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Mendacious conservationism and poetic justice in Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist*: A postcolonial ecocritical reading

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ABSTRACT

Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist* (1974) engages with the conservation of nature under apartheid South Africa. The novel's portrayal of the policy of land ownership and use under this period, signifies the deep issues of racism which many critics have exposed in relation to Gordimer's writings. In this article, I shift focus to the novel's engagement with conservation in a theoretical context drawn from insights in postcolonial ecocriticism, and political ecology. These highlight the joint exploitation of nature and the victimisation of people who lack access to political and economic power. While my analysis concentrates on the ecopolitical force of the narrative, I also examine the novel's deployment of irony as a key device that exposes the racist/classist underpinnings of the politics of conservation, as well as invests agency, and power to the exploited parties. I conclude by pointing out that Gordimer's engagement with conservation, in *The Conservationist*, is in tune with the precept of postcolonial ecocriticism, which postulates that the literature of a postcolonial society should not only portray the exploitation of nature, and the poor, but also advocate for justice. In *The Conservationist*, Gordimer demonstrates the power of imaginative writing to advocate for nature, the poor, and the oppressed.

KEYWORDS

conservation; nature; politics; exploitation; poetic justice

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1. Introduction

The Conservationist (1974) explores the issue of land under apartheid South Africa. At the centre of the narrative is the question of unequal distribution, and access to land in which the apartheid regime reserved eighty-seven per cent of land to white ownership [1]. Many blacks became landless in the process, were forced to squat, and work on white-owned farms instead. Confined to shanties, their living spaces define their social lives. Poverty, disease, drunkenness, criminality, and violence, manifest as direct consequences of dispossession. From this springboard, The Conservationist is analysed as a literary representation of environmental injustice. Mehring's ownership of over four-hundred-acres of farmland, his affluent life style; placed side-by-side with the penury, disease, and deprivation affecting the blacks, shows how political power under apartheid connects the environmental with social issues.

Although the land is central to the novel, Gordimer uses the narrative to explore the connection between the land, and such issues as: history, identity, a growing African consciousness, an emerging global capitalist economy in the context of South Africa; claims to heritage, legacy, and the receding power of the apartheid regime (Cook, 1985).

Aligned to some of these issues, this article analyses the narrative as a representation of environmental injustice. Gordimer's depiction of the displacement of the blacks, and their appalling living conditions, challenges apartheid's notion of conservation that derives from claims of protecting nature to the detriment of the black population. Further, the narrative subtly foreshadows the collapse of apartheid – through the fall of Mehring and his mendacious claims of conservation –Gordimer uses imaginative writing as a catalyst for social change.

This article, thus, argues that Gordimer designates the importance of the relationship between environmental and social justice in South Africa. Against this backdrop, the paper deploys the concept of political ecology and environmental justice, which are significant poetics of postcolonial ecocriticism, to examine the novel's portrayal of the joint exploitation of nature and the colonised.

2. Postcolonial Ecocriticism

Postcolonial ecocriticism emerged as a response to the excesses of Anglo-American ecocriticism which started in North America in late twentieth century (Goodbody, 2007). While early work in ecocriticism concerns itself with the fate of nature in the wake of industrialisation, it fails to recognise the plight of indigenous peoples whose lives and livelihoods are tied to nature, especially in the face of technological modernity [3]. Postcolonial ecocriticism, thus, expands the boundary of ecocriticism by underscoring how "nature and culture constantly influence and construct each other" (Wallace & Armbruster, 2001, p.4). Consequently, the imbrication of the ecological, and the social, alongside how literature in postcolonial societies resist the power structures that affect both humans and nonhumans, form the basis from which postcolonial ecocriticism is often theorised (Slovic, Rangarajan & Sarveswaran, 2015).

It is within the notion of intertwining the social and ecological that postcolonial ecocriticism incorporates the principles of ecocriticism, and post coloniality, to conceptualise how writers from postcolonial, settler colonial, and decolonising regions have imagined; inscribed the environment in ways that reveal the connection between the exploitation of nature and the colonised as well as the struggle for environmental, and social justice.

