

WHO OWNS THE LAND? ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE AND SETTLER POWER IN NADINE GORDIMER'S *THE CONSERVATIONIST*

Dr. Gayatri Harnesha

Lecturer in English (GPSC GES II)

A V Parekh Technical Institute, Rajkot

Email: gbharnesha@gmail.com

Abstract—Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist* presents a white industrialist's farm as a small but complete model of apartheid South Africa. This article argues that the novel treats landownership not as a neutral legal fact but as a racial and ecological relation maintained through dispossession, labour, fencing, and selective care. Mehring imagines himself as a cultivated proprietor and conservationist, yet his attachment to the farm depends on Black workers whose knowledge and work make the land productive while leaving them without security or authority. The unidentified Black man buried on the property becomes the novel's most persistent challenge to that arrangement. His grave, the drought, and the flood expose the limits of Mehring's belief that money and title can convert occupied land into belonging. Reading Gordimer through postcolonial ecocriticism and environmental justice clarifies how the novel joins damaged landscapes to damaged social relations. Its concern with land, water, unequal exposure to ecological risk, and restitution remains urgent in contemporary debates about climate justice and the unfinished politics of land in South Africa.

Keywords: Nadine Gordimer; *The Conservationist*; apartheid; land; ecological justice; settler power; environmental racism; postcolonial ecocriticism.

Introduction

Published in 1974, at the height of apartheid, *The Conservationist* asks a deceptively simple question: what makes a person entitled to call land his own? Gordimer places that question inside the consciousness of Mehring, a wealthy white businessman who has bought a farm outside Johannesburg. He has a deed, money for improvements, livestock, workers, and the leisure to visit on weekends. In the language of law and commerce, these facts make him owner. The novel steadily shows, however, that ownership is not the same as attachment, care, knowledge, or justice. The farm is cultivated by Black labourers, shaped by histories that precede Mehring, and interrupted by the body of an unknown Black man found on the land. The gap between legal possession and ethical belonging gives the novel its force.

The title is therefore ironic. Mehring calls himself a conservationist because he values soil, animals, trees, and the visual order of a well-managed farm. Yet his version of conservation protects a property regime that has already separated people from land. He wants nature without history: a landscape made picturesque by labour but emptied of the labourers' claims. Gordimer makes this desire visible in the way Mehring looks. He surveys fields from a car, reads the farm as an investment, and repeatedly reduces workers to functions in his private rural experiment. His care is real in a limited sense, but it is inseparable from command. The novel asks whether land can be conserved by someone who benefits from the social destruction on which its ownership rests.

An ecological reading of the novel must not treat ecology as a secondary metaphor for race. Apartheid regulated space, mobility, work, housing, and access to resources; it was also a material system that distributed clean environments and environmental risk unequally. Environmental justice names this connection between power and the unequal conditions under which groups live, work, and absorb harm. Rob Nixon's account of "slow violence" is useful here because it directs attention to forms of damage that are dispersed across time and often made to look ordinary rather than spectacular (2). In Gordimer's farm world, the ordinary facts of employment, drought, disease, enclosure, and uncertain shelter are part of a slow violence that makes white leisure possible.

This article reads *The Conservationist* as a novel of ecological justice and settler power. It first places Mehring's ownership within apartheid's racial ordering of land. It then considers the farm's labour system, the buried corpse, drought and flood, and the novel's fractured point of view. Finally, it connects Gordimer's critique to current debates about land restitution, environmental rights, and climate justice. The aim is not to turn the novel into a simple policy statement. Its ambiguity is one of its strengths. Still, its central insight is direct: a landscape cannot be understood as healthy while the people who sustain it are treated as temporary, disposable, or outside its future.

Apartheid Property and the Fiction of Conservation

Mehring's farm is not simply a pastoral retreat. It is a commodity purchased by a man whose wealth comes from industry, and it is located within an apartheid order that made landholding profoundly racial. The novel does not need to reproduce a statute book to make that history present. The racial division of authority is built into daily life: Mehring makes decisions, visits, inspects, and imagines; Black workers plant, repair, tend animals, interpret weather, and remain vulnerable to dismissal. The unequal distribution of power turns the farm into a condensed version of the country. What appears to be private property is already a political space.

