized as belonging to a hegemonic white minority amongst a victimized black majority. While being a white distanced her from the blacks due to her inevitable though unwanted complicity with the whites, her liberal and later radical views alienated her from the whites. But being a writer who took her commitment to the community at large quite seriously, Gordimer was quite vociferous in denouncing the evil perpetrated by the whites. As Camus says, “the writer’s role is not free from difficult duties. By definition he cannot put himself today in the service of those who make history; he is at the service of those who suffer it” (The Other Harmony 92).

Gordimer’s worth as a writer has to be measured in the South African context of the apartheid era. Her career as writer starts at the beginning of the evil system, which became dominant with the reign of Dr. F. Malan and stretches to the whole duration of the same and even outlives it. ‘Apartheid’ was a deliberate policy of segregation, which was fostered by the Afrikaner government, which had emerged from the original notion of ‘baaskap’. Segregation had a long and historical background in South Africa, part of the English colonial heritage as well as the Afrikaner; but it was after 1948, under apartheid that the greater excesses of exploitation and oppression in the interests of white profit and white power began to occur. As Dominic Head puts it, apartheid was
“a political programme of separate development supposedly justified by the perception of Africans as a distinct subspecies of humanity, inferior to whites, and who had no historical claim to the territory of Southern Africa” (Head: Nadine Gordimer XI). In the words of the Afrikaner Prime Minister Verwoerd in 1953:

If the native in South Africa today, in any kind of school in existence, is being taught to expect that he will live his adult life under a policy of equal rights, he is making a big mistake. There is no place for him in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour. (Qtd in Africa and the Novel 128)

Apartheid, euphemistically called ‘separate and equal development’, was in reality a “rigorous social division maintained and regulated by the apartheid state in the interests of white profit and white power” (Clingman 161). It created a hyphenated society, unfairly sundered between a tyrannous, authoritative minority and a cowed, hapless majority. The horror and ignominy of the apartheid regime that had continued to flourish unhindered and unchallenged even into a post-Hitlerian era, defied the basic conceptions about the essential human values and verities. Heavy irony is that the blacks themselves mined the gold with which the South African white minority muzzled international conscience. Apartheid, which the African poet Dennis Brutus describes as “a miasma, wide as the air itself / ubiquitous as a million trifling things / our very climate”, presented an ongoing nightmare for the blacks. Louis Nkosi depicts it as “A Daily Exercise in the Absurd”: 
For a black man to live in South Africa in the second half of the twentieth century and at the same time preserve his sanity, he requires an enormous sense of humour and a surrealistic kind of brutal wit, for without a suicidal attack on Dr. Verwoerd’s armed forces, these qualities seem to provide the only means of defence against a spiritual chaos and confusion which would rob any man of his mental health.

No newspaper report about a shooting in Sharpeville could ever convey significantly the deep sense of entrapment that the black people experience under apartheid rule. It is difficult to imagine a mode of expression that would adequately describe this sense of malaise. At best an account of what a black man goes through in his daily life sounds like an exaggerated Kafka novel. (Home and Exile and Other Selections 25)

The laws implemented by the Afrikaner government were the most stringent and anti-human imaginable. Together they stood as the racist juggernaut of white power structures, pounding to dust the essential humanity of the African natives. Every aspect of the lives of Africans, Coloureds and Indians was affected by the torrent of legislation.

The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act 1949 and the Immorality Act of 1950 prohibited members of different races from having any intimate relations. The Population Registration Act 1950, which made race a legal as well as a
biological concept, . . . The Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Documents Act 1952 made it compulsory for all African men and (later women) to carry a ‘reference book’ . . . and established a country-wide system of influx control to regulate the movements of Africans and to restrict their entry into the urban areas. The Group Areas Act 1950 and its amendments and the Separate Amenities Act 1953 attempted complete physical and social separation of the races by the removal of Coloured people, Indians and Africans to the outskirts of cities and towns, rigid segregation in sport and other recreations, the use of separate facilities on trains and buses and of separate seats in public parks, all of which led to a rash of ‘Whites’ only signs across the length and breadth of the land. The Native Laws Amendment Act consolidated the control over Africans in urban areas. . . . The amended Industrial Conciliation Act 1965 legalised job reservation for whites and precluded Africans from the process of industrial conciliation over wages. (Africa Since 1800 253)

