

Narrative Probability and Moral Realism in Nadine Gordimer's Fiction: A Reading through Miriam Allott's Theory of the Novel

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Abstract-- Throughout the twentieth century, Nadine Gordimer was predominantly read and interpreted as a political novelist whose fiction engaged with apartheid, exposing the racial, ideological, and ethical conflicts prevalent in South Africa. In the course of much of the twentieth century, Nadine Gordimer was read as a political novelist, one who portrayed the racial and ideological conflicts of South Africa in most of her novels. While such readings continue to be useful, they do not fully account for the continued literary interest in her writings. In the backdrop of the immediate political, a disciplined imagination of the story that always chooses the quotidian over the spectacular. This paper takes a fresh look at Gordimer's fiction in the context of Miriam Allott's notion of the novel as a 'probable world' in which psychological verisimilitude, moral gravity and cohesive social relations prevail. The paper is based primarily on *The Pickup* and *No Time Like the Present* and suggests that Gordimer's realism, far from being documentary, arises from an ethical goal. The characters are believable because they respond to an event that is a logical consequence of the social situation, and the consequences of their choices do not happen artificially. In this light, Gordimer is another significant realist novelist and a witness to the history of South Africa who continues to be a light to illuminate issues of freedom and responsibility as well as human dignity.

Keywords-- Nadine Gordimer, Miriam Allott, realism, probability, ethics, modern novel.

I. INTRODUCTION

The novel's past is the past of growing awareness of ordinary life. Instead of having to rely on extraordinary action and heroic figures like what was seen in epic and romance, the novel was slow to assert itself, and it was finally and gradually established upon familiar experiences and recognisable human circumstances. On the surface, this is a straightforward narrative, but it's filled with difficult ethical decisions, conflicting allegiances and instances of self-discovery. The magic of the novel has always been that it uncovers these elements of the life of the ordinary man.

No early twentieth-century writer is more life-like and true to nature than Nadine Gordimer. Her fiction is always forthright, that it is not political propaganda, yet it is written in the frenetic South African political landscape. Despite apartheid, migration and eventual democratic transition and racial conflict, her novels are very focused on single lives.

Gordimer is not a historian, nor does she want to write a history, but she is interested in the way in which historical events have altered relationships over time, in how events have affected moral judgment and the definition of personal identity. Her fiction is thus a statement to a specific national history and to human concerns at large.

Given the critical reception of anti-apartheid literature and postcolonial thought in general, Gordimer's work has been the subject of a great deal of attention in literary circles around the world. The scholarly work on race and gender, political opposition, and cultural identity is quite voluminous and informative. Less attention, however, has been paid to the artistic principles which support these concerns in the novels themselves. Gordimer's selection of her subjects is not alone, but how she makes them convincing in fiction. Her characters do not simply exemplify or illustrate political arguments. They live, they feel the qualms of compunction, they make mistakes, and make hamartia. They change their minds; at times, they become unaware and a prisoner of their own soul. Her space is a peculiar verisimilitude with these attributes.

This sense of Gordimer's writing is most vivid when read together in light of Miriam Allott's thoughts on the nature of the novel. Allott's realism goes beyond the mere description of what is real. It's a good novel that creates a probable world, a world in which things happen for a believable reason, and things happen for a believable cause and effect. Readers are persuaded because all the events of the story have reasonable possibilities in terms of human experience, not because all of the events of the story have occurred. The job of the novelist is not to preach, nor merely to entertain, but to make life understandable in art.

In this sense, Gordimer's writing can be easily seen as suitable for the form of realist tradition. A coincidence or a melodrama is not the mainstay of her novels. They lead their lives silently, sometimes talking, sometimes not, amidst the routine of daily life and insignificant interactions. There are still queries left in this nonthreatening narration of the surface of the water, however, that still haunt modern societies: What does freedom mean? In what ways is personal identity influenced by history? Can Moral Responsibility be attributed in an Injustice environment?



It is rare for Gordimer to respond directly to such questions. Instead, she goes through the characters' lives in situations that are quite real to us.