The conceptual political ecology and the study of global environmental justice, posit that environmentalism cannot be "free (materially or conceptually) from mediation by social struggle, and it undermines stable definition of environmental threat and conservation" (Caminero-Santangelo, 2011, p. 7). To this end, environmental discourse that stems from political ecology and environmental justice oppose an ecocriticism that is shaped by mainstream environmental discourse which separates nature from human culture, and upholds the view of nature as an independent entity. In contrast, political ecology and environmental justice constitutes an environmental discourse that is deeply connected to socio-economic and political issues. It approaches environmental discourses: "in terms of their connection with economic inequality, social justice, and political rights and in terms of how they impact the lives – the homes, livelihoods, and health - of the impoverished and disenfranchised" (Caminero-Santangelo, 2011, p.7). In addition, a critical framework shaped by political

ecology and environ- mental justice is attuned to "the ways that disparate distribution of wealth and power often leads to correlative and social upheaval and the unequal distribution of environmental degradation and/or toxity" (Adamson, 2008, p. 5). Ultimately, such a framework ties together environmental policies and projects against is- sues of oppression, struggle and liberation. It recognises the realistic conditions of postcolonial societies, as well as advocates justice for those at the receiving end of capitalise activities of exploitation of natural resources. These insights guide the analysis which follows.

3. Racism, exploitation and environmental (in)justice in Gordimer's *The Conservationist*

South Africa, the setting of *The Conservationists*, is one of Africa's foremost countries in terms of both institutional and non-governmental engagement with environmentalism, mainly through the protection of wilderness, and wildlife (Vital & Erny, 2007). This has its roots in the apartheid era and is, typically, racially skewed to serve the interests of the whites against the black population. The apartheid regime embarked on massive creation of conservation enclaves meant for wildlife trophy hunting, and the showcasing of wilderness for white tourist's leisure. Caruthers explains that the idea was anchored on a romantic idealisation of the land of South Africa as purportedly discovered by the first Dutch migrants (the Voortrekkers).

The conservation parks were, thus, created to showcase the land "as the Voortrekkers saw it: virginal, pristine and primordial" (Carruthers, 1995 p.15). She further explains that in order to drive this idea, the apartheid government declared black people as insensitive, cruel and destructive of the natural environment. As such, management boards were constituted to formulate policies that would regulate the use of natural resources. These boards recommended the expulsion of black people from their ancestral homes to make way for conservation enclaves. This action resulted in loss of livelihoods and ultimately to a general degradation of the quality of life of many indigenous.

The Conservationist revolves around Mehring, his farm and the black farm workers. The novel begins with the discovery of an anonymous dead man on the farm. No one knows the details of his death. Jacobus, the head of the labourers,

informs Mehring about the dead body. Mehring calls the police to evacuate the body, but the police simply dig a shallow grave, and shoves it down, right at the spot where it was found.

When Mehring returns, Jacobus informs him that the dead body is buried on the farm. He calls the police station to demand that the body be excavated and taken out of his property, but by the time he returns from another trip Jacobus tells him the body still lay there. The presence of the black dead body sharing his 'land', his 'farm', and his 'investment,' remains a constant source of worry to Mehring. The constant reminder of the dead body on his land sets the tone for the events that runs through the novel.

Gordimer uses the metaphor of the dead body to dramatize the paradox of land ownership under apartheid. On one hand, Mehring owns the four hundred acres of land, yet, he is unable to connect with it. He spends most of the time away from the farm, relying, instead, on Jacobus to run it on his behalf. On the other hand, the dead black body, entrenched in the earth, serves to show the rootedness of the blacks on the land as thoughts of it causes Mehring to question his supposed ownership of the land, as this passage shows:

> He lies for what seems a long time. This place-his farm-really is what everyone says of it, he himself as well…A high-veld autumn, a silvery-gold peace, the sun lying soft on the hard ground, the rock pigeons beginning to fly earlier, now, the river he can hear feeling its dark tongue round the watercress and weeds, there inside the reeds... As if nothing had ever happened - is not-someone dead, down there (*The Conservationist,* 1974 p. 38).

Mehring's thoughts about the farm, in this excerpt, displays a nagging need for reaffirmation of ownership. It also gestures towards a sub-conscious admittance of the ludicrous claim to the land. Hence, by engaging in such activities as laying down on the hard ground for a long time and paying attention to every movement of nature's elements surrounding him, he attempts to bond with the land. Yet, he is constantly jolted by the memory of the dead body sharing the land in a more permanent state of existence. This reveals Mehring's real source of anxiety. His anxiety stems from his inability to connect with the land which he claims to be his, and his fear of losing it.

