Political Consciousness as Opposed to Propaganda: a Stylistic Analysis of Power Dynamics in Nadine Gordimer's Selected Novels

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Abstract

This paper attempts to distinguish between political consciousness and propaganda with reference to African literature .This is one of the issues in the writing and criticism of modern African literature, that is essentially post-colonial and therefore intertwined with politics of colonialism and its aftermath. Although all literature has a political context, post-colonial literature is ubiquitously so. South African literature is even much more so as a result of the extreme racism of apartheid system 1948–1994. But the question is; where do we draw the boundary, however diffuse, between politics-cum-political activism per se, propaganda, and political consciousness in literary art? On the African continent South Africa under the defunct apartheid system is the ideal space in which to investigate the distinction between the concepts. Nadine Gordimer (1923- 2014) a white South African who was both a fiction, non-fiction writer, and political activist provides idea exemplification for the study. She has personally engaged the debate and insisted on the need to maintain boundaries between politics and literary art. In this paper two of her novels in which the political theme is fore grounded are analyzed to validate her claims. What distinguishes literary art from other forms of writing is its literariness or its aesthetic nature. Therefore stylistic analysis provides the analytical tool for interrogating Gordimer's argument which is relevant to all African literature. Sometimes writers are misread as propagandists by non-literary critics who base their conclusions on mere content analysis, thereby mistaking the literary text for a social document. Critical examination of the two texts based on stylistics analysis reveals a clear boundary between political consciousness in literature and overt propaganda.

Keywords: Political activism, political consciousness, propaganda, literariness, conscientization, content analysis, stylistic analysis

Introduction

When Nadine Gordimer (1923 – 2014) the South African white writer won the Nobel Prize for Literature in October 1991, there were mixed reactions. Her supporters acclaimed the award. On the contrary, her critics argued that she should have been awarded a Nobel Peace Prize at the most. The latter assumed that her portrayal of politics of the defunct apartheid system (1948 -1994) was the determinant factor for her award. In effect, the critics erased the boundary between literary art and political activism, thereby reducing literature to social documents. On the other hand, her supporters, particularly the African National Congress Party (ANC), applauded the award as a tribute to all anti-apartheid forces in South Africa. Both groups seemed to equate political consciousness in literary art with political activism per se, thereby linking the discipline to overt propaganda. This is a common misinterpretation of most literature that addresses political themes. African written literature which is essentially post-colonial reaction to colonial conquest and its aftermath is often subjected to such misinterpretation. In this paper I attempt to clarify this mix up. South African literature which is intertwined with the racist extremism of the defunct apartheid system is suitable for this purpose. Nadine Gordimer's literary texts are particularly appropriate for this analysis owing to her unique status as an anti-apartheid white South African literary artist and political activist. She has personally engaged this debate in her non-fiction publications and interviews in an attempt to distinguish between political consciousness in literary art and political activism. This makes it even more challenging to evaluate her authorial disclaimer of any explicit propagandist elements in her fiction.

I argue that such evaluation is only possible through literary stylistic analysis, as distinct from, mere content analysis used by non-literary critics who conflate of her creative writing and political activism. Stylistics analysis interprets representation, portrayal, and depiction of whatever themes including political. On the contrary, content analysis assumes direct presentation of the same. In this paper I analyze two of Gordimer's novels in which political themes are most overt; *The Conservationist* (1974), and *July's People* (1981).