Frantz Fanon writes that, in colonial situations, the demand for land is never merely symbolic because it concerns food, dignity, and the possibility of a future (34–35). Gordimer's novel develops a related idea through scenes rather than slogans. Mehring's right to possess the farm is visible on paper, while the workers' relation to the land is visible in skill, memory, and dependence. The contrast is important. Law grants one kind of recognition, but the novel asks readers to notice other kinds: practical knowledge of soil and animals, burial practice, kinship, and the right to remain. Its ecological politics begins by refusing to let a title deed settle the moral question.

J. M. Coetzee's account of South African "white writing" helps explain the pressure Gordimer places on the farm. Colonial pastoral traditions often imagine the countryside as open, empty, and available for white meaning. Such writing can turn occupation into scenery. Gordimer uses some pastoral materials—fields, animals, seasonal change, rural solitude—but she makes them resistant. Her landscape is never empty. It bears work, fear, racial surveillance, and an unburied history. Mehring tries to see a peaceful property; the novel repeatedly returns him to the human relations that make the peace false (Coetzee).

The word conservation itself carries this contradiction. Conservation can mean protection from erosion, waste, and short-term extraction. It can also become a language through which elites claim moral authority over territory. Mehring's concern for the farm distinguishes him, in his own mind, from crude exploiters. Yet he does not question the structure that gives him control over land and over the people living or working there. Gordimer's title exposes the problem: protection that leaves dispossession intact is not ecological justice. It is a refined form of possession.

Mehring and the Settler Gaze

Mehring is a particularly revealing owner because he is neither an old-fashioned farmer nor an openly ideological racist caricature. He is mobile, affluent, cosmopolitan, and capable of liberal gestures. He sees the farm as an alternative to city life and as evidence that he has acquired depth beyond business. This self-image makes his blindness more instructive. He can dislike apartheid's uglier public forms while still accepting the private privileges that apartheid secures for him. Gordimer thereby questions the comfort of liberal ownership. A person need not speak the language of racial hatred to benefit from and reproduce a racial order.

His relation to the farm is mediated by distance. Mehring arrives as a visitor, observes from vehicles and verandas, and evaluates improvements in terms of order and value. He wants the land to confirm his taste. The people who work it appear in his consciousness as interruptions, problems, or objects of speculation. He is intrigued by their difference but does not grant them interiority equal to his own. The narrative often stays close enough to Mehring's mind to reveal this habit while keeping sufficient irony to expose it. Readers are made to feel how narrow a privileged gaze can be precisely because it assumes itself to be broad.

Dominic Head notes that Gordimer's fiction repeatedly tests liberal individualism against the structures of South African history. That tension is central here. Mehring believes his private decency can give his ownership a moral character. But private feeling cannot repair a public system of land inequality. His occasional fascination with workers, his sexual relationships, and his appreciation of the countryside do not change who decides, who owns, and who can be removed. The farm is not redeemed by the owner's sensitivity because sensitivity without redistribution leaves power untouched (Head).

The novel also unsettles Mehring through his own family life. His son Terry does not inherit the farm's meaning in the way Mehring expects. The property fails to become a stable legacy because the next generation does not simply accept the emotional script attached to it. This failure matters politically. Settler property depends not only on legal title but on the reproduction of a story: that the owner's family belongs naturally to the place. Terry's estrangement reveals the weakness of that story. The farm can be bought, but its future cannot be commanded.

Labour, Knowledge, and the Social Ecology of the Farm

The farm works because Black workers make it work. They know routines of planting, feeding, repairing, watching weather, and responding to animals. Mehring may finance the enterprise, but he does not possess the everyday knowledge that turns territory into a lived place. Gordimer does not romanticize the workers as naturally ecological subjects; they too live under pressure, make compromises, and seek security. Yet the novel makes clear that the farm's practical intelligence lies largely outside the owner's consciousness. This imbalance challenges the fantasy that capital alone creates value.

The workers' dependence on employment is ecological as well as economic. Their housing, food, movement, and safety are tied to a landscape owned by someone else. They live near the land but do not control its terms. Environmental justice scholars emphasize that harm is not distributed after social inequality has already been formed; inequality helps determine who is placed near danger, who has access to protection, and whose losses count. On Mehring's farm, the same people who sustain the landscape are least able to decide what it will become. Their ecological relation is intimate but politically constrained.

