

Research Article

THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY IN NADINE GORDIMER'S *THE CONSERVATIONIST*

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at imparting to the reader a segment of the social political history of South Africa harshly criticized by a white female writer who has committed herself through a work of fiction to denouncing to the whole world the plight and tribulations of non-white people by white settlers who reign supreme over everything in the country. Through the lens of psychoanalysis, historical criticism, and Marxist literary criticism, this paper first sweeps across the relationships among the different racial groups in *The Conservationist*, then the individual's living conditions in South African society under apartheid and finally points out the merits of the novel under study by comparing Gordimer's depiction of apartheid.

Keywords: Individual - Society - Apartheid – Black - White.

INTRODUCTION

South African literature has had its letters of nobility with Nadine Gordimer (1923 - 2014) born and bred in the small gold mining town of Spring. "A towering figure in the World literature", Gordimer has carved out a place for herself in almost all literary genres especially novels, short stories, plays, and essays. In her well-known novel, *The Conservationist* published in 1974, Gordimer has not only dealt with the legacy of apartheid but also with the struggle against it. Such thematic thrusts as the relationships among racial groups, land problems, soaring unemployment, and the high incidence of crime as well as woman's empowerment are the backdrop against which the plot of the novel under study is woven. As critical framework, this paper mainly employs Marxist literary criticism. The choice of approaching this study from this angle is underpinned by the fact that "apartheid literature is socially committed and the best way to approach the literary works produced in apartheid South Africa is to examine them in the light of their social relevance and their success, or failure, to realistically portray the plight of the common man in an oppressively brutal society with no chance or hope of succour." (Orhero, I. M., and Sunday, O. N. 67) Other literary theories employed here include psychoanalysis of which the German philosopher Sigmund Freud (6 May 1856- 23 September 1939) has got the paternity as well as historical criticism which saw the light of day in the 17th century but achieved widespread recognition in the 19th and 20th centuries. The gist of this paper consists of two parts. The first part deals with the theoretical framework and the depiction of the individual in South African society in the novel under study. As regards the second part, it discusses the validity of Gordimer's vision of apartheid through the novel under study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As early mentioned, this study mainly employs Marxist literary criticism, a "theory that evolved from the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels" (Orhero, I. M., and Sunday, O. N. 67) Here, we

must mention that Marxism represents the philosophy of a famous German philosopher of the nineteenth century named Karl Marx. Marxist literary criticism is "the belief that literature reflects class struggle and materialism, and investigates how literature can work as a force for social change or a reaffirmation of existing conditions."ⁱⁱ The major tenets of that theory are encapsulated in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) in which Marx and Engels asserted "that the history of all existing societies is the history of class struggle." (Idem)

Hinting at Marxist literary criticism, Orhero, I. M., and Sunday, O. N. wrote that:

Marxism is a theory that attacks capitalism and feudalism by proposing communism/socialism as the ideal state. The theory avers that there are two opposing classes in every human society, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, and that these two classes form the elites/haves and the have not, respectively. Marxist tenet seeks to remove this dichotomy in human society by arguing for a classless society where intellectuals rule, a society birthed by the commonness and equal distribution of wealth, a society where exploitation and oppression are eliminated by means of proletariat revolution, an egalitarian and utopic society. (Idem)

Marxist literary theory as averred by Eagleton has helped us to examine the various social classes in Gordimer's *The Conservationist* (1974) and their interaction in terms of exploitation. In Gordimer's sixth novel, the reader is kept abreast of two diametrically opposed worlds: the world of the haves (the bourgeois) and the world of the have-nots (the proletariat) epitomized by Whites and Blacks respectively. The first social class includes the white minority and especially the Afrikaner who think that they are the only masters on board under God. As regards the second social class, it includes to a large extent nonwhite people and especially the black community who works on Mehring's farm as well as those working in the Indian's shop or at the local abattoir. These two social classes live in a country called South Africa in which apartheid laws are liable to favour only the white minority to the detriment of the black population. As regards the second literary theory, that is to say psychoanalysis, it is a doctrine developed by the German philosopher Sigmund Freud in the late nineteenth century and refers in lay terms to the theory of human mind. That theory has been attacked on a great number of grounds, the most common of which is sexuality. In fact, critics think that Freud