In these two novels both of which are futuristic, the author creatively deconstructs and reconstructs power dynamics under apartheid with a vision for a post- apartheid portrait of South Africa. In this sense, Gordimer somehow diffuses, but does not entirely delete the boundaries between politics, history and literary art. In her view, literature and overt political activism should not be synonymous. In ' The Writer in Modern Africa' Per Wastberg shares his view on the writer's freedom " To me it is the writer's right to maintain and publish to the World a deep, intense, private view of the situation he finds his society. If he is to work as well as he can, he must take, and be granted, freedom from the public conformity of political interpretation, morals and tastes" (Petersen, 1988,p.24). Wastberg also quotes South African Lewis Nkosi who insists that there should be a distinction between literature and political topicality, despite the political reality of apartheid. "What happens in the street never actually happens in literature, but this fact is lost to many black authors who practice a naive documentary fiction" (Petersen, 1988, p.22). This argument justifies the research problem for this paper. Conflation of literature the three concepts stated above is indeed a reality, but it is a misnomer. So how does an author avoid it, and how do critics verify that avoidance? As stated earlier, literature is distinguished from other forms of writing by its literariness or aesthetic value, hence the essence of interpretation in practical criticism based on stylistic analysis rather than mere content analysis.

In *Writers Politics* (in 1981), Ngugi wa Thiong'o who is the most prolific African fiction and non- writer on the subject of this paper, argues that politics and literature are intricately intertwined. He cites several poets-cum-politicians on the continent such as Chaka Zulu of South Africa, Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal, and Agostihno Neto of Angola who use words to achieve the combined effect of persuading and changing their audience consciousness. wa Thiong'o summarizes the political standpoint of the writer and his work in the preface to the book thus:

> I have titled the book, *Writers in Politics*, because writers cannot escape from the class power structures that shape our everyday life. Here a writer has no has no choice. Whether or not he is aware of it, his work reflects one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in a society. What he can choose is one or the other side in the battle field: the side of the people, or the side of those social forces and classes that try to keep the people down. What he or she cannot do is to remain neutral. Every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics (wa Thiong'o, 1981, Preface)?

In other words, literary art has a political function, much more so in the African context. There can be no art for its own sake. The beauty of art is intertwined with this function. But that does not negate the essence of its beauty. Whereas there is generally a consensus on the issue of politics, divergence exists on the manner of representing the very politics in literature. The question remains whether or not there is a distinction between literary art that reflects a writer's political consciousness and political treatise or overt propaganda which is akin to politics in verse and imagery?

In *Artist the Ruler: Essays on Art, Culture and Values*, published posthumously (1986), Okot p'Bitek Insists that both the politician and artist are rulers in society with the latter being the superior of the two. "I am insisting that in any society, anywhere, in any age, there are two types of rulers: namely the artist who provides and sustains the fundamental ideas, the foundation of society; and the political chieftain, who comes to power with aid of his soldier and rich business brethren, who merely puts these ideas into practice in ruling or misruling society (p'Bitek, 1986, p.39)".

He goes on to differentiate the methods used by the two types of rulers to influence the worldview of the society "If there two types of rulers in every society, that is, those who use physical force to subdue men, and those that employ beautiful things, sweet songs and funny stories, rhythm, shape and color, to keep individuals and society flourishing, then in my view, it is the artist who is the greater ruler (p'Bitek, 1986,p.40)".

According to p'Bitek the aims and methods of the politician, and the artist are linked, but not absolutely synonymous.

The artist seeks lasting influence of the attitudes and values of society at a deeper level for a noble purpose, whereas the politician coerces and manipulates society in the interest of his class and at times even uses the artist's ideas to "rule or misrule the society". The latter is materialistic and temporary for as long as the particular ruler and his are in power. The artists examines the attitudes and values underlying such power using what p'Bitek terms " beautiful things ....", in essence stylistics. In other words, equating an author's political consciousness to activism and propaganda diminishes the impact of literary art. He quotes Charles Davis to emphasize the impact of the artist",' An author, if he is big enough, can do so much for his fellow men. He can put words in their mouths and reason in their heads: he can fill their sleep with dreams so portend that when they wake up they will go on living them (p'Bitek, 1986, p.39)'".