In crafting the character of Mehring as the symbol of apartheid's notion of a

conservationist, the narrative undermines claims of conservation which warranted the expulsion of the blacks from their homes. Gordimer ensures the reader understands the mendacity of the claim that only white people had the knowledge to harness natural resources for proper economic use. One of the deep ironies of the novel is that, it offers a glimpse of a very different image of Mehring than the one produced by himself. Mehring's notions of conservation is an important part of the epistemological ordering brought into question in the novel.

In Mehring's vision, nature is a realm of eternal beauty which is clearly separated from social process and history, and must be carefully protected from the indigenous people who lack knowledge and appreciation of it. Yet, the novel portrays him as a self-deluded conservationist. His perceived relationship with the land is highlighted from the beginning as delusional. Gordimer ensures that we glean beneath his own self-cultivation by introducing him as "the farmer", then undercutting such pretentions by opening the second section with the statement, "Mehring was no farmer, although there is some farming blood somewhere, no doubt" (p. 20).

Mehring bought the farm solely for his business interest and his social status, as stated below:

> Many well-off city men buy themselves farms at a certain stage in their careers – the losses are deductible from income tax and this fact coincides with some-thing less tangible it's understood they can now afford to indulge: a hankering to make contact with the land. It seems to be bred of making money in industry. And it is tacitly regarded as commendable, a sign of having remained fully human and capable of enjoying the simple things of life that poorer men can no longer afford (*The Conservationist,* 1974 p. 20).

Here, Gordimer, sarcastically, reveals through a cryptic mode, the fantasies and heresies of Mehring's class. Owning land comes with money and status. It is something a person of his race and class does. In addition, it serves as a tax-buffer on his main business of pig-iron.

In the first instance, owning a farm is a symbol of political, and economic power, that sets people of different races and social classes apart. The white/rich, perceive themselves as super-human but also feel the need to connect with humanity. As such, farming is one activity that gives them an 'earthly' connection. "It [farming] is tacitly regarded as commendable, a sign of having remained fully human and capable

of enjoying the simple things of life that poorer men can no longer afford" (*The Conservationist,* 1974 p. 20). Rich white men, like Mehring, possess land for their leisure. Mehring takes:

> … friends to the farm sometimes at weekends. They said what a marvellous idea, we adore to get out, get away, and when- they debouched from their cars (the children who opened the gate at the third pasture the richer by a windfall of cents) – how lovely, how lucky, how sensible to have a place like this to get away to. There would be a sheep roasted on a spit rigged up over the pit… to people like those on the grass drinking wine and eating crisps lamb from their fingers, the sight brought a sensation of freedom…the freedom of being down there on the earth, out in the fresh air of this place – to – get – away (*The Conservationist,* 1974p. 21).

The above reveals conservation as a parable for debauchery and escapism. Mehring and his rich friends, use the farm to indulge in the pleasures of eating, drinking and displaying their ostentatious generosity by throwing cents at the black children who run to open the gates for their approaching automobiles.

As for the tax matter, the novel narrates that white land owners get tax relief on any losses they incur on the farm. It explains why Mehring is not bothered when the rain does not fall, and the yield declines because "the losses will go to tax" (*The Conservationist,* 1974 p .42). These two reasons show that Mehring owns the farm not because he cares about conservation, but for the apparent reason that it serves his economic interests, and it is a symbol of power exclusively reserved for people of his race.

The novel also provides a third additional reason why Mehring purchased the farm, for his illicit sexual affairs. Even before he purchases the farm, he thinks that it would be a great rendezvous for his sexual escapades. He contemplates how perfect it would be to bring his girlfriend to the farm –for the sake of 'discretion'. As he anticipates his forthcoming appointment with Antonia, he assures himself that it is, "undoubtedly a thousand times better than any flat in town, from the point of view of discretion…" (*The Conservationist,* 1974 p.39).

The fact that Mehring thinks of the farm as a place to have his sexual affairs, even before he acquires it, exposes his exploitive motives for owning the farm. Mehring purchased the over four hundred acres of land to serve his leisure, his profit margin, and, his ego.

The fact that Mehring controls the farm and the black people working on it gives

him a feeling of authority, and dominion over land, and people. Gordimer criticises this in many instances. One is through the conversation between Mehring and his liberal girlfriend, Antonia. Antonia constantly taunts his so-called authority. She tells him that, “You don’t ‘own’ a country by signing a bit of paper the way you bought yourself the title deed to that farm” (*The Conservationist,* 1974 p. 95).