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"brings everything down to sex" (Oedipus complex). However, as Eagleton Terry cogently pointed out:

Psychoanalysis is not only a theory of the human mind, but a practice for curing those who are considered mentally ill or disturbed. Such cures, for Freud, are not achieved just by explaining to the patient what is wrong with him, revealing to him his unconscious motivations." (Eagleton 159)

This second literary theory has helped us to delve into Mehring's innermost feelings and personality. As far as the third literary theory is concerned that is to say historical criticism, it is an approach that "seeks to understand a literary work by investigating the social, cultural, and intellectual context that produced it – a context that necessarily includes the artist's biography and milieu."ⁱⁱⁱ In this regard, it is worth pointing out that *The Conservationist* was published at the height of apartheid time and especially when apartheid met the sharp opposition of people in South Africa as well as outside the country. At that specific time, John Vorster's government imposed on black people working in white areas the nationality of their host homeland. Two years after the publication of *The Conservationist*, that is to say in 1976, the bloody Soweto uprising broke out and made the front page of local as well as international newspapers.

THE RELATIONSHIPS AMONG RACIAL GROUPS IN *THE CONSERVATIONIST*

It is worth underscoring that out of the four racial groups South African society consists of three stand out in the novel under study. These are Whites, Indians (Asians) and Blacks. Although being relatively few in *The Conservationist*, white people are at the highest level of the social ladder and reign supreme over everything. Being essentially businessmen, white people are brought together by selfish interests and do not truly cooperate with the other racial groups. Thinking that they are accountable to nobody, white people regard themselves as the sole master on board under God and hence visit for instance Indians without any previous permission. For example, when a white policeman calls on Indians, "the dogs must be called in, chained helpless against the arrival of such a one, he was not an intruder, he came in the name of the law, there was no defence to keep him out. He must not be antagonized." (Gordimer 114 - 15) Surprisingly enough, Indians are nonetheless obsequious towards Mehring, the central white character, because they want him to let them set up their shops in his name and be the legal owner so that they could not be forced to pay taxes to the white policemen, "but Mehring feels no obligation towards them." (Russell 36) White people regard their black fellows like their servants and do not truly care about their living conditions. The dehumanization of black people by white people has reached a pitch where white people regard black people as being equal to animals. For instance, the policemen who are asked to take the dead man away from Mehring's farm have just "asked for a spade and [...] put him down there where he was" found. (Gordimer 27) The makeshift grave that is dug for the dead man has eventually led to its appearance after the flood that has wreaked havoc on Mehring's farm. This is a convincing and striking example of white people's racial hatred for black people in South Africa under apartheid. Quite aware of their wretched lot, black people show sympathy to one another. Although they do not know the dead man of Adam, they have given him a decent burial at the end of the novel. Equally remarkable, the repressive apartheid laws do not prevent black people from showing their great attachment to their culture and tradition by celebrating on Christmas Eve the resurrection of their brother Solomon who has been stabbed by intruders. The traditional way that celebration has been organized is a way of showing that whatever a person's social condition his or her tradition represents the essence that helps to label him or her.

Jacobus, the foreman on Mehring's farm embodies the driving force that welds black people through his dynamism to hard work and the effort he has made to help Witbooi, the jobless Rhodesian to find an employment on the farm. Better still, Jacobus' black brethren and him greet each "other with 'brother', 'sister', 'mother', 'uncle', a grammar of intimacy that went with their language" (Gordimer 35)

Like white people, Indians regard themselves as being superior to black people just because they employ the latter in their shop. They mistrust black people to a pitch where they keep their dogs chained to snarl at them and even go to the length of being unfair with their black employers.