Rene Wellek and Austin Warren make a clearer distinction between art and propaganda in *Theory of Literature: A seminal study of the nature and function of literature in all its contexts* (1949). The two critics argue that in so far as literature is " a persuasive purveyor of truth "it is the very antithesis of propaganda which often implies pernicious doctrines from suspicious sources. But they go on to agree that in one way literature can be and should be propagandist in a noble sense of the word, "

> So limiting the sense of the term, one might say that some art (the lowest Kind) is propaganda, but no great art, or good art, or Art, can possibly be. If, however, we stretch the term to mean 'effort, whether conscious or not, to influence readers to share one's attitude to life,' then there is plausibility in the contention that all artists are propagandists or should be, or (in complete reversal of the position outlined in the preceding sentence) that all sincere, responsible artists are morally obligated to be propagandists (Wellek and Warren, 1949, p.35).

This oxymoronic sounding truth concurs with wa Thiong'o's insistence on the inevitability of politics in literature from which no writer can escape. And herein fits the underlying research question in this paper namely: where then is the boundary between the discussion of politics in non-fiction writing and its reflection, refraction, representation, portrayal, or depiction in fiction? Are they synonymous? This is one of the specific questions that Gordimer addressed several times in her interviews. She insisted that the approach of the literary artist-cum-political activist in one and the same person were still distinct. The function of the literary artist's "propaganda", if at all, is gradual conscientization of the audience, as opposed to political propaganda that aims at exciting people to take immediate action in a given situation. As if to clarify the oxymoron above, the two critics emphasize that Serious art implies a view of life which can be stated in philosophical terms, even in terms of systems... The responsible artist has no will to confuse emotion and thinking, sensibility and intellection, sincerity and feeling with adequacy of experience and reflection. The view of life which the responsible artist articulates perceptually... cannot, by hypnotic suggestion, to premature or naive action (Wellek, and Warren, 1949, p. 36).

Gordimer agreed with the arguments above but rejected partisan writing, even as she claimed her two roles "one as a writer and the other one, my commitment to the cause of freedom in South Africa and creating a new post - apartheid culture" (Interview in Los Angeles Times October 4, 1991). In the charged political atmosphere of the apartheid system one wonders how it could be possible to separate the two. It is therefore safe to conclude that Gordimer opposed the partisan creative writing akin to overt propaganda which Wellek and Warren term as art of "the lowest kind". In this paper I attempt to validate her argument referring closely to her two novels.

***The Conservationist* (1974): disrupting the power structures of apartheid**

The Conservationist is the story of Mehring , a white South African desperately struggling to conserve a four hundred acre farm against all odds. His occupation of this farm at the expense of the rightful black owners is a metaphor through which Gordimer explores the desperate efforts made by the racist government to preserve the status quo. Mehring represents a combination of the original and new exploiter classes in South Africa. He is not a genuine farmer. The farm is an aside that serves as prestige and leisure , paradoxically , there are thousands of blacks living in deprivation in the locations around it. His claim to the land is set against that of black people and his conservation efforts are portrayed as a losing battle. Gordimer effectively exploits his experience as a metonymy for racial confrontation at national level, but in a way that is not aimed at prompting the people to immediate action. Mehring and the corpse of an unknown black man are the antagonist and protagonist of the story respectively. Notably, it is the "illegal" white farm owner who is portrayed as the antagonist.

The story plot begins with the discovery of the corpse of an unidentified black man on the farm. Rather than bother with investigation, the system's police dump the body indecently in a shallow grave. The outrageous disrespect of the dead is symbolic of the extreme violation of human rights that black are subjected to under the system of apartheid. The writer accords the corpse an elevated status of a protagonist against whom the white farm owner fights. Their confrontation involves one in disadvantaged position beneath, yet that position simultaneously accords him original claim to the land. The great potential of the repressed, yet resilient spirit is symbolized by the eventual triumph of the corpse. In the end, corpse resurfaces to reclaim the land on which Mehring has been threatened by natural forces of drought and floods. But above these threats, is the ubiquitous presence of the corpse of which Mehring is constantly aware. The white man's claim to the land is pitted against that of the anonymous dead man who signifies the original rightful owner of South Africa, the black African ancestor. Gordimer quotes at length from Reverend Henry Callaway's book *The Religious System of the Amazulu* to support ancestral claim to the land The Amatongo, they who are beneath."Some natives say, so called, because they have been buried beneath the earth. But we cannot avoid the earth. But we cannot avoid believing that we have an intimation of an old Hades or Tartarous, which has become lost and is no longer understood (Gordimer, 1974, p.163)". What is no longer understood is the black man's valid claim to the land because he has been dispossessed by the colonizers that he had initially collaborated with.