The parallel she draws between owning a country and owning a farm is particularly revealing as both farming and colonialism are fundamental structures of owning, controlling and exploiting. In the context of apartheid, Mehring represents a class of people who, by virtue of their racial, political and financial power, ‘own’ South Africa and exploit its human, and natural resources. Mehring is, therefore, a mere beneficiary of imperialist racial othering as well as an exploiter of nature. Nixon (1999, p. 8) cognises this cynicism in the depiction of Mehring’s conservationist impulse where he opines that “Mehring is simply a prominent industrialist, a weekend farmer with a squanderer, absentee relationship to the land.” He represents the worldly-wise corporate white who rose to prominence during the economic boom of the late sixties.

Mehring fancies himself a conservationist who nurtures the land for future generations, yet he knows nothing about farming. Gordimer ridicules Mehring’s notion of conservation where he is seen walking around the farm in his characteristic haughty disposition towards the blacks, complaining about insignificant things like their children playing with pigeon eggs, Jacobus’ cigarettes butts laying on the ground or the dogs running around the farm. This is his notion of conservation. Indeed, the extent of his deluded self-identification as a farmer occurs during one of his romantic meanderings through his farm, dressed in his business suit:

> His shoes and the pale grey pants are wiped by wet muzzles of grasses, his hands that he lets hang at his sides, are trailed over by the tips of a million delicate tongues. Look at the willows. The height of the grass. Look at the reeds. Everything bends, blends, folds. Everything is continually swaying, flowing rippling waving surging streaming… (*The Conservationist,* 1974 p. 218).

This poetic description of Mehring’s moments of romance with the land portrays a desperate attempt to own it. Wagner (1994, p.11) describes this moment of Mehring’s own self-conception as “irremediably arrogant”, but it can also be interpreted as more deluded than egotistical. He is attempting to forge a connection with the piece of land,

which he fully well knows is not belong to him, and his haphazard recollection of the phrase, "fair and lovely place" is confirmation of this. The fact that he knows it is "not his vocabulary" and "only something learned by rote" (*The Conservationist,* 19741974 p. 218), reinforces the falseness of Mehring's claims to the land.

Adding another layer to his conceited claims of conservation, the novel portrays Mehring as always spouting his botanical knowledge of trees, which he reads from books. In one instance, he sends his secretary to buy him a book on flowers which he labours to memorise:

> Genus: Amaryllidaceae; species Crinum bulbispermum. One of the secretaries at the office has been sent out to buy the best book available on veld flowers and from it he's identified the lilies as the Orange River Lily, Crinum bulbispermum, springblooming, favouring swampy ground. It belongs to the amaryllis family, most of whose members are distinguished by the arrangement of the flowers in an umbel subtended by two or more bracts (*The Conservationist,* 1974 p. 206).

Here, Mehring learns about farming not on the farm, but from a book. Yet, such attempts at learning the botanical names of flowers do not seem to help him understand the intricacies of farming. Thus, he consistently relies on Jacobus' 'traditional' skills to manage the farm.

Gordimer ironizes her protagonist's claims of conservation, revealing how colonialism undergirds the exploitation of both men and nature through, so-called, claims of scientific knowledge. Right from the 18th century, the idea that nature can be mastered through scientific knowledge had a mutually enabling connection with the colonial project. Dryton (2001 pp. 4-5) has argued that one of the fundamental structures of colonialism was the expropriation of lands under the claim that agriculture could "reclaim wastelands and make barbaric peoples civilized if guided by scientific planning". However, Mehring's reliance on Jacobus to take care of the farm reveals that he is no conservationist, but simply an exploiter.

The land, to Mehring, like to Mr. Howland in Ngugi's (1987) *Weep Not Child*, exists only as a sign of authority, power and domination. Also, just as Ngotho is indispensable to Mr. Howland, so is Jacobus to Mehring. Howland and Mehring, as agents of colonialism, conserve not the land but the authority (colonialism/white-supremacy) that gives them ownership of the land.

The subject of white supremacy is critiqued in the novel. The master versus

servant relationship between Mehring and Jacobus is reversed, ironically, through depiction of Mehring's incompetence and absolute dependence on Jacobus, and Jacobus' sheer mastery of farm, and personnel management.

