Chapter III

In a Fractured Society

We have no heroes and no wars
only victims of a sickly state
succumbing to the variegated sores
that flower under lashing rains of hate.

We have no battles and no fights
for history to record with trite remark
only captives killed on eyeless nights
and accidental dyings in the dark.

Dennis Brutus ‘For a Dead African’
(Qtd in The Literary Criterion 60-1)

In the turbulent 1960s, following the banning of black political organizations and the crushing of any effective opposition by the state secret police, a mood of despair begins to pervade the anti-apartheid circles. As Nadine Gordimer advances from one novel to another, the personal humanism that she had displayed in her early works including the first novel The Lying Days, slowly gives way to a more radical stance, making her more and more an ally of dominant black dissidence. On the artistic front her next three novels The Late Bourgeois World, A Guest of Honour and The Conservationist are unique in their forms and scope and demonstrate the range of the author’s developing narrative skills. Each embodies a range of techniques, produced by her desire to react against and build upon the previous work; and each stands in a trans-textual relationship to a single, dominant and specific textual source.
In a 1979 interview Gordimer observes that her 1963 novella *The Late Bourgeois World*, marks the turning point, as it “shows the breakdown of my belief in the liberal ideals” (Interview in *Kunapipi* 2). And Gordimer had preferred to keep her “bosom franchis’d and allegiance clear”. The shift in allegiance had occurred after Gordimer was convinced of the inadequacies and the contradictions inherent in liberal humanistic stance. *Occasion for Loving*, which was written during the Sharpeville massacre of 1960, had registered the total failure of multi-racialism and liberal humanism. Gordimer in one of her interviews in 1974 said, “Liberals are people who make promises they have no power to keep” (Quoted in Morphet 54). What made liberal a dirty word was not the fact that liberals were powerless, but that the term had been marked in a very pronounced way within the Black Consciousness text, which derived its specific articulations in part from Frantz Fanon and in part from the American Black Power movement. The political barometer of the decade was on the rise with the rising antagonism towards the apartheid government and radical activism against it. The founding of the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), an indigenous party, had resulted in the rejection of multi-racial concepts, since the members viewed the oppression in South Africa as a national oppression – the oppression of a black indigenous majority by a white settler minority. This had led to the denunciation of liberal meliorism espoused by some of the white intellectuals, and had moved slowly towards black exclusivity. This rejection of the liberal principles was a result of what is often termed the ‘bumiputera’ rhetoric in multi-
cultural discourses which legitimizes the right of the autochthonous population over their native land as they are the aboriginal – the children of the earth. In the African context it drew its resonances from the ‘mother’s milk’ ideology which had grown out of three hundred years of oppression. The Black Consciousness posited that white liberals were intrinsically part of white supremacy despite their ideological affiliations, and even when ostensibly opposed to white dominance, they acted on behalf of the blacks instead of letting blacks act for themselves. Liz Van Den Sandt, the central character in Gordimer’s novel, *The Late Bourgeois World*, makes a similar observation about her husband Max’s experience:

> But the Africans themselves did not take the Liberal Party seriously; he saw himself set aside in a white group that Africans felt had the well-meaning presumption to speak for them. (*The Late Bourgeois World* 42)

Furthermore, Black Consciousness Movement sought to highlight black dignity and power and to underscore the different social and political conditions as well as the seemingly ineradicable gap of existential and psychological distance that lay between the blacks and the whites. In addition, the peaceful methods that had been the orthodoxy of the 1950s, had given way to more explicit militancy. The rise of such underground movements as ‘Umkhonto we Siswe’ (‘The Spear of the Nation’), ‘Poqo’ (‘Alone’ or ‘Pure’) and ‘The African Resistance Movement’ or the ‘ARM’, marks this trend. The despair that followed in the wake of Verwoerd’s stringent measures against apartheid, whose government proved to be “as unyielding as walls of granite”, led to small
largely unsuccessful acts of sabotage by several young idealistic members of the Liberal Party. These maverick ideologists had generated various fringe movements, such as the ARM, that precariously straddled the wall separating the democracy and the black majority. They had tried to play a part in the revolutionary measures by attempting a series of bombings of post offices and other strategic targets, but their militant overtures were soon nipped in the bud. Gordimer tries to delineate in particular, such a failed maverick activist in her novella, *The Late Bourgeois World*. Gordimer states, “My short novel *The Late Bourgeois World* was an attempt to look into the specific character of the social climate that produced the wave of young white saboteurs in 1963-64” (Quoted in Clingman). As Bruce King observes:

> Her early novels appear to have originated in the lives of people she observed who had themselves engaged in such quests [of self discovery]. As the novels probed the dilemmas of the liberal conscience in racially segregated South Africa, and the impossibility of total fulfilment, they paradoxically became both more significant yet more restricted and despairing, even depressing, seemingly a dead end. The mixture of the British fictional tradition, with its liberalism, individualism, social detail and the European literary tradition of ideas and revolutionary demands, required new forms, new techniques, a new consciousness. The personal had to be more firmly anchored in the rapidly changing politics of black Africa. *The Late Bourgeois World*, with its
main character’s moral and political despair, appeared the
dead end of a road, as if the South African novel about personal
relations could go no further in the darkening climate of
apartheid. (The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer, 3)

Thus The Late Bourgeois World, written in response to a historical
situation, attempts to find new ways of understanding the contemporary,
chaotic, political world and the demands it makes on the individual. The
result was a slim novel of chilling reality, explicitly linked to actual
historical events that it was banned in South Africa. By 1960s South
Africa had entered into a previously unchartered era. If the transition to
violent resistance marked the first wave of the double movement, the
unexpected brutality with which the Repressive State machinery had
climaxed the resistance formed the second. As a result, The Late
Bourgeois World emerges from the specific experience rooted on the false
start of the South African revolution and the outright victory of the
counter revolution. The story is set in South Africa of the early 1960s
after the authorities “had broken the backbone of the underground
movement to which most activists looked for a change in the existing
order” (Ogungbesan 31). A substantial part of the novel is devoted to an
examination of the revolutionary moment of the early 1960s, of its
impulses and of its weaknesses. Stephen Clingman says that the novel
exists in a stunned world, down on the ground after having been knocked
off its feet (95). Gordimer herself had realized and stated in her 1965
interview with Alan Ross, that politics being a character in South Africa,
nobody could steer clear of it:
... the political situation has moulded the lives of people around me. Not only obvious confrontations of black and white are affected; whites among themselves are shaped by their peculiar position, just as black people are by theirs. I write about their private selves; often, even in the most private situations, they are what they are because their lives are regulated and their mores formed by the political situation. In South Africa, society is the political situation. To paraphrase, one might say (too often), politics is character in SA. I have come to the abstractions of politics through the flesh and blood of individual behaviour. I didn’t know what politics was about until I saw it all happening to people. If I’ve been influenced to recognize man as a political animal, in my writing, then that’s come about through living in South Africa. (Conversations with Nadine Gordimer 35)

Accordingly, in The Late Bourgeois World, the inescapability of politics forms one of the major themes that Gordimer draws upon. When, through the character of Max Van Den Sandt she portrays a failed revolutionary, through Liz, the heroine she exposes the inevitability of a political destiny for the individual, in South Africa. Though Elizabeth Van Den Sandt turns “her sardonic interior monologue on to her own failure to connect her smart liberal patter to any structured political activity in her life”, towards the end of the novel, we see a revolutionary, albeit with a clandestine agenda, on the make (South African Literatures
235). Her ex-husband Max, a naïve idealist, actually in rebellion against his privileged parents, resorted to sabotage and under secret-police interrogation, betrayed his revolutionary cell and later committed suicide. After the death of her husband, Liz gets a chance to take a stock of her life, which had so long been placid and noncommittal. Max dead proves to be more pervasive and persuasive than Max living. Tucked away into a corner of her subconscious, he resurrects after his suicide into her rising consciousness, being re-evaluated and reassessed for what he had done for the cause. Liz Van Den Sandt epitomizes the truth behind George Steiner’s observation in his essay ‘A Kind of Survivor’ in *Language and Silence*, that “Men are accomplices to what leaves them indifferent”, which is later quoted by Gordimer in her speech ‘Speak Out: The Necessity for Protest’ at an ‘Annual Academic Freedom Lecture’ at the University of Natal (*The Essential Gesture* 92). The ‘living and partly living’ existence of the complacent individual, who feels his/her own morsel to be secure, and who averts his/her eyes as well as conscience from unpalatable truths, is held in scrutiny in Liz’ character. She realizes that Max, inspite of being a failure and a traitor in the eyes of the society had at least made the essential gesture of protest against the morbid symptoms of the society and had tried to hold on to his convictions in his own feeble way.

He is dead now. He didn’t die for them – the people, but perhaps he did more than that. In his attempts to live he lost even his self-respect, in betrayal. He risked everything for them and lost everything. He gave his life in every way
there is; and going down to the bed of the sea is the last. (55)

Max is a representative of the numerous white youths, mainly students and young professionals, who recognizing themselves to be privileged by their race, had decided to turn to revolutionary praxis to take up the cause and alleviate the pain of those they recognized as less fortunate. Gordimer herself testifies to the commitment of the youths and students to social causes:

. . . there are enough young people among the students at the English-language universities to dig up, alive and kicking, the concept of protest that was buried under the weight of the Suppression of Communism Act and its satellite laws and overgrown – an unmarked grave from which people prefer to avert their eyes – by a dusty ivy of intimidation. (The Essential Gesture 92)

In his own, personal way, Max had dug up his concept of protest from under huge monolithic mausoleums of white legislature, overgrown by a dusty ivy of intimidation. The confrontation of Liz to this fact forms the peripeteia of the novel. She acknowledges the veracity of Maxim Gorky’s statement that “the madness of the brave is the wisdom of life” (The Late Bourgeois World 55). And she gropes for the various possible avenues of resistance open to her in the manner of Frantz Kafka: “There are possibilities for me, certainly; but under what stone do they lie?” (45). The two quotes, embedded within the text as the subliminal musings of Liz, and without the text as paratext in the guise of epigraphs, explore
the themes of commitment and positive action, which form the ethical core of the work.