These laws, of which only a segment has been cited above, were stringently and unabashedly implemented. The police force and military authorities did not hesitate in perpetrating physical violence on supposed deviants from the prohibitive laws. These monstrous laws split the land wide apart. It ultimately also landed people on two sides of the apartheid debate, with even the whites rallying around the victimized blacks. Nadine Gordimer, definitely, might be the greatest defender of human
freedom in South Africa known for her anti-apartheid stance. She has admitted that she did not know what politics was until she saw it all happening to people. And she lashed out at the Government policies in the best way she knew – through her writings. Gordimer herself has stated, “If you write honestly about life in South Africa, apartheid damns itself” (The Essential Gesture). In her unequivocal style she lashes at apartheid – “It’s far more than a matter of prejudice or discrimination or conflict of loyalties . . . we have built a morality on it . . . we have created our own sense of sin and our own form of tragedy” ( ).

The trajectory of Nadine Gordimer’s literary career shows her political evolution from liberal humanism, to despair, and hence to intransigent anti-apartheid opposition. She mirrors a weltanschauung that divulges anti-apartheid and anti-oppression sentiments. Her fiction discloses a respect for life, which reveals the inseparability of lives in modern South Africa.

But however radical her stance is, alienation is seen to be at work in the manner in which Gordimer has moulded her artistic sensibility, which is primarily Euro-centric. Thus Gordimer is part of the mainstream western elitist hegemonic tradition of literature, which forms a continuum and which has been validated by an external metropolitan cultural media. But Gordimer tries to strike a balance between her Western lineage and African roots by extracting from the western literary tradition and yoking it to her essential South African experience, to produce a literature of synthesis. She is the only one of white African writers who hasn’t eventually returned to the metropolitan culture, which
gave birth to the literature of the empire. Hers is a firm determination to remain in South Africa so that she may invent an identity for herself as an “African” writer. Her own assertion testifies to this statement:

I haven’t left South Africa because of my feeling of commitment to the place as a human being rather than as a writer. If I went to live in England, for instance, where I have my cultural roots, I might be very happy there. I might write quite well there. I don’t feel that I would lose my identity as a writer because I was born in Africa. I’ll carry Africa with me, whenever I need to draw on it. But I do feel that as a human being, as a woman, I would then be living on the surface of whatever country I lived in. I could never have the commitment to the society in an adopted country that I have to my feeling of opposition to apartheid in South Africa.

(Conversations with Nadine Gordimer 44)

Judie Newman points out that as a white writer Gordimer’s fictional enterprise involves a refusal to exercise white proxy in the arts, but rather seeks out narrative forms which combine European and indigenous cultures and are attentive to the majority voice in South Africa.

As a result her work is both politically committed and formally innovative, involving subject matter of intense contemporary interest, to which Gordimer has responded with a multiplicity of narrative strategies. . . . While Gordimer operates within a divided society, and must be understood
within her South African context, her writing also offers an important contribution to the postmodernist reassessment of narrative poetics, and a conscious challenge to European conceptions of the novel. (Nadine Gordimer 13)

Gordimer was conscious of the political affiliation of different modes of representation. Conscious of the need for the hybridization of cultural forms – a cultural fusion of dominant European literary forms and the indigenous sources of African culture – she subtly subverts Eurocentric conventions in various ways:

. . . by establishing a counterpoint between male and female protagonists, white and black interpreters, by employing double plots which readjust the relation between social context, text and subtext; by the reconstruction of the implied reader; and by interrogating the linguistics of the South African cultural voice. (14)