> So we came out possessed of what sufficed us,we thinking that we possessed all things, that we were wise, that there was nothing we did not know . . .we saw that, in fact, we black men came out without a single thing, we came out first. But as for the white men… they waited for all things, that they might not leave anything behind (Gordimer, 1974, p.213)

This inequality is signified by an individual white man's ownership of four hundred acres in contrast with the deprivation of the blacks living outside the farm. As if to naturalize the black man's claim, natural forces enter into alliance with him to reclaim his right. The corpse that was once upon a time, dumped in a shallow grave is effortlessly exhumed by the floods. Black workers on the farm get Mehring's permission and assistance to accord a befitting burial to "one of them ".Although Mehring initially disclaims the humanity of the corpse at the beginning, in the end he is forced to recognise it. Interestingly, it is Mehring rather than the black workers who is conscious of the presence of the corpse throughout the novel. This is Gordimer's artistic connotative strategy of persuading readers to share her verdict on this inequality. This function of art is summarised by Wellek and Warren quoted earlier as follows literary language is far from merely referential. It has an expressive side; it conveys the tone and the attitude of the speaker or writer. And it does not merely state and express what it says; it wants to influence the attitude of the reader, and ultimately change him. There is a further distinction between literary and scientific language: in the former, the sign itself, the sound symbolism of the word, is stressed. All kinds of techniques have been invented to draw attention to it, such as metre, alliteration, and patterns of sound (Wellek,and Warren, 1949,p.23). In The Conservationist, the writer exploits many kinds of imagery to persuade her audience to share her view of the exploitation of black people's land rights under apartheid system.

As the second or proper burial of the corpse takes place on his farm, Mehring is on his way to "one of those countries white people go to, the whole world is theirs" (Gordimer, 1974,p. 266). Symbolically he is voluntarily in flight. He has abandoned his unlawfully acquired land to its lawful owner, the black corpse. But he has nothing to lose because he has a share in the whole world which belongs to his race. The corpse reclaims only a limited resting space. The writer's attitude is summarized in the novel's last word which signifies the black man's victory speech. "The one whom the farm received had no name. He had no family but the women wept a little for him. There was no child of his present but the children were there to live after him. They had put him away to rest, at last; he had come back. He took possession of this earth, theirs; one of them (Gordimer, 1974, p.267)".

At the end of the confrontation between Mehring and the dead protagonist, no physical battle is necessary. The unlawful owner symbolically concedes defeat. Land is a metaphor of settler economy in South Africa. Apartheid was initiated when farmers dispossessed Africans. To create cheap surplus labor for agricultural and industrial capitalism the blacks were reduced to landlessness. Therefore land signifies all that the blacks had and lost. If change was to come, it had to begin the way colonization did, with the land issue. The anonymous corpse is exhumed by floods caused by winds blowing from neighboring Mozambique. By early 1970s when the novel was published, decolonization was taking place in the last colonies on the African continent. Gordimer probably believed that her country could not resist the prevailing wind of change in the neighboring Lusophone region including Mozambique and Angola. Although this is a very clear sign that Gordimer identifies with the black South Africans' claim to the land, she also realistically portrays their apparent resignation to apartheid status quo.

The blacks on Mehring's farm and other white farms around it are engaged in a struggle for survival. In their abject poverty and deprivation, they in fact, turn against one another. One of them, Solomon, is killed by co-workers. The workers on white man's wage list are grateful because they have no sense of entitlement. Their consciousness is limited to a servile relationship with the employer. All this is communicated connotatively through various stylistic techniques. Despite the current circumstances and naive attitude of the blacks in the novel's setting in time, Gordimer creates optimism for liberation in the future through the presence of the children at the burial of the anonymous corpse.