Gordimer addresses her novel to the whites. The whites are supposedly free, but in reality they are incarcerated in a more timeless prison than the blacks. *The Late Bourgeois World*, like Albert Camus’ *The Stranger* and Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*, makes use of the metaphor of imprisonment as its central symbol for the human condition. The white suburbs in which the story is set constitute “the white laager”, as claustrophobic as any gaol (Ogungbesan 31-2). The whole of Liz’ interior monologue through which the narrative unfurrows, is directed towards an implied, unseen, omnipresent white readership. In certain passages the narrator’s sarcasm and animus towards her own myopic and conscienceless people surfaces distancing herself from their lot,

I was excited with hatred of her self-pity, the very smell of her stank in my nostrils. *Oh we bathed and perfumed and depilated white ladies, in whose wombs the sanctity of the white race is entombed! What concoction of musk and boiled petals can disguise the dirt done in the name of that sanctity?* Max took that dirt upon himself, tarred and feathered himself with it, and she complained of her martyred respectability. [Italics mine]. (*The Late Bourgeois World* 25)

Even Max has nothing but contempt for his family and its bourgeois values. Through Max, Gordimer depicts the South African society in caricatures of affluence. “‘Yes’ Max said, ‘my mother puts a frilly cover over everything; the lavatory seat, her mind –’ ” (22). Equating his
mother’s mind with the lavatory seat, and thereby highlighting her nature of trying to cover-up the seamy aspects of life, is one of the less derisive remarks that Max makes. He is scathing and hectoring as he proposes a toast to the newly weds during his sister Queenie’s marriage and addresses the privileged white company gathered at the nuptial ceremony:

‘There’s a whole world outside this’ . . . ‘Shut outside. Kept out. Shutting this in . . . Don’t stay inside and let your arteries harden, like theirs . . . I’m not talking about the sort of thing some of them have, those who have had their thrombosis, I don’t mean veins gone furry through sitting around in places like this fine club and having more than enough to eat’ . . . ‘What I’m asking you to looking out for is – is moral sclerosis. Moral sclerosis. Hardening of the heart, narrowing of the mind; while the dividends go up. The thing that makes them distribute free blankets in the location in winter, while refusing to pay wages people could live on. Smugness. Among us, you can’t be too young to pick it up. It sets in pretty quick. More widespread than bilharzia in the rivers, and a damned sight harder to cure. (30-1)

The reaction that he elicits is horrific. Liz recalls the response of the congregated elite: “They were smiling blindly, deafly, keeping their attitudes of bland attention as they would have done if the hostess had lost her panties on the dance floor, or they had suddenly overheard an embarrassing private noise” (31).
When they got married, Max had rejected his family’s wealth and attitudes; and Liz, the world of her father’s shoddy little small-town shop. Yet these backgrounds rise up and destroy their marriage. Max’s parents are extremely condescending to the two vagrants who had managed to get a family started like ‘clever . . . naughty children’, and they expect Liz to be a stable influence on him:

The Van Den Sandts must have relied on me to lead Max by the penis, as it were, into the life he was born for; and I suppose that was why she was inclined to take with sophisticated tolerance . . . the fact that I got myself pregnant at eighteen. ‘It’s just a mistake, that’s all,’ she said in a sort of soothing baby-talk, as if a puppy had wet the carpet. (26)

Max’s upbringing has dulled him to others’ true needs and ultimately robbed him of his self-respect. Liz describes his childhood: “Driven to school and home again by the chauffeur every day, and then shut out of the rooms where grownups were at their meetings and parties, at the Van Den Sandts, he was ministered to like a prince in a tower” (42-3). At the same time Liz’ upbringing made her expect from him an impossible embodiment of truth and beauty. Life with Max made her realize the grand idol had feet of clay. During her ruminations after hearing about Max’s death Liz thinks: “I believe I know all there was to know about Max. To know all may be to forgive, but it is not to love. You can know too much for love” (39). She also knows his true, idealistic, ‘head in the clouds’ nature. “Max simply did not know what it was to live with others;
he knew all the rest of us as he knew Raskolnikov and Emma Bovary, Dr Copeland and Törless, shut up reading alone in his room on the farm” (44).

Max loses everything ‘in his attempts to love’. He gives every thing to the revolutionary cause, but he has a misplaced sense of duty. His parents are shocked that their son had stooped to bombing but would have happily buried the secret had they a choice.

Only public injury counts, with them. In one of those twists of an ancient code degenerating far from its source that is characteristic of a civilization brought over the sea and kept in mothballs, the Van Den Sandts interpret honour as something that exists in the eyes of others; you can do each other to death in private: shame or pain come only from what leaks out. (28)

But by going against their dictates he had torn up “his only birthright,” the life membership in the white club (44).

However much Liz may speak in the accents of despair, the novel ends with her contemplating a fringe renewal of political activity and perhaps a sexual relationship across the colour-line which might even be called love, based simply on what each has and can give to the other. Towards the end of the novel she is accosted by Luke Fokase the black revolutionary, to act as an agent to filter in money through her grandmother’s savings account into the country to aid the revolutionary cause.
Gordimer’s novels progressively move towards a more committed social aesthetic, with *The Late Bourgeois World* forming something of an aesthetic manifesto. The last fuss of superfluous detail disappears in *The Late Bourgeois World*, the most economical of novels. The action of *The Late Bourgeois World* is tightly fitted into the unity of a single day, as in Joyce’s magnum opus *Ulysses*. Though the analogy seems rather far-fetched, as Gordimer’s slim book is in no way comparable to the masterpiece of the millennium, Joycean overtones resonate in the novella, as subconscious, but surfacing night-thoughts connect with archetypal realities. In a retrospective interview Gordimer indicates her conviction that this novel marks the beginning of her maturity as a writer of narrative fiction. She is of the opinion that her early novels betray narrative weakness – “they fall into beautiful set pieces” – and only with *The Late Bourgeois World* does she begin “to develop the narrative muscle” (Interview in *Paris Review* 100). Gordimer is right to draw this distinction based on narrative form: *The Late Bourgeois World* registers the fragmentation of the liberal ideology, and does so through a skillful disruption of form in a more overt manner than in her previous work (Head 78). The structure of the novel is one which registers primarily the mood that gave rise to the campaign of sabotage in South Africa, in the first place, a mood that of alienation and doubt concerning the possibility of political progress: these uncertainties are represented in the experimental nature of the novella’s form.

As mentioned in the beginning, novels written by Gordimer during this phase are linked to specific texts trans-textually. Judie Newman
points out the vital inter-textual connections between *The Late Bourgeois World* and Marxist critic Ernst Fischer’s *The Necessity of Art* (35-36). The title is taken from Fischer’s book which is a work in Marxist aesthetics. Head says: Fischer’s preoccupation with questions of form – with regard to both social structures, and the means of artistic expression – seems to have inspired Gordimer’s formal project in this work which makes the same connection. Fischer’s book examines the relationship between art and social reality, concentrating on questions of form and content. Fischer maintained that ‘truthful’ art, in a decaying society must reflect that social decay, and yet must also indicate means of social improvement. *The Late Bourgeois World* is the first book that reflects social decay overtly in its form “as a sustained fact of composition” (Head 79). According to Fischer art should be able to perform a dual function, reflect the situation of decay and help change it. Art represents freedom of the spirit and therefore is automatically on the side of the oppressed (*The Essential Gesture* 291). Fischer investigates the necessity of art – as well as its questionable role in the late bourgeois world. All art is conditioned by time and represents humanity as it corresponds to the ideas and aspirations of a particular historical situation. Speaking about the origins of art Fischer maintains that art has nothing to do with aesthetic desire or beauty, but was “a magic tool or a weapon of the human collective in its struggle for survival” (Fischer 35-6). Art evolved towards a transformative social function, reuniting the individual with communal existence. In this analysis the late bourgeois art fails in its social function as it lacks a vision for the future, as
opposed to the hopeful historical perspective of socialist art. The vision of the future that Fischer associates with the artists and the writers of the late bourgeois world is negative and even apocalyptic. The socialist artist must remove this apocalyptic shadow by offering a different possibility both rational and humane (Head 79). Liz’ unemotional tone and detached objectivity have to be considered as pathological symptoms of a decaying, callous, dehumanized world that she inhabits. Her eventual tentative decision to help procure money for the revolutionary underground has to be seen as trying to rectify and transform the historical condition.

Given Fischer’s emphasis on content, Gordimer attempts to fashion a form appropriate to the content. This novella represents an experiment in genre designed to convey the problems of a particular situation. The idealism of Fischer’s aesthetic and the grim nature of the social reality which forms the content, underpin *The Late Bourgeois World*. The book is an exploration which works through and beyond Fischer's aesthetic in order to rationalize the function of art in the South African context.

“A particular feature of shorter narrative forms”, Dominic Head says, “is that ideas are expressed obliquely, and there is an ambiguity in *The Late Bourgeois World* that stems from this oblique expression” (82). The ambiguity arises from the technical limitations of point of view, which in the case of *The Late Bourgeois World* is limited to a single, alienated consciousness that of Liz Van Den Sandt. Gordimer has tried to circumvent this difficulty through a dialogic narrative structure. But this in turn has created a narrative that is inconsistent in places which
leads to a certain narrative unreliability. A measure of this ambiguity is suggested in Elizabeth’s vision of her domestic future. It contains a salutary wariness, and resistance to the self-contained bourgeois family unit that Liz’ lover Graham offers, a resistance in Fischer’s terms to a “social form no longer in keeping with the times” (130). The stability of the bourgeois life is enticing and desirable but not really possible.

Fischer condemnation of the late bourgeois world is his rejection of technological advancement, principally as represented by a nuclear age of pessimistic visions of apocalypse. Liz’ conversation with Graham occurs against the backdrop of one of a series of super-sunsets “a romanticized picture that made the room look drab” (*The Late Bourgeois World* 63). Liz does not consider the sunset beautiful which might be the result of nuclear fall-out. Where Graham envisages the sunset in aesthetic terms, supplying a Chagallian image of floating lovers which encapsulates the mystic desire for flight from reality, Liz finds it curiously dated: “Like the background to a huge Victorian landscape. Something with a quotation underneath with lot of references to the Soul and God’s Glory and the Infinite . . . what my grandmother would have been taught was beautiful” (110). Newman opines, “the overblown sunset suggests to Liz only the absurdity of an atemporal, transcendent aesthetic; an understanding which derives from her preceding visit to her grandmother on the latter’s 87th birthday” (37).

Liz had earlier contrasted the unchanging landscape of the veldt with her awareness, fostered by Max’s death, that “Time is change” (*The Late Bourgeois World* 9-10). In the home for the aged, where “There was
no sense of the day of the week . . . No seasons either. Spring or winter, it feels the same” (57), her grandmother’s senile amnesia projects a nightmarish image of timeless stasis. Imagistically the two women are associated when Graham sends them identically funereal bouquets. To her grandmother’s terrified question “What happened?” the décor of her grandmother’s room, comprising the signed photographs of the artists of her youth, suggests that “it always seems that nothing has happened” (62). In the great nullity of her existence, living upon dividends from past capital, the old lady, emblematic of the South African bourgeoisie, will know change only as death (Newman 37-8).