CLASS STRUGGLES IN *THE CONSERVATIONIST*

As averred by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* published 1848, "the history of all existing societies is the history of class struggle" (qtd in Orhero, I. M., and Sunday, O. N. 67) In fact, all existing societies are earmarked by the presence of two classes: the bourgeois (the haves) and the proletariat (the have-nots). As things really turn out, in all capitalist societies as it is the case in *The Conservationist*, the strongest exploit and dominate the weakest. In the novel under study, black people work hard but for a mere pittance. They do not enjoy any social welfare like health care, drinking water, or electricity and are regarded as less than human beings. For example, hasn't the dead man found on Mehring's farm been washed up by the flood, he will not enjoy a decent burial at the end of the novel. In such deplorable conditions, black people are not entitled to set up any trade union whatsoever and any attempt to trespass against this regulation is simply nipped in the bud, which tightens white people's sovereignty or supremacy on their black fellows. Equally remarkable, the black people who work in the Indians' shop are humiliated, exploited and looked down on by their bosses who are averse to paying them a good salary which compels them to run into debts so as to compensate for their poor wage. Such is the case of Dorcas who has bought a sewing machine from her boss Bismillah which she has promised to pay on installments. As she is long in paying off her debt, Bismillah has pulled back two rands from her month wage. Another striking example of black people's indebtedness is the case of Solomon's brother who has borrowed twenty rands and has promised that his brother will pay the money back, the insolvency of which has led the creditor to send some men at night to beat Solomon up till he has lost consciousness. Even Mehring, the rich businessman who stands for the local bourgeoisie does not reward his black employees duly and their children are seen picking food on a rubbish dump and suffer from malnutrition (Gordimer 40). Contrariwise, white people as for them live in town where they enjoy the presence of electricity, tarred road, running water and other types amenities. To put the matter in a nutshell, class struggles in *The Conservationist* have taken on the form of unequal distribution of wealth as well as economic exploitation. In fact, the Zulu - who account for the great majority of the nonwhite community - show a great dynamism to hard work but are turned into farmers, herdsmen or cook on their forefathers' land to produce a wealth which the white minority profits by. For instance, the black employees on Mehring's farm plant and take good care of chestnut trees and oaks under the supervision of Jacobus, the black foreman on Mehring's farm. Similarly, they also take great care of the cows and the guinea fowls of which eggs they are never allowed to touch not to incur their master's displeasure.^{iv}

Last but not least, it is also worth mentioning that class struggles have fostered a geographic division of black and white people. In fact, whereas black people live in shanty towns not far from Mehring's farm and do not have a secure job, their white fellows lead a life of ease in the main cities of South Africa.

POWER AND FREEDOM IN *THE CONSERVATIONIST*

To plug in the ignition device, we should say that in *The Conservationist*, power is wielded by white people like Mehring who reign supreme over everything even the natives' lands. This clearly implies that in South Africa under apartheid, black people cannot fully enjoy their freedom. Instead, they are even asked to carry a pass book stating their legal residence and workplace: "the Africans had papers that made them temporary sojourners where they were born." (Gordimer 114) Those without the proper papers run the risk of being arrested by the police and immediately expelled to the countryside. Equally remarkable, in the novel under study white people command high respect and in whose awe all the other racial groups stand and can for that reason visit Indians' places without any previous permission. As can be easily inferred, decision-makers being white people, Blacks and Indians have no other choice than abide by arbitrary decisions coming from leaders who seek to stay in power for ever. Worse still, the police which are supposed to protect human rights are rather in the service of white people and help them to implement their plans or achieve their goals in case of uprising. Similarly in *The Conservationist*, despite the repressive apartheid laws, Mehring is seen preying over a little girl who is his son's age and even goes to the length of caressing the genitals of that innocent immigrant girl in a plane bound to Johannesburg finding the girl's body like "a grateful dog" (Gordimer 130) Even if later on, Mehring is haunted by the fear that his deviant behaviour is risky enough, he is also found drawn by the same girl in an Indian coffee bar and has gone to the length of having casual sex with her. Surprisingly enough, nowhere in *The Conservationist*, is a black person seen indulging in such an immoral behaviour. All this shows how black people bend beneath repressive apartheid laws like the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Acts of 1949, the Immorality Act of 1950 and in this special case the 1953 Reservation of Separate Amenities Acts which encouraged racial discrimination in public places like train stations, buses, movie theaters, hotels, and virtually all other public facilities. Contrary to Mehring, black people and Indians dare not attend the same coffee bar as white people for fear of incurring the displeasure of their white fellow countrymen. Moreover, Mehring's authority and selfishness, as mentioned earlier, have no parallel. He patrols self-righteously everything around him and listens to nobody even his bosom friend Antonia Mancebo and his beloved son Terry. One of the main bones of contention between them is the farmer's most precious possession the farm, and his desire to oblige his son to go into the Army willy-nilly. As can be seen, being a wealthy pig iron dealer, Mehring regards himself as the only master on board under God and is hence not compelled to listen to anybody because of his social standing. As Russell Sheila Grace Brownlie wrote:

Mehring believes that his ego-consciousness can dominate all in the outer and inner worlds. Gordimer repeatedly shows him engaged in futile power struggles with in his own mind, scorning, criticizing, arguing with his inner voices. He suffers what appears to him to be assaults by the voices, but he attempts on the part of his unconscious to heal the one-sidedness of his psyche. The voices he hears, especially those of his son and his former lover, are speaking of what he has denied, rejected and exiled; in the broader context of South Africa, they speak of what the conservative attitude has denied in its insistence on preserving its privileges. (Russell 8)

Worse still and importantly enough, as shown in the quotation above, Mehring is portrayed as a paternalist character whose ego has led him to failure and ruin. In fact, Mehring is so anxious about dominating everything and everybody around him that he listens to nobody as shown in the quotation above. Nor does he listen to his inner voice, and behaves as the fancy takes him. Compared to the pale freckled eggs seen at the beginning of the novel, a symbol of

fertility, Mehring is offered numerous opportunities to become better than he is, but he has gone through no change like the piles of stones similar in shape to the guinea fowl eggs, "a whole clutch of pale freckled eggs that will never hatch." (Gordimer 257) Sexually, Mehring has no sense of responsibility. "Finding himself drawn to a young girl his son's age, the daughter of a colleague, he focuses on Antonia's aging body, its lack of attraction for him, reducing her to physicality in order to feel superior. He thinks that ownership, phallic possession is the only way to relate to Antonia" (Russell 19-20)

Even "on a plane between Europe and Africa, between day and night, under an airline blanket, he caresses with his finger the genitals of a young Portuguese girl [...] Mehring's sexuality is reduced to a roving finger, and he behaves in a way that is foolish and irresponsible." (Ibid. p.26) Equally remarkable, is Mehring not a besotted womanizer, he will not accept to follow the young immigrant girl to a quiet place to fall into the trap that is set to him by non-white people to claim their lands. It is then obvious that Mehring has borne the brunt of apartheid system since his spiritual life is shattered and has the indelible scars of a system he is normally supposed to profit by. Mehring's black employees are the ones who experience his abuse of power the most, especially Jacobus the black foreman on the farm^v. In fact, although Jacobus supervises all the farm activities while his boss is absent, and is well-known for his dynamism and determination to hard-work, his white master does not reward him duly under the pretence that being black he does not deserve a higher wage. Instead, Mehring thinks he is already doing his best to reward his black employees, and even goes to the length of scolding or upbraiding his female workers for being late to work caring less that they have to take care of their children beforehand or may be busy doing housework.^{vi}

Fed up with the inhuman racial laws they are going through, the black people in *The Conservationist*, have staged up a plot and have led the central white character – thanks to the young immigrant girl – to a mining dump. Unable to cope with such a situation, Mehring has run away to the city.

THE UNDERSIDE OF APARTHEID

At this level, we set out to examine the works of a few nonwhite writers whose insightful reflections and seminal experience on the fundamental issue of apartheid cannot be contended. To begin with, we should point out that many aspects of apartheid are not pervasive through *The Conservationist* in spite of the author's commitment to stand up for black people, and even when these aspects are addressed, they do not truly reflect the way black people have gone through them. In fact, in South Africa under apartheid, nonwhite people and especially black people were not entitled to live in the same area as white people. In that regard, a so-called Promotion of the Bantu Self-Government Act of 1959 encouraged geographic divisions between the races by creating ten so-called homelands for the black population. One of the most repressive apartheid regulations is the law requiring that black people and other nonwhite people must carry a pass book stating their legal residence and workplace. Those who go out without the proper papers run the risk of being arrested by the police and immediately expelled to the countryside. In *Tell Freedom* by Peter Abrahams, Young Lee tells his misadventure with a white policeman about their passbook when his sister, his brother and himself returned from Elsburg:

I walked up one empty street and down another with my brother holding my one hand and my sister the other. Once, a white man in uniform stepped from a shadowy corner and shone a torch on us. Evening baas, Harry said. Where're you going to so late?