By authorial statement she notes that the "children were there to live after him" and provide continuity to his recovered claim to the land. Through this portrait, the white farm owner-cum-employer versus landlessness worker's power structure is sufficiently disrupted in *The Conservationist* paving way for more explicit deconstruction and reconstruction in *July's People* (1981). In between the two novels, Gordimer wrote other texts, including her well known *Burger's Daughter* (1979). However, the two selected novels for this paper are closely linked. Jacobus who leads his fellow workers at the final burial of the corpse in *The Conservationist* is a precursor of July's character through whom Gordimer advances from disruption the power dynamics to deconstruction and reconstruction power of the same, with the aim of gradual conscientization, as distinct from a call to immediate reaction against apartheid.

July's People (1981) : deconstruction and reconstruction of the power dynamics of apartheid

July's People is set in a future South African milieu as envisaged by Gordimer. Its time span is limited to an imaginary transition period referred as the interregnum meaning "The period between two reigns: the between cessation of one and the establishment of another government". The period defies clarity. In this context Antonio Gramci's elaboration of the term offers Gordimer an apt epigraph for the novel: "The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms "(epigraph). Gramci cautions that the transition cannot be fast and neat. His definition concurs with Gordimer's literary vision. She envisages a realistic future as opposed to a romanticized one. Hers is a tragic insight which acknowledges that change is certain, but it will be gradual and replete with challenges. It cannot be otherwise because of the deeply entrenched system of apartheid. This is one more divergence between the quick fix propagandist approach and literary realism. The "great diversity of morbid symptoms "implies a revolution that may wipe out obvious manifestations of apartheid but leave behind entrenched attitudes as a legacy for years to come. Just like the experience of Mehring and his workers the main plot in *July's People* is also a metonymy for national revolution. At personal level the interregnum period implies co-existence of, or even confusion of the defunct and new power dynamics. Gordimer envisages both conscious and unconscious reactions against restructured power dynamics by both groups. July the servant evacuates his employers from riots in the city and takes refuge with them in his rural home. This relocation in place implies simultaneous relocation of jurisdiction. From July's perspective the master-servant relationship has ended. But Gordimer's vision is cautious about such unrealistic instant change, because the racist immediate past clouds the apparently reversed ex-servant ex-master interaction. In the new structure, the Smales do not automatically become the servants. Ideally, there should be recognition of the reality of complementarily between the races. Bamford Smales takes the initiative to hunt for food. His wife Maureen joins the village women in collecting edible herbs.But July continues to play servant role in many ways. He still treats the Smales as his masters. This confusion in the new power structure is still tied to the past dynamics. His supposed ex-masters are equally confused and make it difficult for July to note the change. They find it difficult to relinquish both overt and covert manifestations of their former privileged position.

The transfer of July's white masters to a rural black African residence rather than the reverse is the author's interpretation of the concept of power and equality commensurate with meaningful change. It compels the white people to a taste of black experience of abject poverty and deprivation. Whereas July is aware of the white people's lifestyle, they have no idea about his. The dislocation accords the masters an opportunity to discover how the 'other' has lived for centuries. This is a powerful test of some political assumptions about post- apartheid, lest the envisaged equality should be assumed to be synonymous with the exploiter's lifestyle. Gordimer's futuristic social structure will inevitably entail redistribution of national resources as opposed to transfer of the same from one race to another. Under Apartheid the black majority lived in abject poverty. It would therefore be illogical and unrealistic to expect reversal of material status between the races. The revolution that Gordimer envisages in this novel is justifiable because of the extreme inequality under apartheid.