This is why the novel's attention to small material details matters. Tools, livestock, rain, crops, fences, and work schedules are not background decorations. They are the means through which power is enacted. A fence, for example, can protect animals or crops, but it can also formalize exclusion. A water source can support life, yet control of it can become control of labour. Gordimer's rural realism asks readers to see these objects as social facts. The environment is not outside politics; politics is embedded in the management of environmental life.

Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin argue that postcolonial ecocriticism must connect environmental questions to the histories of imperialism, development, and unequal power that structure them. *The Conservationist* does exactly this before the term became common. Its farm is not an innocent natural setting onto which racial conflict has been added. Racial domination shapes the very form of the landscape: who can dwell there, which work is visible, whose body can be buried there, and whose future the property is designed to serve (Huggan and Tiffin).

The Corpse as Counter-Memory

The unidentified Black man's body is the novel's most disturbing answer to Mehring's confidence in ownership. Found on the farm under uncertain circumstances, the corpse cannot be comfortably absorbed into the routines of property management. Officials treat the matter with limited concern, and Mehring's first responses are shaped by inconvenience and distance. The body is, from his perspective, a problem that has appeared on his land. Gordimer reverses that logic. The corpse makes the land itself speak of a history that Mehring cannot control.

The man remains unnamed, and that anonymity is ethically difficult. It reflects a system in which Black life can be bureaucratically neglected and socially unrecorded. At the same time, the body resists becoming merely an emblem. It produces anxiety because it cannot be explained away. There is a person beneath the farm's surface, a death that does not fit the owner's pastoral self-image. The grave creates a second map of the property: not the map of fields and improvements, but one of violence, abandonment, and unresolved claim.

The workers' relation to the corpse differs sharply from Mehring's. Burial is not simply a disposal problem; it is a matter of recognition and communal responsibility. Gordimer does not make this difference sentimental. Instead, she shows competing ways of understanding land. For Mehring, the grave threatens the clarity of possession. For the workers, it enters a social and spiritual landscape that cannot be reduced to the owner's account books. The contrast makes the novel's question more exact. Who owns land that holds the dead of a people excluded from its title?

Stephen Clingman describes Gordimer's fiction as historical from the inside: public structures are felt through private consciousness and daily experience. The corpse is one of the clearest examples of that method. Apartheid is not presented only through public laws or speeches. It appears in the indifference surrounding an unknown death and in Mehring's inability to recognize the grave as an indictment of his position. The body becomes counter-memory: a reminder that the farm's apparent order is built over lives that official property language does not adequately acknowledge (Clingman).

Drought, Flood, and Ecological Time

The novel's weather patterns deepen its critique of control. Drought exposes the fragility of agricultural life and the unequal capacity to survive scarcity. A wealthy owner can calculate losses, purchase supplies, and leave the farm; workers cannot separate environmental hardship from the insecurity of employment and shelter. The drought is therefore never just natural scenery. It reveals how class and race shape exposure to ecological stress. The same dry land means different things to people with different resources.

Flood later disrupts the farm's surface order and returns the buried body to narrative attention. The movement of water becomes a material challenge to the fantasy that land can be fully enclosed, improved, and made legible. This is not a simple story in which nature delivers moral punishment. Gordimer does not claim that weather possesses human intentions. Rather, the flood exposes the limits of Mehring's mastery. Earth, water, and decay do not obey the property owner's desire for clean boundaries. They make visible what his management has tried to cover.

Rob Nixon's idea of slow violence is especially helpful here. Environmental damage often unfolds gradually, without the dramatic visibility that attracts public concern. Drought, soil exhaustion, and the accumulation of unequal risk can become normal. The flood interrupts that normality, but it does not create the injustice. It reveals an older pattern in which some people have been made more disposable than others. Gordimer links ecological event to political history without collapsing one into the other. Nature does not replace human responsibility; it brings responsibility into view.

The novel's ecological time is thus longer than Mehring's weekends and investment plans. He measures the farm through purchase, improvement, and inheritance. The land carries seasonal cycles, older occupations, graves, and processes of erosion and renewal. This difference in scale weakens the owner's claim to permanence. He may control a title at one moment, but the novel refuses to grant him a secure place in the deeper time of the landscape. Its form makes possession look provisional.