Nadine Gordimer’s commitment to literature is an acknowledged fact: hers is what Sartre calls, littérature engagée. But almost from the beginning of her career Gordimer was also recognized as a potentially major artist, a talented, serious and careful writer. Heir to the politically conscious fiction of the thirties and forties, she is a truly impressive artist from the African heartland; one who could write sensitively about local life with complex consciousness. Her prose ranges in its manner according to what is being described or shown. She is primarily a realist concerned with detailing the manners, ideas and changes in her society. Yet she fuses this with the symbolic and the psychological as she
maintains a remarkable interest in the art of fiction. Her early works have a sensuous sensibility and betray a special freshness. Aesthetic sensibility is often confined to the capturing of the sensual beauty of nature, and the poetic and photographic detailing of the world and the life she observed. It is from her fourth novel that she starts developing a narrative muscle. Often her writing is consciously “high art in its nuances, its increasingly elliptical conciseness, sense of multiple ironies and self-conscious awareness of the traditions of the novel” (The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer 2). Her novels evolve from the bildûngsromân, although often written while still in the process of discovery, of exploration. As the novels probe the dilemmas of the liberal conscience in racially segregated South Africa, and the impossibility of total fulfilment, they paradoxically become more significant and yet more restricted and despairing, even depressing, seemingly a dead end. The mixture of British fictional tradition, with its liberalism, individualism, social detail and the European literary tradition of ideas and revolutionary demands, required new forms, new techniques, and a new consciousness. Gordimer’s created the new novel of Africa producing variations on the novel of the Interregnum. This new form was increasingly post-modern and polyphonic as the subject matter became the world of radicals, revolutionary situations, discussions of means and ends, commitments to the People – which represented the heightened tensions of contemporary Africa. The later novels exhibit a self consciousness about the nature of story telling and portraying, and about the essential nature and conventions of art which reveal a desire to
revise and go beyond the bourgeois novel. They display a radicalism of form and subject matter: a confusion of facts with fantasies and unreliable or dislocated multiple narration; and yet at their core is the *bildûngsromân*. We are able to identify allegorization, use of baroque, metafictional elements, multivoices, fragmentation, interweaving of subtexts, the mixing of the real with the imaginary, and the subjective with the objective, open ironies, ambiguous narratives, open endings and the like in the later fiction. The significant point is that the formal innovations become part of the politics of the novel than mere play and aestheticism. A certain juncture arrives when the ethical concerns in her novel cannot be dismantled from its aesthetic formulations, as both are inextricably intertwined. This is indeed the mark of a mature artist.

Gordimer’s careful choice of titles and epigraphs of her novels and short stories are vastly indicative of the conscious artistry that she demonstrates in their use. Chosen for their multifarious nuances and ironies these have an intimate thematic connection to the works. Revelatory of her erudition and vast fund of knowledge she has gleaned through her life, they fit like a glove to the literary work they entitle, forming its crowning glory. Gordimer herself states about the significance of her titles: “Titles either comment on or sum up the theme,” and “Short stories are such a compressed form and the title is the distillation, so to speak” (*Conversations with Nadine Gordimer* 80). In an interview with Stephen Gray in 1973 she states, “To me titles are very important – the whole story must be in the title – and if I get a bad title, as I do sometimes, then I know the story’s not going to be any good” (71).
Gordimer’s being a woman problematizes her position as a writer. Martin Green says that her name may be included among “the group of writers whose hour has just struck, the women born in the empire, who rebelled against its male ethos as well as against its imperialism and made their fiction out of that rebellion” (Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire 337). Though Gordimer never admits herself to be a feminist, being a woman writer in a male dominated society who writes about women, and their experience does make her position problematic. In her many statements on what it is to be a writer, she has unambiguously dissociated herself from a ‘feminist’ perspective. She contends that any feminist activity must remain subsidiary to the struggle against apartheid. She states that she is simply “a writer who happens to be a woman,” and amplifies this by emphasizing that she is “not a feminist except in so far as [she] carries the tattered banner of full human rights for all human beings” (Journal of Literary Studies 33,45). She upholds the concept of ‘writer as citizen’ and categorically asserts that writers are androgynous. In her ‘Introduction’ to Selected Stories she states:

As for the specific solitude of the woman-as-intellectual, I must say truthfully that my femininity has never constituted any special kind of solitude, for me. Indeed, in that small town, walled up among the mine dumps, born exiled from the European world of ideas, ignorant that such a world existed among Africans, my only genuine and innocent connection with the social life of the town – was through my femaleness. As an adolescent, at least I felt and followed
sexual attraction in common with others; that was a form of
communion I could share. Rapunzel’s hair is the right
metaphor for this femininity; by means of it, I was able to let
myself and live in the body, with others, as well as – alone –
in the mind. To be young and in the sun, my experience of
this was similar to Camus . . .