A means of escape from this Limbo is offered by Luke Fokase, who asks Liz to use her power of attorney over her grandmother’s account to channel funds to the PAC. Liz recognizes Luke as her ‘Orpheus’ come to fetch ‘pale Eurydice’ from her ‘life-insured Shades’ (89). As Jan Mohamed has suggested, Gordimer ironizes a myth, transforming Luke, a member of the political underworld, into Liz’ rescuer from the terminal white laager. She reverses its traditional Manichaean allegory of life and death: black Orpheus/Luke’s underground world is real, human, while white Eurydice/Elizabeth’s above-world is peopled with ghostly shades. The particular mythic reference carries both an aesthetic/mystical implication and a political message. Reference is to Orphic cult and Orpheus as the archetypal artist. In the decaying state of interregnum, religion, as much as art, are historically involved. And evidently there is a crucial subversion of a bourgeois form of fiction – the private bank account put to the service of revolutionary ends.
At the close of the novel Max’s death has been superseded by the news of the technological exploits of man in space. Fischer describes art in the late bourgeois world as in danger of being driven out by science and technology. “When the human race can fly to the moon is there any real need for moonstruck poets? . . . The astronomer can see what the poet merely dreamt of” (The Necessity of Art 217). Liz is haunted as she tries to sleep, by the thoughts of the astronauts trying to “transcend all kinds of human limits (The Late Bourgeois World 91). But she is brought back to the present with a bump with the haunting suggestion of Luke Fokase. Human time eclipses the mystificatory attractions of technological transcendence. Gordimer here uses two potent symbols. The first, the foetal position that Liz assumes, referring to the possibility of rebirth into a new world of sense and sensibility and the second is the thought of the bank account that grows like ‘sexual tumescence’ pointing to a reawakening of Liz’ deadened emotions at the hint of a purposeful life. The novel does not speak of Liz’ final decisions, but leaves it open-ended with a suggestion of her possible involvement in South African politics. There is an implication that this Eurydice with follow her Orpheus into the future without looking back, as the thought gives her a frisson of excitement and fear. Though lying in timeless darkness, Liz finds that her heart supplies the temporal beat: ‘There is no clock in the room . . . but the slow even beats of my heart repeat to me, like a clock: afraid, alive, afraid, alive, afraid, alive . . .’ (95).

Stephen Clingman observes that circles, “the mythic symbol of fulfilment and completion, surround Elizabeth. The twenty-four hour
day-in-her-life is approaching full turn, while in the silence of night the world is revolving, the astronauts orbiting above it” (The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside 109). She herself is at the ‘still point of the turning world’, as she accosts in a day’s events, the setting of the bourgeois world and the dawn of a new revolutionary world order, at this intersection of time with the timeless.

Critics like Di Maio see The Late Bourgeois World as an expression of the strength and constraints of the discrete and highly evolved form of the short novel. A short novel, according to them is a form in its own right. “A short novel is something in itself, neither a lengthily written short story nor the refurbished attempt at a novel sent out into the world with its hat clapped on at the eightieth page” (qtd in Cross-Cultural Voices: Investigations into the Post-colonial 63). A preeminently modern form – its economy of composition draws together and compresses the complexity of the world it portrays into essential unity, a world whose kernel often appears scattered in multiple chaotic fragments. As Milan Kundera who asserts the urgency of new techniques of ellipsis and condensation in modern fiction defines, the short novel is the art of ‘dépouillement radical’ (radical scrutiny) in that it goes straight to the core of things while curtailing frills. In the short novel the number of main characters is usually limited to two or three, while the minor characters double up as extras. The protagonist, who provides with the main point of view and is the central narrative voice, is backed up by an antagonist, an ineliminable doppelgänger (a double) to whom the protagonist is fatally bound. Elisabeth, whose perspective and voice are self-
articulated, forms the analogical centre of the narration. Max reveals himself to be Liz’ doppelgänger, even though he appears only in absentia all along the story. As much as Liz is the pivot of the narration, the relationship between her and her late husband constitutes the axis of her tale. Every other relationship somehow springs from theirs: Bobo is their son, Graham is Liz’ lover, and was Max’s solicitor at the trial in which he was implicated. Luke, the PAC member, was Max’s political acquaintance. Liz’ and Max’s spiritual and political fate is ineluctably one and the same. The nature of their relationship appears very clear from the very first scene.

I opened the telegram and said, “He’s dead” – . . . It read MAX FOUND DROWNED IN CAR CAPETOWN HARBOUR . . . Graham, reading over the telegram, said, “Why – I wonder”. I felt immense irritation break out like cold sweat and answered. “Because of me!” (The Late Bourgeois World 7)

Oh will this child’s game never end, between Max and me? That was what turned me cold with anger when the telegram came; the feeling that he was looking over the shoulder of his death to see . . . if I were looking? (10)

Against both Graham the Übermensch (the man of the world) and Luke the underground man, all who have some influence on Liz, stands Max the madman: the man who rebels against his family and society, makes a bomb, and tries to blow up a post office, who betrays himself twice by disrespecting the imposed white social code and later by turning his friends in, who finally wins over the “moral sclerosis” that he had
tried to avoid, by choosing death by water and undergoing a sea-change. Correspondingly, at his death, Liz his doppelgänger undergoes a major change too. She is the only one who fully understands Max's gesture and is shaken by it, so much so that she feels morally obliged to continue his struggle. As long as the oppression of the blacks remains, no white man can ever be free. From birth, everyone is thrust into an absurd world that he must struggle to straighten out before he can begin the leisure of living. Finally Elizabeth understands that the struggle to be free is in itself a kind of freedom; that within her cloying society only rebellion provides an avenue for human beings to reach forward to one another.

What actually happens when finally the much desired Utopia floats into the ken is what Gordimer explores in her next novel *A Guest of Honour*.

**A Guest of Honour**

Gordimer follows her short exploration of the fictional genre with an extensive and exhaustive attempt to produce a dense work of immense range and magnitude, and her longest novel till date. This novel, *A Guest of Honour* is reminiscent of a classic realist novel, which evokes a sustained and detailed sense of political reality. “The writing of *A Guest of Honour* had a technically liberating effect on Gordimer”, (*A Guide to 20th Century Literature in English* 101) as the later novels reflect a penchant for growing more complex and intense. In a 1972 interview with Diane Cassere, Gordimer says, “I tried to write a political novel treating the political theme as personally as a love story. I tried to put flesh on what have come to be known as the dry bones of political life” (*Conversations with Nadine Gordimer* 55). A rich and powerful novel
permeated by the sense of an African World, A Guest of Honour is a turning point in her treatment of black Africans. Its verisimilitude is both sustained and varied. Lionel Trilling’s comment is well illustrated in A Guest of Honour.

... in any extended work of literature the aesthetic effect ... depends in large degree upon intellectual power, upon the amount and recalcitrance of the material the mind works on, and upon the mind’s success in mastering the large material ... (The Liberal Imagination, 295)

K. Venkata Reddy declares that it is a novel of total immersions – physical, moral, social and political (Critical Studies in Commonwealth Literature 71). It teems with human life, with landscapes of the map and of the mind, with events and insights. According to him, Gordimer weaves an intricate tapestry the threads of which are “love, friendship, idealism, freedom and betrayal” (71).

For the first time Gordimer sets up her location outside South Africa. The country that she invents for A Guest of Honour is a synthesis of a number of African countries. The unnamed republic bearing strong resemblance to Central Africa, specifically Zambia, is a long way from the South African settings of Nadine Gordimer’s earlier works. Yet her understanding of the historical forces at work in the independent, black Africa is remarkable. The clue lies in Gordimer’s statement that she had been writing African novels all along. The inference is that she considers her South African experience as quintessentially African. Furthermore, A Guest of Honour has a great deal to do with her South African historical
consciousness at the time when it was written. It suggests that political independence in South Africa will be neither a terminus nor an apocalypse, but a prologue to a new set of challenges and opportunities in which the aim can be achieved only through blemished means.

The new direction in Gordimer’s writing begins with *A Guest of Honour* with its larger, pan-African setting. The novel introduces many of the concerns of the later fiction, such as awareness that black rule in independent Africa has not led to social or political justice; that a more humane and egalitarian black Africa requires a further revolution destroying the role of the white progressive Africa. *A Guest of Honour* foreshadows the novels which follow by assuming that “the post-colonial in most of independent Africa is neo-colonial, a stage of contradictions in the march of history towards authentic independence and justice for the masses” (King 4). Liberal values, such as personal freedom and interracial friendship, are likely to be found irrelevant as black leaders attempt to create their own version of a just society, generate a need to consolidate power, or reward their followers. The pan-African perspective of *A Guest of Honour*, like the later *A Sport of Nature*, has its South African significance. Besides mirroring what has been happening in many parts of post-colonial Africa, the novel reflects the increasing pressure in South Africa to go beyond liberalism towards radical political action. Although such issues are tackled explicitly in subsequent novels, Gordimer’s imagination was already anticipating the adjustments required of the white liberal in a future black Africa. She felt that the political and economic culture was incapable of reform and something
more extreme was needed. Gordimer ponders over her lot and of those like her.

Gordimer in an interview with Stephen Gray in 1973 speaks about the reason for choosing an Englishman as the protagonist. She was interested in writing about a white man’s commitment to a country which he happens to have lived in.

Travelling round in Africa, I’ve become interested in white people like Bray. I think that people don’t realize how many there are; a very original and perhaps off-beat kind of white man who really survives in Africa. But it’s never the sort of person who ‘goes native’, who ‘loves’ the African; it is somebody who’s ceased to see Africans except as people whom he lives amongst. Who are full of the same faults as anybody else. So often, looking at people, I see circumstances becoming choice. By that I mean they become committed . . . they . . . realize that their only reality lies here in that life. And in order to live again, he accepts coming back to Africa and working here . . . But then he comes up against his particular liberal dilemma – how far are you to go in standing aside, in not interfering now that the people have their destiny in their own hands? When it’s no longer a business of black against white, when . . . there is an ideological struggle then it would seem honest for him to make a choice . . . (Conversations with Nadine Gordimer 69)
In 1961 delivering the Anne Radcliffe Memorial Lecture at Harvard, Gordimer has said,

... there is little reason why a straightforward novel of events in which the protagonists are black men should not be written just as authentically by a white writer as by a black one. Just so long as he makes it his business to know the social forces that shape his protagonists, as the writer who writes of men at sea must know the sea” (qtd in The Third World Writer: His Social Responsibility 124).