Animals, Fences, and Managed Life

Animals in *The Conservationist* are part of Mehring's fantasy of competent stewardship. Livestock, dogs, and wild creatures allow him to imagine a relationship to nature that is more authentic than his urban business life. Yet the animals are also managed within the same hierarchy that organizes the farm's human relations. They are counted, bred, protected, sold, and used to display the owner's capacity for care. The novel's point is not that care for animals is false. It is that care becomes morally compromised when it is detached from concern for the people whose labour sustains it.

This contradiction recalls a central problem in environmental politics: protection can be uneven. A landowner may preserve a view, a species, or a productive field while accepting the disposability of workers. Such selectivity creates an environmental ethic without justice. Gordimer's irony lies in letting Mehring value the nonhuman world while failing to understand the human world that makes his rural pleasure possible. His conservation is not empty, but it is incomplete in the most consequential way.

Fences make the problem visible. They organize animals and crops, but they also mark who has the right to enter, remain, and decide. In a settler-colonial context, the fence is more than a practical tool. It translates historical seizure into everyday space. By treating the farm's borders as normal, Mehring avoids the question of how a bordered property came to stand where other relations to land had existed. Gordimer's narrative keeps returning to crossings, surveillance, and unease because the fence cannot erase the history it materializes.

Race, Capital, and the Failure of Private Morality

Mehring's wealth links the farm to a wider economy. He is not simply a man of the soil; he is an industrial capitalist who turns rural property into a personal possession and cultural symbol. This connection matters because apartheid was not only an attitude or a set of social prejudices. It organized labour and space in ways that benefited capital. The farm's racial hierarchy is therefore connected to the larger systems that make Black labour cheap, mobile, and replaceable while preserving white ownership as security and prestige.

Achille Mbembe warns against accounts of domination that treat power as distant from the intimate textures of ordinary life. Gordimer's novel is attentive to those textures: casual speech, bodily discomfort, domestic arrangements, desire, embarrassment, and silence. Mehring does not encounter apartheid as an abstract institution; he lives inside habits that make inequality appear natural. The literary value of the novel lies partly in its refusal to grant him the innocence he seeks. His unease is not proof of ethical transformation. It is evidence that the world he benefits from cannot be made fully coherent even to himself (Mbembe).

The limits of private morality are clearest when Mehring responds to those around him as individuals while leaving structures unchanged. He can be generous, curious, or regretful. None of these feelings gives workers ownership, political voice, or protection from displacement. Gordimer's critique remains important because contemporary discussions of environmental responsibility can also become too individual. Personal concern for nature matters, but it cannot substitute for changes in law, labour relations, land access, and decision-making power.

Form, Silence, and the Limits of the White Gaze

The Conservationist does not tell its story in a smooth realist line. It moves through Mehring's perceptions, workers' speech, memory, rumor, and moments that unsettle stable explanation. This fractured form is political. A conventional single-owner narrative would make the farm appear coherent because it would reproduce the owner's authority to interpret it. Gordimer instead permits disruptions that Mehring cannot master. The unreadable corpse, the workers' knowledge, and the land's changing conditions interrupt his version of events.

Some readers may find the novel's indirect treatment of Black interiority troubling, and that concern should remain part of its interpretation. Gordimer writes against a system that silenced Black people, but a white author's attempt to represent that world is not free from the limits of white perspective. The novel's strongest achievement is not that it perfectly speaks for the dispossessed. It is that it makes the authority of the white proprietor visibly inadequate. Its gaps and silences can be read as evidence of what Mehring cannot know, though they also remind readers to seek histories and voices beyond his frame.

Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley argue that postcolonial ecological writing often challenges the separation of environmental form from colonial history. Gordimer's formal disruptions serve that challenge. The farm cannot be narrated as a stable natural whole because it is fractured by racial power. Its environment is made of contested relations, not harmonious scenery. The novel's uneasy style asks the reader to inhabit that contest rather than resolve it too quickly (DeLoughrey and Handley).

Ecological Justice and Contemporary Relevance

The novel remains contemporary because the questions it raises have not disappeared with apartheid. South Africa's Constitution recognizes both the right to an environment that is not harmful to health or well-being and the need for land reform and restitution within its property provisions (South Africa, Constitution secs. 24–25). These commitments show that environmental protection and land justice cannot be separated. A clean environment that remains inaccessible or unequally governed is not sufficient; nor is land reform complete if communities remain exposed to polluted water, climate risk, or insecure livelihoods.