In any case, I question the existence of the specific solitude
of the woman-as-intellectual when that woman is a writer,
because when it comes to their essential faculty as writers,
all writers are androgynous beings. (The Essential Gesture
113)

In Georg Lukács view, great literature is that which manages to
penetrate beyond the surface appearances, to perceive and expose the
social totality, with all its contradictions. The Nobel Prize that came to
Gordimer in 1991 is a ratification of her convictions as well as her art.
She views the history of her society at very close quarters. Her
“interpretation of apartheid problem is viewed from the stand of a social
participant completely caught up in a swirl of the processes she wants to
assess” (‘A Woman of Noble Conviction’ Indian Review of Books 21).
Gordimer’s novels are sustained meditations and examinations of the
environment from which they emerge, and thus throw more light on that
area of darkness where apartheid divides black man from the white. Her
first three novels The Lying Days (1953), A World of Strangers (1958)
Occasion for Loving (1963), written during the days of liberal humanism,
smack of her early ambivalent attitude. They mainly focus on the
intrusion of external reality into the comfortable existence of South Africa’s middle class white society. *The Lying Days* is a semi-autobiographical bildungsromän, which offers the portrait of a sheltered Afrikaner woman, Helen Shaw who gains political consciousness through her affair with a social worker. *A World of Strangers* introduces one of the most important issues that were to dominate her later fiction, the problem of what roles whites may play in the South African liberation struggle. The novel, set in Johannesburg, relates British writer Toby Hood’s attempts to unite his white intellectual companions with several black Africans whom he had befriended. In *Occasion for Loving*, while exploring the moral dilemmas confronting the white South African liberal she also introduces one of the important themes that were to haunt her: the question of miscegenation. The incestuous affair of Ann Davis and Gideon Shibalo fails not because of state intervention but due to the repressive effects of apartheid, prestructured within one’s psyche. The novel ultimately rejects the liberal tenets of her earlier fiction thus standing as a vestibule to the strong anti-racial, anti-apartheid literary edifice she eventually erected.

The tone becomes more pessimistic in her later novels as Gordimer discards her liberal views. In novel after novel she probes the debilitating effects of apartheid on blacks as well as whites, with a growing sense of concern. *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966), more of a novella than a novel, explores the hypocrisy of the South African bourgeois mentality. The novel, banned in South Africa for twelve years, reconstructs events leading to the suicide of a naïve white political activist who had betrayed
his compatriots in exchange for clemency. The novel traces the change of heart that takes place in his erstwhile wife, Liz Van Den Sandt who, at the end of the novel, decides to help the revolutionary cause, which her dead husband had espoused. *A Guest of Honour* (1970) is about the return of an exiled revolutionary, John Bray, to his native land after independence, his disillusionment with the corruption, greed and mindlessness of the new government, his resistance and finally his assassination. Set outside South Africa, in an unnamed state that bears some resemblances to Zambia, the novel is an extraordinarily dense rendering of the neo-colonial realities of a black African state shortly after political independence, and yet can also be read as a vision of a South African future, proleptic and prophetic. *The Conservationist* (1974) is often seen as Nadine Gordimer’s version of *The Waste Land* as this novel fictionalizes the collapse of all familiar structures of power in South Africa. The novel which inaugurates a new phase in Gordimer’s career, is a different breed of novel which is mostly made up of reminiscences, nightmares, and imaginary conversations of the ‘conservationist’ Mehring, the central character, who is a wealthy farmer and businessman, who discovers an unknown corpse of a murdered black on his land, which comes to haunt him time and again. *The Conservationist* is a subtle, allusive, parable of South Africa’s repossession by its black majority.