Home, Harry said. We've been to fetch my little brother from the country.
 Prove it?
 I'm coloured; I don't carry a pass.
 For a long time, he shone the torch on Harry's face.
 Trying to be smart, heh.
 No, baas. Just stating a fact.
 He swung the torch down to my face. I blinked and closed my eyes.
 He looks like a kaffir.
 Don't you call my brother a kaffir! Maggie snapped.
 He swung the beam up to her face then turned it out.
 All right...
 He faded into the shadows from which he had come. We set off again, walking more briskly than before. (Abrahams 51-2)

It can be easily inferred, quoting Orhero, I. M., and Sunday, O. N. that the police stands as a "hindrance to free movement which should be a fundamental human right." (A Marxist Study of Police Brutality in Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night*: p.73) Equally remarkable, other laws restricted or forbade social intercourses between races like interracial marriage which is regarded as a criminal offence. In *Tell Freedom* for example, the marriage of Maggie and Chris Fortune is "nearly called off because Chris Fortune's very fair mother had hesitated about meeting Maggie's black mother." (Abrahams 162) During apartheid, education was also segregated and black people were not allowed to attend the same schools or universities as white people. For example, the very first day Young Lee has set foot at school, the mistress has said ironically: "education is only compulsory for whites." (Ibid. p.151) Similarly, in the white schools where Blacks have been admitted, "black pupils and students are humiliated for being poorer than their fellows." (Ibid. p.155)

Moreover, as underscored by Peter Abrahams in *Tell Freedom*, "Blacks were not allowed in white unions. Black unions were not recognized by the State, the white unions, or the agencies of the employers." (Ibid. p.258) As can be seen, black people were denied the right to form any kind of trade unions whatsoever in South Africa. In South Africa under apartheid too, black people are humiliated to a pitch where they are regarded as less than human beings. In *The Conservationist* for example, the white policemen who have been asked by Mehring to take the dead man away from the farm have merely scratched the ground the way a cat does its business and have buried him on the place where they have found him. This shows that white people do not care a dam for black people. Other more vivid and poignant illustrations are given by Peter Abrahams and Alex La Guma. In *Tell Freedom*, Peter Abrahams mentioned that on a fine autumn day, three white boys have pounced on Lee as he is returning home from work. Another time, a white man riding his bicycle has cleared his throat and has spat on Lee's face. (Ibid. p.142) Similarly, black people live in townships and do not have access to electricity, and running or safe water supplies. Young Lee tells this situation in *Tell Freedom* nearly as follows when he is with Aunt Liza in Elsburg:

The water I poured into the drinking-wool was yellow, almost opaque. I watched the sediment settle. When it was clear, I saw a black water-spider moving slowly over the sediment. Other signs of tiny life wriggled about as well. I told Aunt Liza. She laughed. You'll get used to it. They haven't killed me. Just don't drink the water at the bottom. (Abrahams 22)

Although black people's working and living conditions are deplorable, they do not have work insurance. For example, when Young Lee's mother is washing white people's laundry, "and the tin of boiling water has fallen on her," the white woman who has engaged her has "made her come home by herself." (Ibid. p.64) Oddly enough, the white woman has said that she cannot help if Lee's mother is careless enough to get hurt. She has even added that Lee's mother "can't ask a penny from her." (Idem)

In La Guma's *A Walk in the Night*, Michael Adonis, the protagonist is introduced to us as an unemployed man unable to provide appropriate clothing for himself:

The young man wore jeans that had been washed several times and which were now left with a pale-blue colour flecked with old grease stains and the newer, darker ones of that day's work in the grease sheet-metal factory, and going white along the hard seams. The jeans had brass buttons, and the legs were too long, so that they had to be turned up six inches at the bottom. He also wore an old khaki shirt and over it a rubbed and scuffed and worn leather coat with slanting pockets and woolen wrists. His shoes were of the moccasin type, with leather thongs stitching the saddle to the rest of the uppers. They had been a bright that once, but now they were worn a dark brown, beginning to crack in the grooves across the insteps. The thongs had broken in two places on one shoe and in one place on the other. (La Guma 1-2)

In *The Conservationist*, Witbooi, the jobless Rhodesian stands as Michael Adonis' replica. Witbooi is introduced to the reader thus:

The man called Witbooi who had come from Rhodesia illegally seventeen years before rocked slightly, reassured, on his haunches. If he had no pass, it was not that he, whose real name was Simon Somazhegwana, had no papers; in the plastic fertilizer bag that held his clothes and possessions there was an old wallet full of paper – expired work permits from areas where he had been endorsed out, pages torn from school exercise books inscribed Bearer, Witbooi, is a good boy[...]. TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN [...]. This is to say that Bearer, native Witbooi... with the barely-literate signatures of white housewives and farmers as references. He produced them to employer after employer, over the years, preserving them carefully against a day when they would meet the pair of eyes in which surely they would find validity, like that of any other document given out by white people; like that of the bits of paper issued officially at the post office. (Gordimer 33)

In the same literary vein, La Guma has given a pitiful portrayal of Joe the little tramp in *A Walk in the Night* as follows:

Joe was short and his face had an ageless quality about it under the grime, like something valuable forgotten in a junk shop. He had the soft brown eyes of a dog, and he smelled of mixture of sweat, slept-in clothes and seaweed. His trousers had gone at the cuffs and knees, the rents held together with pins and pieces of string, and so stained and spotted that the original colour could not have been guessed at. Over the trousers he wore an ancient raincoat that reached almost to his ankles, the sleeves torn loose at the shoulders, the body hanging in ribbons, the front pinned together over his filthy vest. His shoes were worn beyond recognition. Nobody knew where Joe came from, or anything about him. He just seemed to have happened, appearing in the District like a cockroach emerging through a floor board. Most of the time he wandered around the harbour gathering fish discarded by fishermen and anglers, or along the beaches of the coast, picking limpets and mussels. He had a strange passion for things that came from the sea. (La Guma 9)

Little Joe's portrayal mentioned above in La Guma's *A Walk in the Night* is akin to the portrayal of Xuma, the protagonist of *Mine Boy* by Peter Abrahams:

It (the beam of a powerful torch) started with the big, old tennis shoes that were kept together by bits of strings and wire, and saw the toes peeping out in spite of the string and wire; moved up the dusty, colourless old trousers that were ripped at both knees and looked as though they would burst at the waist because they were so tight; up the immense chest and huge shoulders against which the equally tight and tattered shirt seemed to cling fearfully; it lingered on the broad, good-natured face for a brief moment; then it shifted to the right hand with its bundle and then the empty left hand. (Abrahams 2)

Like Peter Abrahams in *Tell Freedom*, Nadine Gordimer has shown in *The Conservationist* that black people live in shanty towns which are generally polluted areas. Those are generally sordid and squalid areas unfit to be inhabited by human beings. Gordimer depicts their environment thus:

Thousands of pieces of paper take to the air and are plastered against the location when the August winds come. The assortment of covering worn by the children and old people who scavenge the rubbish dump is moulded against their bodies or bloated away from them. Sometimes, the wind is strong enough to cart-wheel sheets of board and send boxes slamming over and over until they slither across the road and meet the obstacles of the fence, or are flattened like the bodies of cats or dogs under the wheels of the traffic. The newspaper, ash, bones and smashed bottles come from the location; the boxes and board and straw come from the factories and warehouses not far across the veld where many of the location people work. People waiting at the roadside for buses cover their mouths with swollen scarves against the red dust; so do women who sit at their pitches selling oranges or yellow mealies roasting on braziers. [...] There have been old shoes, casts of bunions and misshapen toes in sweat and dirt and worn leather; a broken hat. The old tyres are hardest to get because people make sandals out of them. From hoardings along the railway line, which also runs through the industries, providing sidings, black men with strong muscles and big grins look down, brushing their teeth, drinking canned beer or putting money into a saving bank. (Gordimer 84-5)