Yet a decade later she changed her position,

The changes in life in South Africa since 1961 would lead me to quarrel with one statement I made confidently at the time of writing my essay ... I now believe that Georg Lukács is right when he says that a writer, in imaginative creation and intuition that comes with it, cannot go beyond the potential of his own experience. That potential is very wide; but living in a society that has been as deeply and calculatedly compartmentalized as South Africa’s has been under the colour bar, the writer’s potential has unscalable limitations. There are some aspects of a black man’s life that have been put impossibly beyond the white man’s potential experience, and the same applies to the black man and some aspects of a white man’s experience. (124)

As her statement authenticate, there is no attempt in A Guest of Honour at telling the story from the ‘inside’ the experience of the black African
characters. The story is told almost entirely from the point of view of European characters: till the death of James Bray, it is his point of view that one encounters, and after his death, that of his lover Rebecca Edwards. Only the final page divulges the impersonal point of view.

*A Guest of Honour* begins with the decision of Colonel James Bray to leave the stability of his home in Wiltshire to return to a newly independent African state. Bray had been deported from this (imaginary) country ten years before – by the colonial regime – for supporting the growth and rise of the People's Independent Party which then was subversive but is now in power. Bray as an ally of the movement for Independence had thought that it was only logical that the country belonged to Africans and he did not accept the colonial myth of African inferiority. While ostensibly a colonial administrator, he had worked in the Party alongside Adamson Mweta, now President, and Edward Shinza, a Trade Unionist. Bray’s return to the country is for the Independence Day celebrations as a guest of honour: “the white stranger in a modest place of honour” (*A Guest of Honour* 33). The sudden return of the outsider who is also an insider gives Gordimer a superb opportunity to engage in social observation at a heightened level of clarity, a strategy that she had employed in *A World of Strangers*. Gray is gently coerced into accepting the post of an Educational Advisor, a post which takes him initially to the Gala district where he had previously resided. There he makes his re-acquaintance with the powerful, intelligent Shinza who is living in rural banishment. The plot revolves around the conflicting ideologies of Mweta and Shinza, and Bray’s movement to align himself
with the revolutionary aims of the banished Shinza as he becomes aware of the less attractive capitalistic and neo-colonialist nature of Mweta’s rule, which appear as a betrayal of the ideals of independence.

With Bray being co-opted into the service of the new state as a special educational advisor, he decides to stay on. Bray considers this appropriate as,

. . . the white man in Africa has had no image for himself other than as mentor – but soon he has to search for a new image and define new grounds for his role. For Bray finds himself confronted with a more advanced form of the same kind of dilemma he experienced as a colonial administrator; under Mweta he finds the country in the grip of a thoroughgoing neo-colonialism and he is once again faced with the prospect of a historical choice. (The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside 118)

A Guest of Honour gives Gordimer ample opportunity to plumb the ethical issues close to her heart. The novel observes with great acuity the futility of colonial educational systems, which Bray encounters in the capacity of the educational advisor. A case in point is when Bray comes across a school master studying for Cambridge O-level exams, which he will most likely never pass. The questions which are set out to him are those entirely beyond the range of his cultural experience, and alien to the needs of his social situation, such as to describe a film he had seen or a visit to a picture gallery. Bray hence forth becomes involved with Education.
This mission takes him throughout the length and breadth of the country. Through Bray’s eyes, as he travels around the country and the province of Gala, the novel’s account of neo-colonialism occurs. And here the highly sophisticated nature of its political analysis and its persistent powers of observation are revealed. The political, economic and social structures of the country are detailed with a sustained, remarkable clearness. With the ‘terrible clarity’ and candour of his analysis Shinza makes Bray see what Mweta’s democracy really is.

P I P has become a typical conservative party – hanging on wherever he can to ties with the old colonial power, Western-oriented, particularist. It’s a textbook example. His democracy turns out to be the kind that guards the rights of the old corporate interests more than anyone else’s – the chiefs, religious organizations, pre-colonial nations. Foreign interests. All that lot. In seven months you show which way you’re going. It’s right from the start or it’ll be never. (A Guest of Honour 272)

The country’s economy revolves upon three metropolitan based concessionaire mining companies and with independence they have ‘Africanized’ certain of their working strata by promoting Africans into positions previously occupied only by whites. The price of this is the continued extraction of a major share of their profits overseas. This is the basis of neo-colonialism. Though political independence is granted, economic domination continues. Shinza, vehemently opposes policies of
Mweta who handles the English and Americans like glass, and is terribly scathing in his censure: “We move up into the seats of the expatriate whites, and go on earning dividends for them when they go back ‘home’ to retire . . . We’re exporting our iron ore at their price and buying back their steel at their price” (*A Guest of Honour* 256)

While agreements are made with international companies, class stratification within the ‘independent’ country is both constructed and reinforced: a local elite is created, the masses are oppressed and exploited, and within the basic division there is regional differentiation. Mweta dances to the tune of the international aid agencies in transferring a scheme for a new dam from the underdeveloped north, where it would be extremely valuable, to a more developed area where it can be shared with a similar neo-colonial country.

Labour unrest breaks lose and it is brutally repressed in capitalist interests. Shinza sets himself up as champion of the rights of the workers against the state’s domination of the Unions and subordination of the welfare of the workers to the demands of the state. Bray who starts off as Mweta’s “White Man Friday” (509) starts lobbying for Shinza and now effectively aligns himself with the ‘left’, with the movement whose canonical texts are Fanon and Nyerere and which argues that a ‘social revolution,’ a major redistribution of wealth and opportunity must follow the political revolution of Independence. “Turn the whole thing over, just like you kick an ant-hill, and make new lives for all those people running about not understanding where they are going” (270) articulates Shinza with great perspicacity. According to him, “power
[isn’t] going to be a matter of multiplying the emancipated, while the rest of the people remained a class of enfranchised slaves” (273). He doesn’t mince words when he puts in succinctly how the social revolution would work out. It is not by

keep[ing] the sort of status quo that Europeans call stability – the stability of overseas investment, the stability of being so poor your feast comes once a year when the caterpillars hatch on the mopane? . . . we want an instability, James, we want an instability in the poverty and backwardness of this country, we want the people at the top to be a bit poorer for a few years now, so that the real, traditional, rock-bottom poverty, the good old kind that never changes in Africa, can be broken up out of its famous stability at last, at long, long last . . . (275)

Concomitant with Bray’s new political awakening is a sexual awakening. Bray had left his wife Olivia back in Wiltshire in England. Despite their original arrangement that she would eventually join him, she doesn’t and she iconically comes to represent the life of stability he has left behind. Bray’s affair with Rebecca Edwards represents the burgeoning of a personal vitality to parallel the public vitality of Bray’s growing political maturity. A Guest of Honour is in a way the story of a man torn between personal and collective demands. Published in the same year (1970) as Kate Millet’s Sexual Politics and Shulamith Firestone’s The Dialectic of Sex, this is a novel that explores the psychopathology of power and examines the interaction between the
ideological and the psychological. As Judie Newman says, “the sexual relationship between Bray and Rebecca . . . lie at the centre of a novel which investigates the psychological causes of authoritarianism and of failed revolutions” (Nadine Gordimer 40).

Clingman observes that A Guest of Honour is a deeply meditational novel; “one that arose in circumstances requiring its form of meditation” (The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside 114). After the frenzy of 1960s had died down, circumstances had arrived which needed a thorough reappraisal of the legitimate grounds and the legitimate expectations of any renewed historical commitment. Such a re-evaluation is partly what A Guest of Honour’s move into an unspecified African country is about. Gordimer’s novels are in some sense social hypotheses: attempts, within a fictional domain, to formulate the structures and forces of social reality and their implications of personal life. A Guest of Honour shifts to a higher plane of investigation. The novel’s method is not only meditational but also theoretical, says Clingman (115). It sets up an abstract model at a level of the typical where both social forces and subjective implications can be explored in what may be termed almost ideal conditions. It is a post-apartheid novel which postulates that history does not stop with independence, and that problems and commitments will continue.

A Guest of Honour is sharply differentiated from Gordimer’s earlier novels. In A World of Strangers the world was simply divided in two, the division was much symbolic as analytic. Here the novel “has been deeply concerned to account for the smallest details of political and social
interaction, to understand their every gradation and intersection” (121). *A Guest of Honour* is also unlike *The Late Bourgeois World*, where Gordimer’s political understanding was entirely monolithic and symbolic; here the early novel’s romanticism is completely eliminated. If Elizabeth’s night-thoughts are about God, here the protagonist’s meditations concern one of the most powerful of political thinkers within the African context, Frantz Fanon. Bray is impressed by what Fanon has to say and gets up in the middle of the night to check a reference in full:

   The people find out that the iniquitous fact of exploitation can wear a black face, or an Arab one; and they raise the cry of ‘Treason!’ But the cry is mistaken, and the mistake must be corrected. The treason is not national, it is social. The people must be taught to cry ‘Stop thief!’ *(A Guest of Honour* 292)

As in all Gordimer’s work, there is a working-through of questions of generic form in *A Guest of Honour*. The project is to create a dense political novel that will find a way of interrogating the requirements of Lukácsian critical realism. Gordimer meets her objectives by finding an appropriate point of inter-textual reference, in the work of Frantz Fanon, the path-breaking *The Wretched of the Earth*. *A Guest of Honour* is a deeply revolutionary, Fanonist novel about Africa. There is much political debate and analysis in the book, and this analysis follows Fanon in defining the nature of the political struggle in the post-colonial African state in which the novel is set: the contradictions inherent in a newly independent state not pursuing the socialist implications of its drive for
independence are criticized in what amounts to an extended critique of neo-colonialism. Gordimer, when she was writing _A Guest of Honour_ was following Fanon’s conviction that African unity can be achieved only through a people’s movement, led by people which will defy the interests of the bourgeoisie. For Fanon this class consciousness is necessary to challenge ‘the native bourgeoisie’ which under economic pressure from colonial interests, will exercise its new class aggressiveness to control the power and wealth formerly accrued by foreigners, and appropriate existing exploitative structures under the guise of a new nationalism. Gordimer’s novel presents a fictional consideration of Fanon’s question of whether or not this bourgeois phase can be eschewed – of whether there is any place for ex-colonial ‘guests of honour’, such as Bray, in such contexts. Fanon believes that absolute violence is the only way of calling into question the colonial order, itself established on principles of force. This kind of violence involves the people and makes social truths available to them and without which the struggle for post-colonial independence will dwindle into ‘a fancy dress parade and the blare of trumpets’ such as Mweta’s theatrical independence celebrations. The most crucial of Fanon’s analysis of anti-colonial struggle and for _A Guest of Honour_ is the prescribed rejection of individualism and a new commitment to local organization and communal interaction. Through the career of Bray the novel presents the rejection of individualism, and finally it is the violence that is perpetrated by the revolutionary forces that decides the cruel end of Bray, when he is ambushed and killed,
mistaken for the leader of a gang of mercenary vigilantes. He is a victim of the forces of history and the energies released by social change.