Mehring is entirely dependent on his farmhands' labour. Jacobus, through his labour, usurps Mehring's position of mastery. This is made clear in many instances; like when fire from the De Boars farm, razes part of the farm while Mehring is away on one of his numerous trips abroad, and the onus is on Jacobus to manage the fire and stop it from spreading (*The Conservationist,* 1974 p. 143). Another instance is when a cow develops mastitis, Jacobus rummages through Mehring's house for medicine, which he then administers by copying what he had once seen the veterinary doctor do. Jacobus' expertise in managing the inferno and inoculating the cow to curb the spread of the disease, contrasts sharply with Mehring's incompetence as a farmer. It is even more striking when the flood occurs, and Mehring is cut off from the farm while Jacobus is left in charge. Mehring's ignorance of farming reveals his exploitative relationship with the land.

4. Displacement and its social consequences

The Conservationist is invested with the issue of injustice in the distribution of natural resources, particularly, the land. The land has been a prominent motif in postcolonial literature because the physical occupation of territories was a major feature of colonialisation. Many Africans where dispossessed, and separated from their natural environments, as a result of land usurpation. This affected their social and economic lives, and ultimately, their dignity and self-respect. Gordimer portrays this through characterisation. Many of the black characters are drifters, with no secured livelihood. They move from one location (black reserved areas) to another in search of work in white-owned farms, the abattoirs or the Indian shops. The shanties that provide transit accommodation for these displaced people are dilapidated and hazardous to human habitation. For example, the shanty near Mehring's farm, as young Izak describes is, "a one-room with a roof held down by rocks and pumpkins" (*The Conservationist,* 1974 p. 60).

The shanties are also surrounded by dumpsites where young children, and the elderly, scavenge the rubbish pile for discarded items and food. Pushed by hunger

and frustration, alcoholism and criminality are common within the black quarters. Most of the times they engage in gambling, prostitution and theft. The shanty, Jacobus says, "is worse than the location…They'll take your money. If they don't do it themselves, with a knife, they'll get those dirty women to steal it out of your trousers" (*The Conservationist,* 1974 p. 60).

The location (black quarters on white-owned farms) itself is not a comfortable habitat. It is overcrowded with men, women and young children, struggling to survive. Mehring thinks there are over a hundred and fifty thousand black people in the location by his farm. No one is responsible for them; not even the government. Like the land, they are simply transferred from one white-owner to another. Mehring bought his farm with the people on the location. In a moment of frustration over their overwhelming presence on the farm, he exaggeratedly cries out that there are "a hundred and fifty – thousands of them, practically on the door step". He thinks that "it was something that should have been taken into consideration from the beginning, before the deed of sale was signed." Mehring dismisses that "they're used to anything, they survive, swallowing dust, walking in droves through rain, and blown, in August, like newspapers to the shelter of any wall" (*The Conservationist,* 1974 p.234).

Others like Jacobus, Witbooi, Izak, Alena and Solomon who are fortunate to be employed on the farm, may have escaped homelessness and starvation, yet they do not live comfortably. Jacobus, his wife, and youngest child, occupy a room in the servants' quarters. Alina and her man "had fixed up the shed as their room" while the rest of the workers are all crammed in a make-shift 'breeze-block quarters' called the compound (*The Conservationist,* 1974 p.22). Despite their discomfort, they take in homeless relatives into the compound which gets "colder in winter… [and] as soon as the sun went down; the coughing of the children went on increasingly and ignored inside, while the men equated or stood with hunched shoulders around the brazier" (*The Conservationist,* 1974 p.29).

They have to also share the little provision the master hands out to them. This means cutting down individual ration in order for the food to go around. Like when a relation of Solomon comes squatting, "his family fed from everybody's cooking pots; Jacobus could not increase the amount of mealie-meal distributed without accounting for it when the supply did not last the allotted period of time" (*The Conservationist,*

1974 p. 85).

5. Poetic Justice

The dramatisation of poor health, shelter and insufficient food which the black people are subjected to provides a view of the deep issues of environmental racism, and injustice. By directing attention to the deprivation of the key pillars of life, Gordimer is deeply invested in the ecological critique of apartheid through what Glissant (1997 p. 27) calls an "aesthetic of the earth"; an aesthetic which "avoids the obsolete mysticism of place and engages with an ecological critique of models of consumption, exclusion and hegemony." Consequently, the subjugation and oppression of the black people beacons for justice. Justice comes in the way that Mehring begins to lose grip of himself, his son and eventually his farm.