Some novels of Nadine Gordimer are looked through the critical lens of Miriam Allott in the subsequent discussion. It is not political fiction alone, but, like Gordimer's, the novelist's adherence to the "probability of the narrative" and to "psychological truth" and "moral realism" that is crucial to her. Her fiction continues to call out for serious criticism on these qualities, rather than any ideological stance.

II. MIRIAM ALLOTT AND THE ETHICS OF PROBABILITY

In one way or another, Miriam Allott is a distinct 20th-century critic of fiction, a critic of the novel as a vehicle of understanding human life and its panoramic phenomena. The *Novelists on the Novel* is a book in which she is constantly asking herself and other novelists this question that previous novelists asked, and answered, in their novels: How do readers believe in an invented world? She has no originality of storyline, no brilliance of language. A novel is successful in making the reader believe the characters, actions and situations of the novel are real.

For Allott, adopting the role of a probability is more than a fact. The novel does not have to lay bare the facts of life or any factual events, but rather a situation which appears psychologically and socially true to real life. Characters should be consistent with their temperaments, their experiences and the society they live in. If the actions are natural as a result of these, fiction becomes believable. The reader should not take it to be fact that all events occurred, but should take it to be fact that they might occur in similar circumstances. That's why there's a difference between realism and photographic realism.

Such a clear concept and understanding of life may have a substantial impact on the very framework and plot of a novel that sustains the taste of time and speaks of life as it is. Allott repeatedly mentions that the movement of the story should be ascertained by the cause-and-consequence relationships of the story. Major incidents or events that happen in the story are not "random" but have a cause in the lives of the characters already. If the novel is well organised, then this organisation involves a set of reasons within the novel, and each incident must help the reader understand the theme and the character of the novel. The storyline is not only artistic, but also moral: actions have consequences.

Another important aspect is that Allott shuns away from the separation of realism and moral investigation. She does not say what the novelist must do, nor does she ever say that s/he must be a didactic personality or a staunch moralist.

But there are questions of value in serious fiction, which she tries to put forth as all stories are about how people act and react towards each other. Any decisions made by the characters in any story tell the reader some assumption about human life that the author of the story made. These decisions do not need to be made on the part of the novelist in so many words. The representation is already an ethical involvement and is true.

What makes Allott different from others is that her critics could discern the differences between realistic description and realism vis-à-vis storytelling that is reflective of the society. The author's ideas presented outside storytelling will not sustain a novel. Streets, shops, markets, houses, landscapes and the religious and political institutions are only significant when they are linked to human sentiments and human affairs. Authenticity is more important in a fictional world than realism, particularly the emotional realism. It is not so much the characters' surroundings that are described as the characters themselves, their thoughts, hesitations and moral anguish, which seem recognisably human, that make readers remember them, Elizabeth Bennet, Dorothea Brooke, Maggie Tulliver. Probability in this way is, of course, connected with inner life.

Allott's insight as to the aspects of a novel and realism enlightens Gordimer's fiction, the moment we read it and make a fair assessment of the characters and situations. Even though the setting is very tumultuous politically, Gordimer seldom structures her plots to accommodate the political events. The narrative of apartheid and democratic transition and migration is always there, but not prominently seen as much. Instead, they are found indirectly in the domestic sphere of daily life, in the course of historical processes. This is because what can be said at the table, the immigration examinations, family conflicts, or sudden inactivity can talk more about the society than political confrontation. The realism in Gordimer is to allow history to uncover itself to the ordinary experience of the human being.

There is another aspect of similarity, observed in Gordimer and Allott's concept of the novel that speaks of a valid point of argument when life is in constant encounter with nature and phenomenal lives, and it is very to the point and economic in description, instead of dry details. There are a lot of novels, which are too emotional and/or too dogmatic to make the reader believe in a certain perspective. But Gordimer does not. She believes that people are smart enough to draw their own conclusions and doesn't like forcing her own opinion on them. A narrator, in her fiction, becomes a round character as she does not read between the lines, but rather beyond the lines.



Characters can alter their thoughts; they can misunderstand and sometimes make decisions that lead to outcomes they don't expect. Readers are involved in the moral judgment process, and the openness adds to, rather than detracts from, the moral thrust of the novels.