One major concern of the novel is that of its own inadequacy to the articulation of African realities. Gordimer is aware of a potential mismatch between western literary norms and her particular subject. From the outset of the novel Bray is situated in a world marked by selective story-telling, and a struggle for interpretive control of events. At the Independence celebrations each character produces his own ‘Independence story’ and the air teems with anecdotes. Bray’s acceptance by the group is explicitly envisaged in terms which compare linguistic norms with cultural and familial assumptions. He finds it rather like being “forced to learn a foreign language by finding oneself alone among people who spoke nothing else: it was assumed that he would pick up family and other relationships merely by being exposed to them”. (23) Gordimer’s interrogation of the relation between ideology and psychology finds literary extension in psycholinguistic terms. Gordimer in the essay “Censorship and the Primary Homeland’, refers to the word as ‘the primary homeland’ replacing cultural loyalties for the writer. The phrase is drawn from George Steiner who perceives man as ‘the language animal’ conditioned by language in every significant respect. Patterns of thought echo the systematizations of language, which carries culturally ordained values.

Thus the western sense of time as sequential causality, and of the irreducible status of the individual, is inseparable from the patterns of Indo-European syntax, with its past, present
and future tenses and pronominal distinction between ego and collectivity. (Nadine Gordimer 47)

Steiner holds that “to learn a language beside one’s native idiom, to penetrate its syntax, is to open for oneself a second window on the landscape of being” (qtd. Nadine Gordimer 47). If psychology is topographic, a piece of local inventory mapping the mental conventions of a specific culture then where consciousness communicates in a different linguistic context, a different psychology may be in order. Psychology cannot be separated from an awareness of how radically a particular language conditions the life of the mind. This selectivity of language is nowhere more evident than in literature. Every work of literature is a specialized language act, a piece of language in a heightened condition of order, reference and elision, a selection filtering out some from the available totality. In A Guest of Honour Gordimer draws attention to this process of omission, so that, at the close, as Bray’s life story is submerged in a wash of journalistic mendacity, the reader is alerted to the possibility of absent stories, and of silences of the text.

While within the novel Gordimer uses the dynamics of psycholinguistics the reveal the faultlines in the text, she also uses the landscape iconography to inform the imperatives of her political and ideological project. She presents the nature and landscape of Africa as a world of complex order, indifferent to human affairs, unresponsive to the imported aesthetic standards and entirely self-absorbed in its own process. In such images the African continent itself is emblematized as existing beyond the puny reach of its temporary invaders. In passages
such as those describing the fig tree Bray works under in the novel, a vague threatening quality warns off the presumptuous intruder into this ancient world:

. . . coarse and florid shrubs, hibiscus with its big flowers sluttish with pollen and ants and poinsettia oozing milk secretion, bloomed, giving a show of fecundity to the red, poor soil running baked bald under the grass, beaten slimy by the rains under the trees, and friable only where the ants had digested it and made little crusty tunnels. A rich stink of dead animal rose self-dispersed like a gas . . . it was the smell of growth . . . the process of decay and regeneration so accelerated, brought so close together that it produced the reek of death-and-life, all at once. (A Guest of Honour 18)

There is an uncompromising self-containment here, and a defiance of accepted aesthetic standards of beauty. Here thematic intention directs the eye in richly subtle ways to suggest that the colonial invasion has not only placed ‘Africa’ in its multiple levels of signification under siege, but has made its essence inaccessible, even invisible to those who remain trapped in colonialist perspectives.

In fact, through such images, Gordimer ironically reverses the issue of integration by suggesting that it is the white man who must find a way to meld with Africa and not the black man who must struggle for acceptance in white society. By implication it is suggested that the process of white integration must begin with a sensitivity to the land and its
unique sensory impact, that is, the senses and the emotions must be ‘Africanized’ before the intellect can respond positively to the political and ideological demands Africa makes upon it. (King 82)

Such richness in signification is something that is on the emergent in Gordimer’s aesthetics. The extraordinary evocative descriptions of the African landscape cease to be mere verbal photography and local colour as in the earlier novels. The symbolism continues throughout the book. Departing from Gala Bray leaves behind him ‘the patriarchal fig’, the age old tree which has survived many attempts to hack it down, a host to “teeming parasites whose purpose of existence was to eat it out from within” (481). Though fertile, the tree is “at once gigantic and stunted, in senile fecundity endlessly putting out useless fruit on stumps and in crotches” (481). Imagistically the tree suggests both the African country itself, formerly supporting white parasites, now equally threatened by neo-colonialism from within, and, in broader terms, both the durability and futility of endlessly re-engendered patriarchal structures. Distanced now from senile patriarchy, Bray reflects that “only for trees is it enough simply to endure; not for human beings” (483). The nature of his death is thus a deeply ironic one. Halted by a roadblock, a huge tree, Bray is attacked by a mass of smaller men, and finds himself in the ensuing struggle ‘desperately hampered by the size and strength of his body’ (492). ‘Felled’ he rises once by brute strength, only to be hacked down again. Though he tries to speak Gala, the words escape him, and he dies with the thought “I’ve been interrupted, then –”.(492) In his death both
language and body fail him, each insufficient to counteract the attackers’ misreading of him as a white colonialist symbol.

*A Guest of Honour* is bitingly satiric in places, especially in episodes involving political duplicity and chicanery. In another time and another place, Gordimer would have been another Jane Austen, says Peter Nazareth (*The Third World Writer: His Social Responsibility* 125). Like her Gordimer has a sharp eye for the hypocrisies of social behaviour, and she makes her characters reveal themselves from the way they talk and behave.

The Mayor spoke, a prominent industrialist spoke, the chairman of the largest mining company spoke. Through grapefruit cocktail, river fish in a pale sauce (*Tilapia Bonne Femme*, in the illuminated lettering of the menu) some sort of beef evidently brought down on the hoof from the Bashi . . . he (James Bray) sat between Mrs. Justin Chekwe, wife of the Minister of Justice, and Mrs. Raymond Mackintosh, wife of an insurance man who was one of the last white town councillors left in office. The white matron, like a tourist proudly determined to use her phrase-book sentences to demonstrate how much at home she feels, leant across him to say to the black matron, “Mrs. Mweta looks so young, doesn’t she? What a responsibility at her age. I’m sure I wouldn’t be able to cope. Doesn’t the hall look beautiful? One doesn’t realize how much hard work goes into these functions – you should have seen our chairwoman, Mrs.
Seldon Ross, up a ladder hammering nails into that material.” She added in a lower tone to Bray, “We begged it from the Indians, you know.” (A Guest of Honour 205)

Here, out of their own mouths emerge the hypocrisy, suppressed racism and greed of the white colonial bourgeois. Not a writer to mince words Gordimer has looked deep into the behaviour of the colonial and settler bourgeois and pinned it down in the pages of her novel. But Gordimer is not making cynical fun of people she regards as contemptible. She sees the whole African situation politically, within the context of colonial, economic exploitation. Like Fanon she sees peaceful decolonization as a means by which the colonial powers try to hold on to the colonies.

The Independence Celebrations are essentially an attempt to whitewash colonial rule, to put a blind over the eyes of the people as to the real meaning of colonialism and consequently as to the real meaning of Independence.

There had been a sports rally, and a police band and massed school choirs concert as well as the rather peculiar historical pageant that had gone on for hour at the stadium. Tribal dancing and praise-songs alternated with tableaux of Sun dreary whiskered white men showing chunks of gold-ore to splendidly got-up chiefs; it had all to be kept vague in order not to offend the tribal descendants of Osebe Xuna II with a reminder that the old man had given away the mineral rights of the territory to the white man for the price of a carriage and pair like the Great White Queen’s and a promise of two
hundred pounds a year, and in order not to offend the British by reminding them that, at the price, they had got the whole country thrown in. Schoolgirls bobbing under gym frocks and helmeted miners epitomized the present on much safer ground. (40)

It becomes apparent that Independence does not mean what it should, namely the ending of economic exploitation. At the party, the chairman of the gold-mining companies, Sir Reginald Harvey, gives a speech in which he talks like all businessmen, of mining industry bringing development to Africa, of bringing the first light of hope after the centuries-long degradation and stagnation of the slave trade, and of the mining companies and the nation going forward together. Gordimer’s acerbity matches the heights of Orwellian vitriol of *The Animal Farm*:

> Applause was regular and vociferous, descending on cue as each speaker closed his mouth. Black cheeks gleamed, the blood rose animatedly in white faces while in the minds of each lay unaffected and undisturbed the awareness that what the industrialist had said was, “You’ll use our money – but on our terms, and what the chairman of the gold-mining group had said was, “We don’t intend to reopen the Mondo-Mondo mine because our shareholders overseas want big dividends from mines that are in production, not expansion that will create employment but take five or six years before it begins to pay off”. The director of the cold-storage company, whose butcher shops all over the country had
served Africans through a hatch segregated from white customers until a PIP boycott three years before had forced a change, charmingly insisted that the black guest across the table from him accept a cigar. “Put it in your pocket, then. Smoke it at home when you feel like it.” Mr. Ndisi Shunungwa, secretary General of the United Traders’ Union Congress, who had once said, “They got in with a bottle of gin and a bible – let’s give them back what they brought and tell them to get out”, solicitously fished under the table to retrieve the handbag of the wife of the Director of Medical Services. A plump and grateful blonde, she was apologetic: “Oh I am a nuisance . . . oh, look, you’ve got all dusty on your arms . . . . (207)

The reader witnesses the moment of transfer from colonialism to neo-colonialism, that is, to a situation in which although the country has nominal political independence, economic exploitation continues with the assistance of the local black bourgeoisie which is only too willing to sell out. Nadine Gordimer notes the telling detail and Shunungwa’s ‘solicitous’ fishing out of the bag becomes a symbol of the role of the new black elite vis-à-vis the external businesses, of a bourgeoisie that is willing to put hand-outs into its pocket, as described by Fanon, “[it] is only a sort of little greedy caste, avid and voracious, with the mind of a huckster, only too glad to accept the dividends that the former colonial power hands out to it” (*The Wretched of the Earth* 175).
A Guest of Honour is constructed like the great works of nineteenth century realism, in which the fictional world appears to be autonomous, growing independently of the novelist’s controlling hand. As in the work of the European predecessors the richness of A Guest of Honour is not confined to surface and externals, it attempts to record the complexities of contemporary Africa with density and comprehensiveness. Roland Barthes while exploding the fallacy of realism in fiction in his book Writing Degree Zero looks at realism as being ‘intention’ and not ‘convention’. “The writing of realism is far from being neutral; it is on the contrary loaded with the most spectacular signs of fabrication” (73-4). A Guest of Honour is an intelligent rendering of contemporary political theories and ideologies and reveals Gordimer’s ability to comprehend the pull of the unseen yet strongly felt historical forces: the forces that lie behind the human phenomena. Yet, what Gordimer has written is a realistic novel with architectonic virtuosity and not a political analysis or a parable, and she makes special claims for the novel form. She talks of the extra dimension of the novel, “the dimension that makes it possible for us to know all, if the novelist chooses to tell us, about the minds and souls of the people in the novel, that extra dimension that gives us, in fact, the freedom of the city of the writer’s imagination” (The Third World Writer: His Social Responsibility 128). Gordimer organizes the novel in order to present this imaginative experience. She understands how deeply affected private lives are by the conflict of ideological and economic forces during a revolutionary epoch. She gives to fiction’s narration of private life a systematic ideological dimension. The novel’s
conflicting ideologies arise out of and in turn affect the texture of men’s ordinary existence. A Guest of Honour demonstrates the vitality of the Lukácsian tradition of critical realistic novel as a means of recording and understanding Africa’s revolutionary progress. The novel’s amplitude is fiction’s way of mirroring the invigoration of change.