Gordimer uses the landscape and elements of nature as symbols to craft a 'new' South African subjectivity that registers the prominence of the blacks whilst the identity that Mehring persistently tries to cultivate through his attempt to bond with the farm, slowly fades away. Mehring's attempt to wholly possess, and keep the farm, fails as his efforts to bequeath the farm to his son fells through. Mehring's anxiety about his 'legacy' is very apparent. He is continually worried about passing an inheritance to his son. In an instance, he declares that "the farm, who else is a farm for but a son..." (*The Conservationist,* 1974 p. 114).

It is clear that Mehring's vision of the future predicts a handing over of the farm to the next generation. This is made clearer in his plan to "plant another hundred trees," and in particular, "Oaks", as his internal monologue reminds us that "You don't plant oaks for yourself but for those who come after" (*The Conservationist,* 1974 p. 172). Yet, his son is not interested in inheriting the farm. The son, Terry, keeps a distance from the father, his ideologies and his Farm.

Terry refuses to spend his holidays on the farm (*The Conservationist,* 1974 p. 117). He detests his father's materialism and treatment of the blacks. Equally, he does not believe in the apartheid government, and plans to leave the country after graduating from college in order to escape conscription into the army. He tells his father that "if anyone thinks [he is] going into their army to learn to 'kill kaffirs' like a ware ou, well I'm damn well not" (*The Conservationist,* 1974 p. 70).

This realisation troubles Mehring as he recognises in his son's anti-government feelings, a growing-away from him as a father, and a potential moving away from the farm, and from South Africa as a country.

By casting Terry as a liberal, the narrative introduces a crack from within. It signifies a challenge to the conservative views of white superiority, which Mehring's generation upholds, signalling the possibility for change. Terry reflects the idealism of the white liberals. Although they are beneficiaries of apartheid, they oppose its subjugation of the blacks. Terry (like such white liberal characters as Paddy, in Peter Abraham's (1946) *Mine Boy*, Camila, in Bessie Head's (1973) *A Question of Power,* Evelyn Bray, in Gordimer's (1970) *A Quest of Honour,* among several others) opposes racism and subjugation of blacks.

Terry negates his father in several ways. For example, he hitchhikes from school to the farm, refusing to take a plane or train ticket from his father. He forbids the servants from calling him master. Izak tells Dorcas, a wife of one of the servants, that: "His son said he doesn't want to be called master – he told Jacobus, didn't he? You mustn't call me Mr. Terry. He just wants us to call him by his name" (p. 73). The depiction of Terry as a liberal, with his nihilist idealism, further complicates the possibility of the continuation of black subjugation, and eventually marks the climax of the novel. Terry's rejection of the farm, the country, and all that his father upholds, prefigures the end of Mehring's, and by extension, white ownership of the land.

As the son shuns the father, he (Mehring) becomes totally lonely and gradually loses all connections with real people. His consciousness is fragmented, and he steadily loses grip on the world around him, such as when he stood in "an awful moment looking at a green light, and not knowing what it meant. He is unable to read even the simplest, familiar system of signs. He is no longer responding to normal signs, he "clings to familiar landmarks in an attempt to hang on to his version of reality, picking out bus stops and beer cartons" (*The Conservationist,* 1974 p. 130). However, the final triumph over Mehring comes in the form of a flood.

A flood occurs which cuts him off from the farm. First, he is unable to reach the farm because the road is washed out by the flood. Secondly, the flood had unearthed the dead body. When he eventually gets to the farm, he is assaulted by the pungent smell of rot, "a stink to high heavens" (*The Conservationist,* 1974 p. 235). Mehring flees away from the smell and from the farm.

As Mehring races away to oblivion, he meets a girl and attempts to have sex with her in the woods behind an old mine-dump. Again, he is gripped by panic as he remembers the dead body lying on the farm. He tries to re-assure himself that it couldn't harm him, but thoughts of violence, the body, and the flood flows torrentially through his mind. Exhausted, he communes with the imaginary Antonia:

> Everything is over long ago, dead when it was found. Violence is a red blossom for you to put behind your gipsy-ringed ear, a kaffir-boom flower you wear in London as your souvenir of foreign parts, like those Americans who leave Hawaii with hibiscus around their necks, but violence has flowered after seven years drought, violence as fecundity, weathering as humus, rising as sap. If it had not been for the flood... (*The Conservationist,* 1974 p. 242).