In *The Conservationist*, Gordimer has shown that nonwhite people and especially black people's living conditions are deplorable because they have scanty means, and their children are malnourished: "The baby's hair was reddish, the usual symptom of nutritional deficiency when infants become too old to be satisfied by the breast and are given mealie porridge instead." (Gordimer 37) Gordimer has even gone to the length of writing that: "The children are spending the day picking over the dirt on the stretch of open veld opposite that is used as rubbish dump." (Gordimer 40)

In *The Conservationist*, Gordimer has just given a bird's eye view of Soweto uprising, but in his autobiographical book, *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994) Nelson Mandela has given a hairsplitting account of it in such a way that a person to whom the story is told can imagine how serious it was. The account of that event goes thus:

On that day (on 16 June 1976), 15,000 students gathered in Soweto to protest against being taught in Afrikaans at school. Students did not want to learn in the language of their oppressors, and teachers did not want to teach in that language. The police opened fire on the students without warning. Thirteen-year-old Hector Pieterse was the first to die. In the days and weeks that followed, hundreds of students were killed, both in Soweto and in other parts of the country where the protest was spread. We learned what had happened through widespread conversations. While we mourned the loss of so many young lives, we knew that the struggle had turned the corner. (Mandela 107)

In the same autobiographical book, Mandela has also drawn the readers' attention on Sharpeville massacre by mentioning that on 21 March 1960, a demonstration staged up in South Africa developed into a riot, and as a result,

The police opened fire on an unarmed crowd outside a police station in the small township of Sharpeville, 35 miles outside Johannesburg. The people were taking part in a demonstration against passes, organised by the PAC.

When the area was cleared and the dust had settled, 69 Africans lay dead. Most of them had been shot in the back as they were running from the police. More than 400 people, including dozens of women and children, had been wounded. News of Sharpeville massacre spread across the world. Suddenly, the horror of apartheid was there for all to see. South Africa was never the same to see. (Mandela 17)

In the same literary vein, Nadine Gordimer has not laid an emphasis on how the police is used to brutalize nonwhite people in *The Conservationist*, which is not the case in *La Guma's A Walk in the Night*. In fact, in *A Marxist Study of Police Brutality in Alex La Guma's A Walk in the Night* (2018), Orhero, I. M., and Sunday, O. N., have pointed out that:

The South African police was a ready and useful tool in the enforcement of apartheid policies in South Africa. Since the police, in almost all countries, is an agent of the government, it implies that the police would have no other choice than to implement government policies even if the policemen themselves do not agree to these policies. In apartheid South Africa, the police was used by the bourgeoisie as a ready agent to inflict untold pain, havoc and catastrophe on all coloured people representing the oppressed lower class. Protests were controlled using the police, racially discriminatory laws were enforced using the police, anti-apartheid protesters and activists were arrested using the police. In fact, the police was at the very nucleus of the apartheid system. While the government, the superstructure, was making the policies, the police, a part of the bourgeoisie, was actually in charge of making sure they are "tormented" into the masses. (Orhero, I. M., and Sunday, O. N., 72)

Furthermore, hinting at Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night*, Orhero, I. M., and Sunday, O. N., have written that La Guma has presented the police as having "hard, frozen faces as if carved out of pink ice, and hard, dispassionate eyes, hard and bright as pieces of blue glass" (Orhero, I. M., and Sunday, O. N., 73). The police are further presented in the same novel wearing "guns like appendages of their bodies" (Idem) and their faces having a "hard metallic look" (Idem). "This unfriendly representation of the police" as averred by Orhero, I. M., and Sunday, O. N., obviously "foregrounds their nature as masochistic as opposed to the idea that 'the police is your friend'". (Idem) These descriptions "show how hardened and ready-to-kill the police force is against the black lower class." (Idem.) Last but not least, it is worth dwelling on the fact that since apartheid itself is especially based on sheer racism, the police have coined demeaning terms to refer to black people. As Orhero, I. M., and Sunday, O. quite rightly observed in *A Marxist Study of Police Brutality in Alex La Guma's A Walk in the Night* (2018), "the racist presentation of blacks in the novel is reinforced by the use of demeaning terms" to jeer at nonwhite people. Among these terms can be quoted: "colour of worn leather" (2), "a cockroach emerging through a floorboard" (9), "negroes" (16), "bushman bastard" (39), "hottentots" (39), "kaffirs" (39), "tan coloured" (51), "skollies" (56), "black bastard" (63), "coloured boy" (80), "bloody baboons" (88), among others." (Orhero, I. M., and Sunday, O. N., 71)