**The Conservationist**

*The Conservationist* (1972) Gordimer’s sixth novel has a complex structure wherein she returns from the northward black Africa of *A Guest of Honour* to the surrealties of her surroundings in South Africa. Spare and self-reflexive, the novel inaugurates a new phase in Gordimer’s career as it marks an innovative departure from the stylistics of her early novels. Through the chronicle of Mehring the capitalist-colonialist hero, *The Conservationist* unfolds a subtle allusive parable of South Africa’s repossession by its black majority.

*The Conservationist* is usually felt to be Gordimer’s entry into post-modernist fiction, where she adopts a *style indirect libre*: a foreshadowing of the many voices, the confusion of facts with fantasies, the unreliable or dislocated multiple narration, which is found in such later work as *Burger’s Daughter* and *July’s People*. The novel’s thematic and textual use of myth, its treatment of the protagonist’s unconscious and the textuality of the novel – all are linked together and point to a central area of concern: the replacement of a framework of reality.

Mehring represents the progressive Afrikaner elite which has joined the late capitalist international order. The story relates the final coming to nothingness, the patronship of the middle-aged Johannesburg
tycoon Mehring who buys the 400 acre farm as an investment for tax evasion and for retreat purposes from the busy schedules of city life. His private environmentalism and conservatism is a form of private domination. The ending is ambiguous, facts and fears merge into an unreliable narrative, the subjectivity of the main character is invaded by the external world of politics and race; there is the eruption of what Freud had called the uncanny (Green 556). All this implies a recognition that the self-willed individual is a product of society, culture and economics, a repository of the past, situated in a precise historical context.

In the central character Mehring the novel captures two emphatic but opposed developments in southern and South African history at this time. On the one hand Mehring represents what Gordimer perceives to be the virtually unitary nature of white historical destiny in this period, considered both regionally and domestically. This was the period when the country began to ‘draw up into the laager’, behind which it prepared to resist what it conceived of as a total historical onslaught. The fates of the white regimes of southern Africa became interlocked and interdependent as the liberations gained momentum in other parts of Africa. On the other hand the period also marks the stronghold of Black Consciousness Movement among the black student intelligentsia, which ultimately resulted in the Soweto Revolt of 1976. The balance of history was swinging. The Second World War had demonstrated the fallacy of white invincibility. Steve Biko, the principal leader of the movement was moved to say: “The blacks in Africa now know that the whites will not be
conquerors forever” (qtd. in *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* 139). The Black Consciousness Movement had gained enormous inspiration from the withdrawal of the Portuguese troops from Mozambique, the second country to gain its liberation from Portugal. This seemed an omen for South African liberation. The political impetus of the novel probably stems from these events as there are oblique references to the cyclone blowing from the Mozambique Channel, which changes the whole course of events, drives Mehring away from the land and also results in the natural exhumation/resurrection of black corpse. In Eliotian terms of *The Wasteland*, the corpse buried in the garden has begun to sprout, to disturb the peace of the land, raking up and mixing past memory and desire for rejuvenation. Referring to the return of the body, almost the very last words of the novel “he had come back” are a direct paraphrase of the African National Congress in the 1950s: “Afrika! Mayibuye!” which means ‘Africa, may it come back’ (143).

As a prominent industrialist associated with the economic advancement of the country at the highest level, Mehring represents development in the national as well as international economic scenario. But yet, through Mehring, Gordimer allegorizes the failure of the Afrikaners to reform themselves through modernization and the pressures of economic development. He is the focus of concern in the novel, a dominant, active, attractive satanic centre of consciousness, with the exception of the black dead body. Just as Mehring represents the white world in its entirety, the body represents the black – both of them representing the Manichaean ‘everyman’. The other characters that hold
all the politically correct attitudes are vague, unattractive, and unsympathetic, the shadowy hinterland throwing into relief the major players.

The complication of the plot is effected with Mehring’s arrival on the farm. In him we see the merging of the colonizer and the conservationist. The question of promoting the natural increase of guinea fowls becomes alive in him; but nevertheless, the ‘conservationist’s’ anxieties are roused when he learns that a murder victim, most probably the result of a weekend violence spawned in and from the location, has been dumped in the third pasture where the police indifferently bury him in a shallow grave. Mehring, very much obsessed with the idea of ownership, becomes disturbed, and ever since the black corpse becomes a permanent presence, a character inhabiting the land.

The mishap lying in wait for Mehring is forecast in his monologue when his first visit is recounted in the novel. Mehring, while pondering over the appearance of the farm changing in tune with the cyclic seasons expresses his scepticism:

Distances come back with the reaped fields, the ploughed earth stretching away in fan-shaped ridges to its own horizon; the farm grows in size in winter, just as in summer as the mealies grow taller and thicker, the horizon closes in, diminishes the farm until it is a series of corridors between walls of stiff green higher than his head. In a good year. If there is going to be a good year again. (20)
Mehring’s second visit to the farm after his trip to Japan shakes him out of his complaisance – he who had thought that

. . . the thudding and distant shouts [over the river] are no more than a smudge on perfect silence that stretches to his horizon, which is first of all while he walks, the rise of the next farm beyond the river, and then, when he lies down the willows, the maze of broken reeds ... I have my bit of veldt and my cows . . . (41)

now undergoes a paroxysmal impulse of identification with the dead body of the black who lies buried in the third pasture:

For a moment he does not know where he is – or rather who he is; but this situation in which he finds himself staring into the eye of the earth with earth at his mouth is strongly familiar to him. It seems to be something already inhabited in imagination. The abyss is no deeper than a doorstep; the landing, home. (41)

Among the recurring images the most important is that of the corpse of the unknown black who has been murdered on Mehring’s farm and crudely buried by the police. As Robert Green says, “At last, some twenty years after The Lying Days, the world briefly glimpsed by Helen Shaw at the outset of that novel – the landless farm-laborers and their rural poverty – moves to the forefront of Gordimer’s fiction” (556). Like Max Van Den Sandt and Rosa’s father in the Burger’s Daughter, the dead man is the controlling force in The Conservationist, and does, in the final paragraph, regain Mehring’s land:
The one whom the farm received had no name. He had no family but their women wept a little for him. There was no child of his present but their children were there to live after him. They had put him away to rest, at last; he had come back. He took possession of this earth, their; one of them.

(\textit{The Conservationist} 22)

Hence the symbol of the inheritors, the nameless corpse, is a continual brooding presence in the text, unseen but active in all Mehring’s reflections, interrupting his nostalgia, anger, and lust haunting him as “Anna Karenina had been pursued by the image of the violent, Francophone peasant and Emma Bovary by the eyeless beggar” (Green 557). For ten months ever since the corpse’s discovery and inadequate burial, Mehring endeavours to forget it. Now the murdered man resurfaces, imaging the blacks’ pressing claim to Mehring’s land. The white farmer is deeply disturbed, and in an episode of hallucinatory power, so strong that the borderline between nightmare and reality is uncertain and vague– he imagines how he himself could be similarly murdered, crudely, arbitrarily, and desolately. In a manner of speaking, this is \textit{memento mori} of a different sort. Mehring is not actually killed but will leave South Africa, his farm abandoned. Clingman argues that

\ldots the vision is one of historical transfer. Prophetically, \textit{The Conservationist} is situated at the point where white history ends and black history resumes \ldots [it] represents a moment when the imminent downfall of white supremacy seemed absurdly manifest, but the precise means of its achievement
were still unclear. (*The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* 141)

The story is unravelled in a density of flashbacks and multiple narration, interior monologue etc through which Mehring seasoned as he is by his German ancestry (the name suggests this), safely outside the Afrikaner enclave in the white community and not belonging to the English speaking establishment ruminates endlessly in his affair with Antonia who was his mistress until recently, the problematic son and his own sexual conquests – new and old.

Gordimer attains better perfection of technique in this novel. The technique calls attention to the fact that truth contains an irreducible measure of complexity and ambiguity. In *The Conservationist* the complexity is translated into tortured and labyrinthine narrative, which constitutes dense flashbacks, intermingling of present action with recollected events, the blurred lines between Mehring’s ruminations and the author’s direct interventions.

The future is prominent by repeated implication in Gordimer’s novel *The Conservationist*. But it is a political novel of a quite different and rarer kind. The spatial density of *A Guest of Honour* gives way to the poetic, verbal density of *The Conservationist*, in which meaning accumulates not through plot and character but through implication and the repetition of certain key images. *The Conservationist* is mostly made up of reminiscences, nightmares, and imaginary conversations of the ‘conservationist’ himself. The novel which stretches forward insistently into the future, ironically, largely takes place in the past. The few key
images, such as the “pale freckled eggs” of the guinea fowls, the novel’s first words, recur and gather their own momentum and meaning.

Gordimer in the essay ‘A Writer in South Africa’ says, “Africa needs an articulated consciousness other than that of newspaper headlines and political speeches” (Qtd. Nadine Gordimer 54). This consciousness emerges from what Marcel Proust termed, “that book of unknown signs within me no one could help me read by any rule” (54). If A Guest of Honour was more public and ideological in its execution, a world determined by newspaper headlines and political speeches, The Conservationist springs from Gordimer’s awareness of the relation between linguistic and political realities. It offers another form of articulated consciousness, simultaneously addressing the problems of South African politics and of mimetic realism as a literary mode, by registering the impact of colonialism in terms of 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. Language is therefore a political statement, a claim to cultural territory. The novel throws into sharp relief the intrinsic connections between the conventional representations of realism and the impositions of colonial structures on the land of Africa. If ‘realism’ is itself a linguistic creation, a code which fosters an easy unthinking acceptance of its signs as ‘natural’ we accept that language may operate on the side of the colonizer. Gordimer’s implosion of realism may be construed as the first step towards political decolonization. The Conservationist therefore renders an internal reality progressively
divorced from the reality outside it, the reality of political and ontological consensus. Gordimer employs two principal strategies here: the use of Zulu myth to create a subtext which obliterates the text of the public culture and the translation of the colonial desire for land into another language, that of sexuality (56).