The changing political clime finds a parallel in her works, as it does during the interregnum, which is full of morbid symptoms. As Virginia Woolf says, “Obviously the writer is in such close touch with human life
that any agitation in his subject matter must change his angle of vision. Either he focuses his sight upon the immediate problem; or he brings his subject matter into relation with the present (Collected Essays: Virginia Woolf 230). In Burger’s Daughter (1979) Gordimer portrays the impingement of political developments on personal lives of people in a transitional society. Burger’s Daughter is the most complex rendering of the theme that has preoccupied Nadine Gordimer from the beginning, “the human conflict between the desire to live a personal, private life, and the rival claim of special responsibility to one’s fellow men” (‘What Happened to “Burger’s Daughter” Or How South African Censorship Works’ 17). In July’s People (1981) Gordimer sketches the end of a white regime while analyzing the very fulcrum of political change, in the lurid, frenzied hours and days after the seizure of power. The novel traces the life of a white liberal family forced to depend on the providence of a black man who was previously their servant. Maureen and Bam Smales driven into hiding at the outbreak of the inevitable black rebellion, in their man Friday July’s ‘homeland’ have to unlearn their privileges as whites. The impact of this sudden reversal of power relationships on both whites and blacks is stupendous. The reversal of roles brings out the deep-rooted prejudices and racial supremacy lying dormant in the so-called liberal minds.

A Sport of Nature (1987) is a serious indictment of the existing social order in South Africa. The white South African heroine, Hillela, here espouses the cause of her assassinated black husband and becomes the first president of the newly created black African nation. Gordimer
often uses the paradigm of man-woman relationship in forging the reconciliation between blacks and whites. *My Son’s Story* (1990) is a tale, which stresses the need for personal ethics in the lives of political personages. It is the story of a flawed hero, Sonny, who fails to measure up to his avowed ethical and political principles in his daily personal life. The book explores the difficult relationship between Sonny, the father and Will, the son, (both coloured), who unwillingly becomes an accomplice, and a reluctant confidante in his father’s adulterous affair with the blonde Hannah.

Life does neither stop nor change all of a sudden, even as political clime changes. The novels written by Nadine Gordimer, after South Africa’s gaining of freedom, come up with fresh issues. *None to Accompany Me* (1994), *The House Gun* (1998) and *The Pick-up* (2001) deal with contemporary issues. *None to Accompany Me* situated in a period of fledgling democracy after the first non-racial elections in South Africa narrates the story of Vera Stark, a lawyer representing black’s struggle to reclaim the land. As in other novels, the personal and the public merge, as Vera weaves an interpretation of her own past into her participation in the present. *The House Gun* is the story of a domestic murder, a *crime passionel*, but like Gordimer’s other novels, is concerned with documenting the nuance of racial politics. The book is about an elite white couple whose lives are turned upside down when their son is accused of murder. *The Pick-up* traces the involvement of an illegal immigrant desperate to evade deportation, with the daughter of a powerful businessman. Set in the social mix of the new South Africa and
an Arab village in the desert, it sketches the rites of passage of
emigration/immigration, and the tribulations faced by lovers in such
world of high-tech medical treatment, of trendy restaurants, of high-
pressure jobs in public relations, business or in the medical and legal
professions, of conspicuous consumption juxtaposed with a mild but
genuine concern for ecology, conservation and social justice while
providing glimpses of the ‘New South Africa’s’ oligarchic inequalities and
iniquities. In short, it presents the world of the decent, privileged upper-
middle classes anywhere. South Africa’s appalling AIDS crisis surfaces
here. The inexplicable hostility of South Africa’s President and his
administration to antiviral drugs, and the horrific demographic
consequences that the disease has the potential to bring about, remain
deep in the background of the novel, *Get a Life*.

Critics see the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Gordimer
as an affirmation of her role in creating a literature to challenge
apartheid, since the consolidation and ultimate dissolution of the
political ideology occurs alongside the publications of her fiction from
1949 – 1990. Other than these she has won many prestigious awards
including the James Tait Black Memorial Prize; the Booker Prize of which
she was the joint winner (1974); the French Grand Aigle d’Or Prize; the
Italian Malaparte Prize and the Nelly Sachs Prize from West Germany.