July's black people and " his" white people are forced to come together by the revolution. Gordimer strategically uses Maureen to describe their contrasting lifestyles. The choice to analyze the contrast from the point of view of the white woman amplifies the black people's disadvantaged status thereby justifying the ongoing revolution in the city. Described from Maureen's point of view the condition is hyper degrading. She is perturbed that human beings could be resigned to the sub-human existence. At this point she appears empathetic with the situation, but her departure invalidates this fact. It signifies the writer's recognition of the ambiguities that inevitable challenges to the envisaged transition to post-apartheid inter-racial connection. Most of the story begins and ends in July's village. This suggests permanence and some of optimism about change. However, the varied responses of the villagers elicit pessimism. July's mother and wife resent the presence of white people in their home in respect of the color bar. The Chief sees Bamford Smales as his savior, even though he is a refugee in his village and equally powerless. At the same time, July continues to act servant because he relates to his masters at personal level. He is not politically conscious enough to contextualize their relationship within the system of apartheid and the ongoing revolution. Ironically he relocates his employers to the village to shelter them from the revolution that aims to alter the status quo. He sympathizes with the inconveniences that the Smales have to bear in the changed circumstances, yet he has never viewed the sub-human conditions as a problem for the blacks. Like the Chief, July he is anti-revolutionary in his own way

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The chief represents a category of leaders who form a buffer between apartheid system and the black people. He is a typical product of "divide and rule policy". Its variant in South Africa is symbolized by the Bantustan. The Chief sees change as a threat to this mechanism. His aim in the face of revolution is individualistic self-preservation. Paradoxically the black people revolting against apartheid become his enemies. He wants to fight with the system against his own people. He attributes their struggle of foreign influence by the communists.

> The Chief spoke for himself again in English. Those people from Soweto they come here with Russians, those other ones from Mozambique, they all want to take this my country of my nation, Eh? They not our nation. Amazulu, ama Xhosa, Basotho . . . I don't know. They were already there by the mine coming here. If they coming, the Government it's going to give me guns. Yes! They give us guns, we are going to kill those people when they come with their guns (Gordimer, 1981,p.119).

Such are the symptoms of confusion that years of conditioning have created. Although the government exploits the Chief to maintain the system, it ensures that he is not armed at all to limit his independence. Bamford's reaction summarises the challenges to the liberation including entrenched disunity affected by the divide and rule policy which seems to suggest that some blacks cherish the system.

> . . . You are not going to shoot your own people. You wouldn't kill blacks. Mandela's people, Sobukwe's people - (Would they have forgotten Luthuli ? Heard of Biko? Not their nation although he is famous in New York, Stockholm, Paris, London, and Moscow.) You are not going to take guns and help the Government kill blacks, are you? For this- this village and empty bush? And they'll kill you. You musn't let the government make you kill each other. The whole black nation is your nation (Gordimer, 1981,p. 120).

In Smales' view, the Chief signifies counter- revolution forces, but July downplays his significance. He dismisses the Chief as a weak personality who can be serve the liberation struggle as well as he serves white oppressors. July dismisses the probability too easily because he is afraid to entertain pessimism. Ironically, July's own relationship with the Smales is a feature of counter-revolution, although the Smales has more political consciousness.

Conclusion

Gordimer's portrait of these characters is realistic. It would be idealistic to assume that the struggle for liberation and ultimate reconstruction of power is neatly demarcated along racial lines. Genuine transformation would have to take place across the color bar. The pessimism Gordimer achieves in this particular case does not jeopardize her vision for the African future. Rather it is a valid portrayal of features of transition. July is the very personification of the transitional confusion. Just as he appears to have grasped the meaning of change, the entrenched servitude resurfaces thus: "We can only hope that everything comes back alright..."(Gordimer, 1981,p.95).His confusion is noted by Maureen who seeks clarification of the word "back". Faced with the reality of the sacrifices for change, July exhibits uncertainty in other words the "morbid symptoms" that typify "interregnum" period.

And ironically, the very Maureen who seems to affirm the revolution also deserts the village, symbolically reversing the situation to pre-revolutionary status. The rest of her family remains in July's village which signifies some irreversible effects of the revolution and consequently some optimism about social transformation in South Africa. This is realistic, but not neutral or pro-apartheid portrait. It is clearly distinct from propaganda as defined above.

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