*The Conservationist* is one text in which paratextual elements gain uncommon significance, as they are intricately bound with the central theme of the novel i.e., repossession of the land by the black natives. Although the foreground of the novel is occupied by Mehring’s story, the irruption into the text of excerpts from Henry Callaway’s *The Religious System of Amazulu*, and which forms the transtextual element, introduces another language, that of Zulu culture. The quotations are the organizing points for a subtext which slowly comes into the foreground. The story on the periphery appears to be that of Mehring, and of the white in South Africa, but reveals itself in reality as that of the blacks. Each quotation introduces or reinforces an event in the novel, surreptitiously at first, later more explicitly. The quotations begin with the prayers for corn and for children and the continuation of life to be expected in what is the fourth or fifth year of drought. A further series of quotations is taken from a dream by one of Callaway’s informants in which he dreams he is awoken and ordered to go down to the river with his brother, there to grapple with a spirit ancestor. This precedes the episode in the novel in which Solomon is awakened in the night, by mysterious figures, supposedly at the behest of his brother, and attacked. Later quotations introduce the image of the ‘Amatongo’, the
ancestors who are beneath the earth and linked to the dead man buried in the third pasture, the question of material possession of Africa and the bringing of rain and floods by a rainmaker which precedes torrential rain and floods in modern South Africa. The final quotation widens the historical perspective to suggest the enduring occupation of the land by the blacks. The effect of these quotations is to suggest that there is a buried logic of fictional events which may expressed in the rhetoric of myth.

From the black point of view the main events in the compound in the year during which the actions takes place are: the drought, the discovery of the body in the pasture, the attack on Solomon, the fire, the spirit-possession of Phineas’ wife, with its attendant feast and dance, the flood, and finally the reburial of the dead man as the cycle of seasons complete itself. This subtext buried like the black man rises to the surface of the novel and repossesses it, obliterating the ‘paper’ possession of Mehring and his story. The dead man is discovered in a reed bed. His body “isn’t actually on the earth at all, but held slightly above it on a nest of reeds it has flattened . . . The only injury he shows is a long red scratch, obviously made by a sharp broken reed” (The Conservationist 15). The situation refers explicitly to a myth of origins. In The Religious System of the Amazulu Callaway points out that the cult of ancestors is connected with a bed of reeds. A father is the ‘uthlanga’ or ancestor of his children’ from him they broke off. ‘Uthlanga’ is a reed, one which is capable of throwing out offsets and is therefore metaphorically a source of being. One of Callaway’s informants, who took ‘uthlanga’ literally,
stated that man came from a bed of reeds. The nest of reeds also suggests the guinea fowl, which Mehring is trying to conserve; the novel opens with the image of guinea fowl eggs, offered by children who have made a nest for themselves in the grass. From the outset, therefore, the fundamental questions of the novel – who shall inherit Africa? How shall it be conserved – are set out in terms of Zulu myth.

The cursory burial of the dead black conditions later events. The first of these is the attack on Solomon, who is discovered unconscious on the veld. As accounts of the attack become ritualized, the legend grows, ‘that he was attacked in the night by a spirit: there was something down there at the third pasture. In realistic terms, Solomon has been beaten up for non-payment of debts. Symbolically he had failed to pay a debt to his culture.

The fire which follows centres upon the third pasture, but also appears to have gone through the compound, though Mehring dismisses the blackened earth as merely the ash from the braziers. In Zulu practice, rainmakers burn the earth around their homes in the belief that the god, seeing the black area, knows that the rainmaker is seeking rain. In Zulu myth it is the lightning bird which brings rain, touching the grass with fire. Rainmakers therefore sacrifice colourful birds in the belief that, as drought takes colour from the land, the killing of colour will cause the sky to weep. In the novel, when rain does come, it is described as a bird: “taking off again with a sweep that shed, monstrous cosmic peacock, gross paillettes of hail, a dross of battering rain” (232). Drought, the
dead black, fire and the images of the rainbird are carefully organized into a coherent pattern of Zulu belief.

The fire is followed by the account of the feast celebrating the initiation of Phineas' wife as a spirit medium. The account of her possession follows the pattern of Zulu possession, as documented by Callaway. The underlying idea is that ancestors are tormenting the subject, complaining that he or she is no longer true to their culture. Interestingly, spirit possession is more common among Zulu women than men. They gain social prestige and power and are appeased by people who shower them with gifts and feasts. It is associated with sexual and family conflicts. Phineas' wife 'had no living children', is somewhere around the end of the childbearing age and no longer sleeps with her husband. By becoming a diviner, therefore, a woman escapes from the pressures of her culture and her sex. In her ravings Phineas' wife conjures up visions of the flood which is seen as female revenge: “The weather came from the Moçambique Channel. Space is conceived of as trackless but there are beats about the world frequented by cyclones given female names” (232). One of these hits South Africa, washing the grounds clean of the fire ashes, unearthing the dead man, and regenerating the burnt area.

In the final scene of the novel the conflicts appear to be resolved. “Phineas’ wife was at peace, there was no burden of spirits on her shoulders” (252). In the background to the unnamed black's funeral stand the female members of the sect of Zion, a breakaway from orthodox Christianity, in which Christian tenets have been adapted to indigenous
patterns of thought. The close of the novel therefore offers a quasi-resolution of white and indigenous cultures. The unconscious like the women shapes formally her actions in society. Through Zulu myth Gordimer gives formal shape to the novel, articulating a very different consciousness from that of the public rhetoric of South Africa. In the language of Zulu culture, possession is non-material, passive, a means of resolving social and sexual conflicts. The divination cult offers a therapy for social deprivation, a catharsis for the Zulu woman in a subservient role. One meaning of the title has thus been indicated: the blacks conserve their beliefs and their beliefs conserve and regenerate the land and its people.

It is significant that it is a woman who comes to express Zulu culture and to resolve and its problems. The conjunction of woman and land is repeated in the events of the foreground. Phineas’ wife may have achieved some independent status in her society, but the other women are visibly getting the worst of it. Dawood’s Indian wife longs for Durban, Mehring’s mistress is forced to flee, the Portuguese immigrant girl is molested, and even the Afrikaner daughter-in-law and grand-daughters of old de Beer are thoroughly cowed. The point being made here is not merely a feminist one. Female exploitation and exploitation of land are linked; sexual guilt functions as surrogate for colonial guilts. Gordimer also shares with eco-feminists the concerns that surface in the novel.

The fantasy ideal form of Mehring’s relationship to woman and land occurs in an incident on board a plane. Returning from a business trip, Mehring is forced to travel tourist class, and during the night
engages in sexual play with his neighbour, a young Portuguese immigrant girl. The scene may be read as an example of Mehring's sexual colonialism: no woman is safe from his hand or eye. Mehring’s mind moves into the event through his perceptions of the land below him, which he sees as ‘soft lap after lap’ of sand and desert. The opening phrase “Golden reclining nudes of the desert” (126) refers as much to the dunes as to any sunning tourist. The body of the girl becomes the land, as Mehring locates it, explores, explicitly compares its flesh to water in the desert, experiences the ‘grain’ of the skin and moves over the terrain, exploring the ridges of her anatomy. The plane, an enclosed world outside time and place veiled in sandstorms, allows Mehring to ignore social, sexual class taboos. The events are “happening nowhere” (129). Moreover, Mehring’s colonialism extends to the whole of reality. The closed world of the plane communicates an impression of consciousness operating in a void, dissociated in its private world from the world beneath, annihilating reality. Beneath him the desert sand becomes “an infinite progression of petrified sound waves” (131) which he watches while caressing the girl, equally soundless, echoing back to him his own activity. Sexual activity is described here as linguistic, as a monologue, delicate phrasing, delicate questioning, and finally entry into the “soundless O of the little mouth” (130). The relationship goes on and on in an endless night of solipsistic communication which does not advance, merely making Mehring hyper-aware of “the bounds of himself” (130). Unlike Bray and Rebecca who had moved towards an African reality, linguistic and political, Mehring remains confined within his own vision
of reality. The erotic quality of the experience is fundamentally auto-
erotic the girl utterly passive. In the method of narration, infinitely
oblique, the question, “Who spoke first? Was it at all sure that it was he?”
(127) goes unanswered, even unasked. The girl’s body “takes up the
narrative” Mehring’s hand “took up the thread of communication” (127-8), but it is never vocalized.

The interference with the young unnamed girl nevertheless has a
name in legal terms ‘crimen injuria’, the ‘insanity’ of which Mehring is
very much aware. Their relationship is surreptitious, tender, never fully
articulated, and one that is the stuff that scandals are made on. It is a
relation comparable to Mehring’s relation to his land and his ‘boys’ which
is also tender as well as a scandal. “Sexual fantasy as a surrogate for
colonial lusts is extended in ontological terms here” (Newman 61).

In previous Gordimer novels there is possibility for political and
sexual awakening to go hand in hand. But in The Conservationist an
assertive and exploitative sexuality is straightforwardly condemned as an
index of a politically benighted consciousness. The Conservationist drives
towards an open sexuality emblematic of political freedom, which Irene
Gorak terms ‘libertine pastoral’ in which liberated sex unites radical
politics with private relationships, resulting in a vision of South Africa as
a place of freely interpenetrating white and black bodies (Gorak 242).
Mehring has a vision of sexual freedom which is very close to Gorak’s
characterization of the libertine ideal, with all its misogynistic
permutations. Mehring envisages a code of free sexuality which is not
merely apolitical, but which also represents a way of silencing unwanted political views.