Allott's theory, if seen through the context of modern literary criticism, we find its relevance. There are many cases of the study of race, gender, class and postcolonial identity in contemporary scholarship of fiction. Race, gender, class and postcolonial identity are often studied in the scholarship of fiction. The readings of Gordimer's work that have followed these perspectives have been largely effective, but at times, the artistic method is seen to be absent. As Allott reminds us, ideas only come to have a lasting significance if they are given a convincing narrative structure. There is no long-lasting literature that can be brought about by political will. Well-rounded characters, logical plot and psychological realism are essential in creating a novel that will appeal to readers across time and space.

This insight and understanding of life is reiterated in Gordimer's fiction. Her novels are not only those documenting South African history, but they also create a believable human experience from history. They are memorable because they are not illustrations of theory. They are still, as they ought to be, unsure, weak, morally complicated—and these attributes unmistakably set them in the realist tradition as carefully delineated by Allott.

III. GORDIMER'S NARRATIVE REALISM: PROBABILITY IN PRACTICE

Allott gives an academic definition of what realism is, and Gordimer follows it practically. What is most fascinating about her novels is the way she accumulates the ordinary life and event and incidents into believable human activity. Political conflict is certainly a part of the world of her characters, but it is not the dominating part of their personality. Instead, historical events have relevance because they are lived through ordinary lives, inner thoughts and tough personal choices. However, what it lacks is the distinction between social reality and individual consciousness, and thus, there is always a fiction in which they are united.

In *The Pick Up*, we discover a similar type of narration. It's a romance between Julie Summers and Ibrahim ibn Musa, which is a superficial part of the novel, though. But on the surface, Gordimer has little love interest; but look closely, it is in the conditions that make it possible—or not. The reasons for the conflict are not melodramatic misunderstandings, but the various forms of immigration, the position of foreigners and the various rights afforded to citizens.

All the parts of the story don't appear to be assembled by a human hand. The situations of the developments are linked to the situation that has taken place in the story, thus making the reader feel that it is realistic and could take place in reality.

Julie is the focal point of this realism. The novel opens with her being unaware of the benefits she enjoys as a result of her social position. As she meets Ibrahim, she learns about the intangible advantages of citizenship, of economic security and of free and unfettered movement. Gordimer does not give us an epiphany of this awakening. It's almost as if a switch is flipped; Julie gradually becomes a different person, as her experience takes over her ideals. This metamorphosis is believable as it becomes apparent when seemingly mundane events occur, not when dramatic declarations are made. They're not a symbolic conversion, but an increasing extension of the human eye.

Ibrahim's character is drawn out, as well. He is not the typical helpless refugee, and he isn't the typical ambitious opportunist. He's more of a young man who is not sure of his future and has little chance. He not only wants to emigrate due to personal desires, but also as a part of economic necessity. Gordimer doesn't make his situation pretty, and has moments of impatience, frustration and emotional distance. These flaws add greatly to the believability of the story. Ibrahim is an issue of a man, and not just politics.

The story of *No Time Like the Present* is also told. This novel doesn't deal with the melodramatic part of the struggle against apartheid but rather the more banal and complex nature of democracy. Although Steve and Jabu have survived the political struggle which created them, freedom has its own set of problems, and these problems are much harder to spot than those which are related to political strife. They are concerned with working, raising children, having to compromise for living, and public morality. Therefore, Gordimer argues, it is only at the end of political oppression that the true test of the change in political values comes, namely, "when political values have to be turned into social practice in real life.

One distinct point of observation is that her novels do not show any obvious victory or defeat at the end. It enlightens the readers as to the narrative movements and developments of life as such. The thing that's surprising is that there's no triumphalism. A lot of novels of political or hegemonic power conclude with a celebration of historical success or a statement of historical failure. Gordimer doesn't opt for either choice. Human beings are not complete in South Africa, and that's why... Steve and Jabu are still confused, depressed and hopeful, just like they were before the change in government. Gordimer, then, isn't a simple historian, but for what she is now offering is much more credible: the continuity of everyday life.



Gordimer is also a great writer of dialogue, and in some of these novels, she makes those works very realistic. Not all her characters express their philosophies perfectly. They take turns at speaking, hesitate, disagree and sometimes don't say anything. The implication can be a meaning, but not the direct expression. This type of discussion is more of a real talk, where there is more uncertainty than certainty. In this way, dialogue is more direct, and the narrator doesn't have to pose political questions in the narrative but can do so naturally.