Gordimer has not only won accolades but has also gained a lot of
critical attention. Several book-length studies as well as a plethora of
essays and articles have been written on her. *The Novels of Nadine*
Gordimer: History from the Inside by Stephen Clingman is one of the most informed studies on Gordimer in which he traces the central themes of her novels and brings out the developing consciousness of history through these novels. Originally written as dissertation of his research work, this book provides a valuable and illuminating tour through the career of Gordimer whose novels mirror the turbulence of South African history. He reads her work largely in terms of the conditioning force of South Africa, situating her novels in relation to social and ideological codes and charting their response to the history of their society. Dominic Head’s Nadine Gordimer is a monograph which offers a comprehensive and in depth study of the whole oeuvre of the author’s career paying attention to the texts both as a reflection of social and political events and situations in the country, and as evidence of the novelist’s constant rethinking of her craft. John Cooke’s The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: Private Lives/Public Landscapes, emphasizes the unusual childhood of the author as a decisive influence, noting the recurrent motif of the possessive mother, suggesting that Gordimer has endowed her private history with public associations, notably in the proposition that complete liberation from familial restraints requires a challenge to the dominant political order.

The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer, a collection of essays on the later works of Gordimer’s career edited by Bruce King gives the whole variety of approaches, insights, claims, readings and opinions on the changing faces of Gordimer’s fiction. Aspects on South African Literature by Christopher Heywood and Andre Brink’s Writing in a State of Siege:
Essays on Politics and Literature offer a background of a difficult literature in a problematic social setting highlighting the socio-political changes in South Africa. Judie Newman’s book-length study on the novelist appraises her works from the perspective of gender, though Gordimer herself frequently contended that any feminist activity must remain subsidiary to the struggle against apartheid. Newman’s argument is that Gordimer is doubly marginalized in South Africa as a white and as a woman. As she says, “in her novels, the interaction of private and public, the complex investigation of the connection between psychological and political, draws upon an awareness of the relation of genre to gender” (Nadine Gordimer 17).

This dissertation proposes to take over where these have left off: a study of a career of a monumental writer, spanning half a century, from the vantage point of a new millennium. The study of a writer is never wholly complete as each age brings with it fresh perspectives with which to view him/her and new critical tools with which to analyze their work. Chapter II of the dissertation titled “In the Seed Time of the Artist” makes a close study of the three early novels of the author, The Lying Days, A World of Strangers, and Occasion for Loving. The early works are characterized by her acute, almost lyrical sensitivity, richness of style and precision of notational detail. Aesthetically satisfying, these novels nevertheless project ambivalence in their ethical standpoint, of a novelist yet struggling to slough off ‘the respectable bourgeois sentiment’ that characterized the early liberal stance. Written during a period that Gordimer later described as that of the ‘Toy Telephone’, when a general
ethos of multiracialism had started to pervade the society, giving rise to social and political opposition to apartheid, but with nobody at the other end listening or responding, these novels fall a prey to the dominant ideologies of the period. Chapter III “In a Fractured Society”, takes up for analysis, the novels *The Late Bourgeois World, The Guest of Honour, and The Conservationist* written during the turbulent days of the apartheid, which undermine the liberalistic stance and herald the rise of the Black Consciousness. Mainly dealing with the political underground, and the aftermath of revolutionary activities, the novels veer away from the earlier liberal meliorism, moving towards a pronounced committed social aesthetic. Chapter IV “The Interregnum Odysseys” takes up the four novels *The Burger’s Daughter, The Sport of Nature, July’s People, and My Son’s Story* written during the turbulent period sandwiched between the old colonial, apartheid regime, and the new democratic regime under the Nationalist government, and shows how the dual concerns of ethics and aesthetics have been reconciled in them through deft scripting of the sagas of the protagonists of these novels, striking a balance between the delineation of the private and the public. The fifth and last chapter titled “Conclusion” not only sums up the findings of the thesis but also makes an assessment of the post-apartheid novels written by Gordimer, which veering away from the turbulent issues of the apartheid regime that had formed the very reason of their creation, meander into other concerns of contemporary relevance such as kidnapping, spread of Aids and so forth.