There are also other instances where nonwhite people are humiliated in *A Walk in the Night* and are regarded as "the wretched of the earth" to put it in Frantz Fanon's term. In fact, nonwhite people and especially black people in *A Walk in the Night* are portrayed as being impoverished people in the strongest of terms: "domestic workers", "working people", "taxi drivers", "loiterers", "prostitutes", "numbers runners", "petty gangsters", and "frayed looking thugs." (La Guma 3 qtd in *A Marxist Study of Police Brutality in Alex La Guma's A Walk in the Night*, p.71) From the above, it can be inferred that as a writer, Nadine Gordimer has made conspicuous efforts to address racial issues in South Africa in almost all her works of fictions. However, the way she addresses those social realities is different from that of nonwhite South African writers who experienced the sheer reality of apartheid notably Peter Abrahams, Alex La Guma, Nelson Mandela just to name those noted writers. All this shows that the depiction of a social reality by a writer who has personally experienced it is more vivid and poignant, and all important details are taken into account.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined Gordimer's vision of apartheid in her sixth novel *The Conservationist* with a special emphasis on the individual and society. The decision to address such a topic is mainly underpinned by the fact that although the novel under study has been critically examined by an apartheid material, the idea of tackling how the different racial groups interact with one another, class struggles, and how power is wielded by white people has seldom burgeoned in the mind of critics. With this in view, this work has mainly adopted the theoretical framework of Marxist literary criticism to examine the novel under study as one Gordimer best works of fiction to deal with apartheid. As José Tolédo quite rightly observed:

The Conservationist is Nadine Gordimer's most intense and certainly most poetic novel. Its meticulous details and documentary exactitude combine to create an elaborate web of meanings where each object detailed or evoked carries symbolic implications for the society that South Africa was at the time of the novel's publication, and which forty years later still resonate with moral relevance.^{vii}

However, this paper has also shown that although it must be said in all fairness that Gordimer has acted as the mouthpiece of the downtrodden who are in the Slough of Despair, her way of denouncing apartheid is quite different from the way nonwhite writers who were really the victims of that crucial reality have done it in their works of fiction. This clearly shows that the depiction of apartheid by Peter Abrahams, Alex La Guma and even Ezekiel Mphahlele is more vivid and poignant because nearly all hairsplitting details are taken into account.

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ⁱⁱⁱ See: "Critical Approaches to Literature": <http://home.olemiss.edu/~egjbp/spring97/litcrit.html>

^{iv}On pages 9 and 10 of *The Conservationist*, Gordimer shows the farmer's anger and dissatisfaction when he saw children playing with guinea fowls eggs:

"Pale freckled eggs.

Swaying over the ruts to the gate of the third pasture, Sunday morning, the owner of the farm suddenly sees: a clutch of pale freckled eggs set out before a half-circle of children. Some are squatting; the one directly behind the eggs is cross-legged, like a vendor in a market. There is pride of ownership in that grin lifted shyly to the farmer's gaze. The eggs are arranged like marbles, the other children crowd round but you can tell they are not allowed to touch unless the cross-legged one gives permission. [...] He – the farmer – asks questions of the cross-legged one and there are giggles. He points down at the eggs but does not touch them, and asks again. The children don't understand the language. He goes on talking with many gestures."

^vSee: "The Conservationist Summary": <http://www.supersummary.com/the-conservationist/summary/> Accessed on 10 March 2020.

^{vi} Idem

^{vii}See: Toledo, José. *The Conservationist by Nadine Gordimer*, 2014. Available at: http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/96337.The_Conservationist. Accessed on 26 October 2015.