Place is as important as Gordimer's treatment of the person. The description of Johannesburg, suburban houses, immigration offices, cafés, and even further out, desert villages, isn't too detailed. Physical settings don't mean decorating; they mean the people who fill them. When there's anxiety, it's a memorable office; when Julie realises it is a place of belonging, it's a small village. All the time, in all of this, Gordimer is more interested in 'place' than in 'landscape' and lived relationships are the guarantee of a realist belief.

Moral questions are not settled traditionally in these novels. Gordimer doesn't suggest that the good are happy, the bad suffer. Consequences, however, do not occur in such a direct fashion; through characters' actions and social interactions that they do not always have control of. Allott had an attraction to the realist tradition, and this is what he was ecstatic about. The word "ethical" is not a word which belongs to fiction, not only because fiction doesn't teach morals, but because fiction addresses worlds which are sufficiently parallel and "realistic" to be too much for the reader's stomach.

In this context, the realism of Gordimer may be considered artistic and moral. Her stories are convincing in that they live with the uncertainty of human action and adhere to the everyday logic of life. The events of history are used as a backdrop, but the emphasis is placed on the individual's life. It is, however, in her fiction where she plays with public and private that makes it great and worthwhile reading. Gordimer is not only an apartheid novelist, but one of the greatest modern novelists of realist fiction that can hold human lives without relinquishing the novel and the moral ambiguity it implies.

IV. DISCUSSION

Gordimer's fiction is brought to life in a new way through the application of the theory of Miriam Allott, a way that is often overlooked in the political context. Her novels will surely stand the test of time for their portrayal of the brutal reality of apartheid and its effects, but it's the way she brings historical events to life as a human experience that will keep them alive.

It is still a novel about people, but set in the context of a political environment. Its balance is to some extent the reason why Gordimer's work is so enduring, even if it is not as much because some of the political circumstances it evokes have changed. The concept of the novel as a "probable world" can help to explain this achievement.

Gordimer's characters form the plot of life as full of probabilities, and nothing is certain if not lived the maze of life. Neither are all the characters necessarily in place to serve an ideology. They make incorrect decisions, and may go back on their own and flip-flop back and forth, or not know how to read the emotions of others and/or themselves. It's not that the story is weak; it's that the story is strong. The moral content of her fiction comes right from the fact that she doesn't tell us what to think; she tells us how people deal with tough situations.

But her narration in particular is also in question; it is a realism related to a detailed description and to a documentary realism. Gordimer does not use the accumulation of facts to make her seem credible, and she is more effective if she can maintain a psychological consistency. Relationships don't evolve quickly, emotions are communicated through conversation, and changes are gradual, not dramatic. In the process, she maintains the realist tradition in a way that is relevant to the political and moral issues of the modern world.

Gordimer, however, in this context, needs to be acknowledged not only as a major South African novelist, but also as a great realist novelist whose life-long saga is yet another reminder of humanity's experiences of freedom, responsibility and human dignity. Her novels show that the power of literature is still one of the best ways of learning about the inner life of ordinary people in the midst of historical forces.

V. CONCLUSION

The detailed study and investigation of Gordimer's novels show an accurate portrayal of the outside world that is authentic to life. It is deeper than that, however, for it also shows individuals' reactions to the stresses of history, society and moral choice. Each of Gordimer's fictional worlds features characters and plot lines that are emotionally convincing and are based on reality. The novel can be best understood as an achievement in light of Miriam Allott's theory of the novel. It is this sense of probability, of a coherent story and seriousness of moral that gives Gordimer's novels their lasting appeal, beyond the particular historical moment. Migration and democratic transition are important issues and social realities of apartheid, but they become important and significant because they are lived and experienced lives, recognisably human.



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Lastly, Gordimer's legacy is that the realist novel is once again a lively form, still relevant. She shows how a fiction can delve into complex social issues without being sensational or unduly political. Rather, she sticks to the familiar cadences of everyday human life, showing that there is a constant connection between individual lives and historical events. That is because she is silent about her dogged attention to the narrative truth, one of the great novelists of the 20th century.

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