The Restitution of Land Rights Act of 1994 gave legal form to the principle that people dispossessed by racially discriminatory laws or practices should have a route to restitution or equitable redress. Gordimer's novel predates this law, but it clarifies why restitution is not only an administrative question. The grave on Mehring's farm suggests that dispossession is carried in memory, place, and unacknowledged death. Legal repair is necessary, yet the novel also insists on the emotional and ecological dimensions of repair: who is recognized as belonging, whose knowledge counts, and how land can support a shared future (South Africa, Restitution of Land Rights Act).

Climate change gives the novel's drought and flood imagery renewed force. Environmental crises do not affect all people equally; their consequences are intensified by insecure work, inadequate housing, unequal access to water, and lack of political power. The United Nations Environment Programme describes climate disruption, biodiversity loss, and pollution as interconnected crises requiring changes in economic and social systems, not isolated technical fixes. *The Conservationist* anticipates this systemic perspective by showing that the condition of land cannot be separated from the racial organization of labour and property (United Nations Environment Programme).

Its relevance is therefore not limited to South Africa. Across settler societies and unequal agrarian economies, conservation is often debated alongside Indigenous and local claims, farm labour, access to water, and the effects of extractive development. Gordimer does not offer a universal solution, but she gives readers a demanding test. Any conservation practice that protects landscapes while leaving historical dispossession unquestioned risks repeating the logic of Mehring's farm. Ecological justice begins when the people most affected by land decisions have meaningful power over those decisions.

Conclusion

The Conservationist dismantles the reassuring idea that ownership proves belonging. Mehring possesses a farm, but he cannot make himself native to its history, its labour, or its ecological time. His title, money, and concern for rural beauty do not erase the racial structure that allows him to command the land while others live on it without equivalent rights. Gordimer makes this contradiction concrete through the workers' indispensable knowledge, the unnamed corpse, the fence, the drought, and the flood. Each element turns the farm from a private retreat into a contested political landscape.

The novel's title finally names a question rather than a virtue. What does it mean to conserve? If conservation means preserving property, order, and scenic value for the already powerful, it can coexist with dispossession. If it means sustaining the conditions of shared life, it must include dignity, restitution, participation, and material security. Gordimer's achievement is to make that distinction felt through fiction. The land does not simply judge Mehring, and the novel does not offer an easy transfer of moral ownership. Instead, it makes the reader see that no account of ecology can be adequate while it ignores the histories of people buried beneath the landscape it seeks to protect.

Works Cited

- [1] Clingman, Stephen. *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside*. University of Massachusetts Press, 1992.
- [2] Coetzee, J. M. *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*. Yale University Press, 1988.
- [3] DeLoughrey, Elizabeth, and George B. Handley, editors. *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*. Oxford University Press, 2011.
- [4] Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox, Grove Press, 2004.
- [5] Gordimer, Nadine. *The Conservationist*. Penguin Books, 1983.
- [6] *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*. Knopf, 1988.
- [7] Head, Dominic. *Nadine Gordimer*. Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- [8] Huggan, Graham, and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2015.
- [9] Mbembe, Achille. *On the Postcolony*. University of California Press, 2001.
- [10] Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.
- [11] South Africa. Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. Government of South Africa, www.gov.za/documents/constitution-republic-south-africa-1996. Accessed 13 Sept. 2026.
- [12] National Environmental Management Act 107 of 1998. Government of South Africa, www.gov.za/documents/national-environmental-management-act. Accessed 13 Sept. 2026.
- [13] Restitution of Land Rights Act 22 of 1994. Government of South Africa, www.gov.za/documents/restitution-land-rights-act-22-1994. Accessed 13 Sept. 2026.
- [14] Terreblanche, Sampie. *A History of Inequality in South Africa, 1652–2002*. University of Natal Press, 2002.
- [15] United Nations Environment Programme. *Making Peace with Nature: A Scientific Blueprint to Tackle the Climate, Biodiversity and Pollution Emergencies*. 2021, www.unep.org/resources/making-peace-nature. Accessed 13 Sept. 2026.