Mehring's thoughts regarding violence is very revealing as it connects, through metaphor, the luxury enjoyed in the metropolis with bloodshed in the colonies. Reference to violence as "red blossom" apparels on the neck, and behind the ears of the imaginary lover now far away in London, and as "souvenir of foreign parts" (*The Conservationist,* 1974 p. 242) on the streets of London, is indicative of the fact that the empire flourishes at the destruction of the colony. Similarly, the allusion to American tourists in Hawaii, a territory with a history of forceful colonisation and marginalisation of indigenous people by European-Americans, reinforces this idea. The passage equally shows that the end has come for Mehring, and the violence, repression and racial injustice that he represents. This is clear where he says that "violence has flowered after seven years" (*The Conservationist,* 1974 p. 242), making a biblical allusion to the story of Joseph and the Egyptian's seven years of bounty and another seven of famine. Mehring understands his current state of affairs as a season of reaping what was sowed.

Thoughts of violence drives Mehring into hallucination. He imagines that some people are lurking in the shadows to attack him. He thinks he is about to be "set upon, robbed, killed, castrated "he shouts, but hears only his own echo. He sees a man, probably a guard, who comes to warn him that the mine- dump is not safe but he imagines the man is together with many others. He thinks they are the killers of the dead body and have come to kill him too. Mehring imagines that a whole gang of them (black people) are coming after him. He imagines he is beaten down and people are shouting "come and look… Its Mehring. Its Mehring, down there" (*The*

Conservationist, 1974 p. 250).

He couldn't achieve his aim of having sex with the girl in the woods. He dresses quickly and runs, thinking about the girl and the farm, simultaneously. He decides that:

> He is going to leave her to them. He's going, in a matter of seconds – mustn't give himself away by so much as glancing towards the car- he's going to make a dash for it, a leap, sell the place to the first offer., jump in, the key's there in the ignition, and drive off reversing wildly… he's going to run, run and leave them to rape her or rob her. She'll be all right. They survive everything… they can have it, the whole four hundred acres (*The Conservationist,* 1974 p. 250).

Gordimer's resolution of the land issue is very compelling. Mehring loses the land in a similar manner that he acquires it; through force and violence. It equally makes a profound statement about colonial possession of African lands which writers have severally demonstrate with images of penetration and rape (Adam, 2003). The failed attempt at copulation with the girl can be interpreted as the end of the violation of both the land and the people. Mehring tells himself that "he is going to leave, he's going to run, run and leave them to rape her or rob her. She'll be all right. They survive everything… they can have it, the whole four hundred acres" (*The Conservationist,* 1974 p. 250). This shows, precisely, what he has been doing to the land, raping and robing it. This scenario depicts Gordimer's imagining of the end of apartheid, especially because as he (Mehring) races away into oblivion, the farm workers purchase a wood coffin, and Jacobus leads a procession for the dead man on the high farm ground.

The workers rebury the unknown man with proper funeral rites, and it is said that:

> 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 to put him away to rest; he had come back. He took possession of this earth, theirs; one of them (*The Conservationist,* 1974 p. 252).

Re-burying the dead man with proper rites by the entire community of blacks, symbolises not only the retrieval of the land, but the continuity of the black race. As the passage shows, although he was nameless and anonymous and had no children, "their children were there to live after him" (*The Conservationist,* 1974 p. 252).

In this statement, the dead man becomes a symbol of the dispossessed, and oppressed generation. His death, therefore, symbolises the death of that era, and a new beginning for the blacks. The children who live after him assume real ownership of the land.

6. Conclusion

The postcolonial ecocritical reading of *The Conservationist* reveals two things. The fragmentation of Mehring's consciousness deconstructs the ideologies that justify white proprietorship of the land. His lack of farming knowledge and his exploitation of the farm as a tax-buffer shows the mendacity of the apartheid regime.

In this regard, the novel exposes the conservation impulse relation to the social, cultural and psychological contradictions of apartheid. Secondly, the introduction of the mythological sub-text of the novel recovers the agency of nature and presents a discourse of farming by the blacks that is ethically invested in the land.

The depiction of the failure of Mehring as a farmer/conservationist, the celebration of the skills and resilience of the black farmhands, and the retributive justice of nature in the form of the flood, corroborates the view that the concept of justice is fundamental to postcolonial environmental representation. The narrative's designation of the victory of nature and the blacks over Mehring, and his conceited claims of conservation, indicates the concept of justice at work in postcolonial environmental literature.

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