Mehring’s activities are presented as flashback and are paralleled, parodied and framed by two images of fathers and sons. The first episode involving the Indians whose shop is near the farm, takes place in an enclosed place akin to Mehring’s plane. The shop of the Indians is contained behind a stockade which the proprietor Bismillah continually repairs. “The image of culture deliberately walling in refusing to communicate across the lines drawn by apartheid, even collaborating with it, is also an image of walled-off consciousness” (Nadine Gordimer 61). The dogs they rear surround within it, in a ring of savagery and make no attempt to escape even when the doors of the stockade are open, “as if for them the pattern of closed gates are still barred across their eyes” (The Conservationist 125). Mind-forged manacles, psychological constraints, operate even more repressively than external ones. In the Indian’s shop the closed world does not intersect in any meaningful way with the world of the customers. Bismillah, conversing in Gujerati with his father, enjoys total privacy. To the blacks he employs “the semantics of the trade” (119) saying one thing to mean another, cagily unwilling to say more than the bare minimum. The rhythm of their speech is not unlike the rhythm of Mehring’s ‘conversation’ on the plane: “Demand. Response. Counterdemand. Statement” (119). When Dorcas’ husband challenges Bismillah, Bismillah deliberately distances him communicating through another, though Dorcas’ husband is perfectly intelligible. “The incident
demonstrates how each closed culture mimics the one above it, absorbing and passing on the aggression” (Nadine Gordimer 62). The episode dramatizes the lack of consensus in South Africa, the different circumscribed worlds communicating crudely, underhandedly or with violence.

Mehring’s son Terry’s visit offers the flipside of this. Peace, it is suggested, comes with exile. Terry’s rucksack with its symbol of peace looms large in Mehring’s car. Beneath the text of the conversation between the father and the son an ominous silence echoes. They appear to speak different languages: Were they referring to the same things when they talked together?” (134). Neither engages with the real subject, Terry’s impending military service. Language attempts to say nothing here, but to be neutral, which is a difficult task. The rhythm of the passage is a continued attempt and failure to guess the unspoken thoughts of the other, and to trap him into revelation. Mehring seizes upon Terry’s book, full of incomprehensible legalese and inscrutable public social rhetoric, published by the Campaign for Homosexual Equality, as a possible answer. Whether Terry is a homosexual or not is not clarified, though chances are that he might be. Attraction to Africa and to women are so identified that rejection of the one implies rejection of the other. The book, according to the narrative voice, was hidden away like the goat whose bones are used in divining by the Zulus. This method of divination is question and answer, slight nuances of emphasis in the answerer’s replies and yielding the ‘correct’ response. Terry and his father lack even this subtlety. Terry’s withdrawal from the enclosed
private world of South Africa makes him a creature of neutralized world, the desert of Namibia rather than the paradise of Mehring’s and Dawood’s laager. No medium connects subjective paradise and objective desert.

In *The Conservationist* the natural landscape is as resistant to realism as to rhetoric. As a result of the fire, which leaves particles of smoke in the air, it is blurred or softened. Drought has a similar effect. “Dust had the effect on his distant hills of pencil sketch gone over with a soft rubber” (107-8). The cyclone in particular dissolves the normal landscape and this is associated with a social change. When the road is washed away, Mehring is separated from the farm and the Africans have to cope without him. It is as though he were dead. Jacobus opens cupboards, “as possessions must be sorted after a death, putting objects aside like words in a code or symbols of a life that will never be understood coherently, never explained now” (238). Gordimer offers a vision of Africa without the white man. Rain dissolves the normal paths and ways of society washing out both social domination and a way of seeing. In the rain, “the sense of perspective was changed,” Car tyres behave as it greased “engaging with a tangible surface only on intermittent revolutions” (219). Within the cars children shriek with joy and fear ‘at the lack of sensation – the impression of being carried along without any kind of familiar motion. Gordimer’s language contains the same excitement, engaging with a tangible surface only intermittently, carrying the reader along in a motion which operates beneath the level of consciousness, leaving realism and familiar social consensus behind. At
those points where the rhetoric of Zulu culture intersects with that of the ‘foreground’ action the perspective of the text is changed, dissolves. The reader is uncertain which action is primary, which ‘background’. When a car is washed away in the flood, Gordimer’s own account – “the car wavered, tipped, obviously floated, then found solidity again”, “it was seen to float a moment and then engage with some solid surface again – just as it was about the gain the rise, something burst out there” (234) is contrasted with the public rhetoric of the newspapers, with their nine-year old photographs of Mr. and Mrs. Loftus Coetzee vanished “without a trace before the horrified eyes of astonished witnesses” (235). White rhetoric is washed away now, matter flows and language changes and all the reader’s normal certainties collapse.

Nowhere is reality more in question than in the final pages of the novel. The reader grasps for a tangible surface in the events occurring between Mehring and the anonymous woman, his death which is not a death and the mysterious figure in the background of the picnic place. Mehring’s mind appears to have lost its grip of reality shortly before. After having coffee with a friend’s daughter, a girl he lusts after, news reaches him that her father has gassed himself, as a result of a financial scandal. Mehring’s reaction is obsessively guilty: “It’s me. Drawn up he had been seized, he is going to be confronted, at last” (194). Dialogic interpenetrations imbue the statement with multi-signification. The words ‘It’s me’ are the daughter’s unspoken greeting, the words of his arrested mistress on the telephone, and the horrid spectre of the Portuguese girl, challenging him. The train of associations leads Mehring
to confront the colonial guilt beneath the sexual, as the coffee he’s just
drunk turns top poison. “Some of them take poison. A dose of cyanide,
it’s quicker” (195). The phrase ‘It’s me’ also refers to Mehring, equally
implicated in the financial scandal of South Africa, equally guilty. He
recalls that cyanide is the “stuff that is used in the most effective and
cheapest process for extracting gold from the auriferous reef . . . it is
what makes yellow the waste that is piled up in giant sandcastles and
crenellated geometrically stepped hills where the road first leaves the city
(195-96). The dénouement of the novel situates Mehring in the same
symbolic landscape, an overgrown rubbish dump between mounds of
cyanide waste. The scene reiterates and unites the themes of the novel.
His journey is conceived through a landscape which functions as a
mental topography. The face of the hitchhiker whom he is about to
seduce looks like an ecological disaster; her face is a cyanide dump.

In her person she sums up all the women of the book. She
babbles like a schoolgirl, reminds Mehring of his mistress,
has an accent which suggests she could be Afrikaans-
speaking or Portuguese. She may even be black: ‘That hair’s
been straightened and that sallowness isn’t sunburn’.
(Nadine Gordimer 65)

Mehring’s abandonment of her prefigures his abandonment of Africa.

He’s going to leave her to them . . . he’s going to run, run and
leave them to rape her and 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. (264)

As Mehring it about to possess the woman he becomes aware of a pair of male legs in the background. He considers them either to be thugs in conspiracy with the woman to rob him, or a policeman enforcing laws against inter-racial sex, a member of the miscegenation squad. Judie Newman states,

On the level of Mehring’s subconscious he is Freudian censor, interrupting his sexual activities. On the political level he recalls the police at the start of the novel, who bury the murdered black, ‘as you might fling a handful of earth on the corpse of a rat (p. 248). ‘Dispose of the body and so you dump your rubbish on somebody’s private property’ (p. 249). The black man, the body, the body of woman, and the rubbish dumps form one massive image of colonial guilt. Mehring is in the reverse position to Phineas’ wife. Her unconscious life shapes her society. His unconscious life is formally shaped and repressed by his society. The final words of the chapter are those of other people inside Mehring’s head: ‘Come and look, they’re all saying. What is it? Who is it? It’s Mehring. It’s Mehring down there’ (p.250).

The problems the passage poses for the reader hinge upon the questions such as those which Newman identifies: What is real? Which is the accepted version of events? Has a well-meaning white been murdered by black thugs? Or has he been arrested by a repressive regime? Has he
as an industrialist been developing a country? Or is he guilty of abandoning it to industrial rape and despoilment? (Nadine Gordimer 66). These fictional problems are precisely the problems posed by South Africa – a lack of normality, shared language or vision. To be true to a political situation, Gordimer has to avoid translating events into the realism of a materialist society. Mehring attempt to seize the reality within a surrealist situation of having espied ‘someone’, who has been there all the time, is by noticing the detail of the man’s comb in the sock. Even realistic detail functions within the nightmare, confirming its horror, rather than mapping out a safe certainty. The novel ends with the re-internment of the dead black the ‘someone’ who has been there all the time and now takes final possession. Gordimer suggests strongly that white solipsism prevents change and renewal of the external world. Another culture beyond Mehring’s, that of the blacks, carries the burden of renewal and rebirth.

In The Conservationist Gordimer explores an individual white consciousness without giving that consciousness final narrative and political authority, through the modernist technique of stream of consciousness, which presents a psyche in confusion. Although woman and black man function as symbols in the white subconscious, onto whom the conflicts of the white psyche are projected, such fantasy projection is critically examined and set in a different perspective by the foregrounding of the black consciousness, rising from its buried position to the surface of the text. Under her ironic title, Gordimer argues that to conserve the land, to maintain it as neither the hothouse of fantasy, nor
the desert of neutral tones, the first task is to regenerate its language. A new rhetoric expresses rather than represses the individual, and the land possesses as much as it is possessed.

The dominant impulse behind *The Conservationist* is symbolic. At a symbolic level there are striking correspondences between Gordimer’s novel and the South African movements of opposition in this time. Outlawed politically and expelled geographically, the liberation movements were literally ‘outside’ an existing South African framework of reality. Like Gordimer’s black body they had been suppressed and gone underground. They represented an ‘inverse’ social reality, and threatened to come back just like the corpse from below. Though Gordimer’s symbols cannot be taken too literally, as Clingman says, the idea of an impending revolution which is prophetically indicated by the novel cannot be totally ignored. Though the novel cannot envision the process by which an alternative reality will emerge, it nevertheless shows that an alternative reality is imminent. Hence the novel is considered an important fictional and historical signpost.

Gordimer’s work has always been concerned with the struggle to find a form of fiction adequate to contain the South African experience. She has always been alive to the duplicity of language in her native land. Titles of her later novels ring with bitter puns while many of her stories ironically memorialize the legacy of imperialism. James Bray in *A Guest of Honour* is murdered by his hosts, while Mehring in *The Conservationist* reaps only corpses on a farm beleaguered by history. The association in
Mehrings mind of the landscape and objects of sexual desire reveals the irony of his putative position as ‘conservationist’.

In the novel sequence up to *The Conservationist* Gordimer comes to articulate with increasing clarity the logic that underlies all her work: that discursive practices create and promulgate ideology and consequently such practices are the sites of the contestation of power. As her literary self-consciousness grows, she uses the principle of transtextuality to structure her investigations. As Dominic Head says, “[t]he novels then become sites of discursive interaction in which very different discourses [such as] political aesthetics, anti-colonial revolution and ethnic mythology . . . are tested and contested at length through the construction of a fiction” (110). In the coming years as South Africa spirals into a gory revolution as an aftermath of Soweto revolt, and develops the morbid symptoms of the Interregnum, Nadine Gordimer responds more deeply to the challenge of the Black Consciousness by developing a political vision and creating a fiction characterized by increasing literary self-reflexiveness.