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APARTHEID SONRASI EKOLOJİ: NADINE GORDIMER'İN *THE CONSERVATIONIST* ROMANINDA SÖMÜRGECİ TAHAKKÜM VE ÇEVRESEL ADALET

Post-Apartheid Ecology: Colonial Domination and Environmental Justice in Nadine Gordimer's the Conservationist

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ÖZ

Bu çalışma, Güney Afrikalı yazar Nadine Gordimer'in *The Conservationist* (1974) adlı romanını postkolonyal ekoeleştiri ve çevresel adalet perspektifinden incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Roman, başkarakter Mehring'in doğa, yerli halk ve emek üzerindeki tahakkümü aracılığıyla sömürgeci mülkiyet mantığının ekolojik krizlerle olan bağını ifşa etmektedir. Araştırmada, sömürgeci zihniyetin doğayı yalnızca ekonomik bir meta ve statü sembolü olarak kodladığı, yerli halkın kadim ekolojik bilgisini ise "epistemik şiddet" yoluyla sistematik olarak değersizleştirdiği ortaya konmuştur. Bulgular, romandaki çevresel adaletsizliğin yalnızca fiziksel kirlilikle sınırlı olmadığını; aksine ırk hiyerarşisi, mülksüzleştirme ve tarihsel hafızanın bastırılmasıyla iç içe geçtiğini göstermektedir. Sonuç olarak eser, gerçek bir ekolojik restorasyonun ancak sömürgeci mülkiyet rejimlerinin ve hiyerarşik yapıların yıkılıp yeniden yapılandırılmasıyla mümkün olabileceğine dair güçlü bir eleştirel vizyon sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ekoeleştiri, Nadine Gordimer, *The Conservationist*, Çevresel Adalet, Sömürgecilik, Epistemik Şiddet

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyse South African author Nadine Gordimer's novel *The Conservationist* (1974) using the ideas of postcolonial ecocriticism and environmental justice. The novel uncovers how colonial ownership directly brings about ecological crises through the protagonist Mehring's domination over nature, indigenous people, and labour. The study shows that while the colonial mindset treats nature only as an economic commodity and a status symbol. At the same time, it uses "epistemic violence" to devalue the ancient ecological knowledge of indigenous people. The findings indicate that environmental injustice in the novel is not just about physical pollution but is deeply connected with racial hierarchy, dispossession, and the suppression of historical memory. Consequently, the novel offers a powerful critical vision that real ecological restoration can only be achieved through the elimination of colonial ownership regimes and hierarchical structures.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Nadine Gordimer, *The Conservationist*, Environmental Justice, Colonialism, Epistemic Violence

Introduction

Nadine Gordimer's 1974 novel, *The Conservationist*, won the Booker Prize, is one of the important books about environmental problems in South Africa during the Apartheid regime. While at first glance the novel seems to be a political story about racial discrimination, class domination, and land ownership. But a closer examination shows that the relationship between nature and power is also very important to the text. In this respect, the work does not only criticizes a political history of South Africa but it also shows how nature was objectified, controlled, and ideologically reinterpreted within the framework of colonial ownership.

In literary studies, nature is not merely as a backdrop; it is a space where the anthropocentric way of thinking is questioned and ecological awareness is built. Oppermann (2012) defines that ecocriticism is a field of study that rejects the anthropocentric perspective and addresses environmental problems in a cultural and social context (p. 26). In this context, ecocriticism examines the complex relationship between literature and the physical environment, and it also fights for the recognition of non-human beings as subjects. When Nadine Gordimer's novel, *The Conservationist*, is examined through this critical framework pointed out by Oppermann, it reveals how nature is objectified within a colonial logic of ownership and how this objectification is expressed through

social hierarchies. Through an ecocritical approach, this study provides insides into how colonial dominance damages nature and where the ideas that lead to environmental injustice come from.

According to Cheryll Glotfelty (1996), "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (p. xix). From this perspective, *The Conservationist* is a powerful narrative that demonstrates how literature and the physical environment are connected in many ways. It is not only an aesthetic matter but also a historical, ethical, and political one. Ecocriticism examines the relationship between cultural productions and the physical environment questioning how this is formed and represented. Garrard (2012) states that ecocriticism does not only describes nature but also examines the cultural aspects of concepts such as pollution, wildlife, and the world, and their connection to environmental movements. Through the critical framework presented by Garrard, this study analyses *The Conservationist* by examining how a colonial subject 'imagines' nature and pollution, and the structural link between this imagination and environmental injustice.

Slovic (2000) defines ecocriticism as the examination of texts that are explicitly environmental, as well as the meticulous exploration of ecological implications and human-nature relationships in texts that, at first glance, seem unaware of the non-human world. In this context, *The Conservationist* does not only offers a political panorama of the Apartheid regime; as Slovic points out, it also reveals how the colonial subject constructs and objectifies nature through the characters' daily practices and proprietary discourses. Thus, this study aims to reveal the power of literature to address environmental issues within a political framework by making visible the ecological implications hidden between the lines of the novel from a postcolonial perspective.

Ecocritical readings posit that literature is not merely an aesthetic object, but also a medium that exposes the hierarchical and exploitative relationships that humans have with nature. Bookchin (2013) argues that the idea of subjugating nature stems from the subjugation of humans by other humans. In this context, *The Conservationist* is not just a narrative of environmental pollution; it is a 'social ecology' study demonstrating how social hierarchies, racism, and the greed for property lead to destruction of nature. Ecocritical readings consider nature not merely as a backdrop or pastoral setting for the narrative, but as a battleground where power relations are established and made visible. Therefore, the central conflict in *The Conservationist* is not simply a contrast between white and black, property owner and labourer, or city and countryside; it is also a question of the ideological framework within which the relationship between humans and nature is established. As Murray Bookchin (1982) points out, "from a critical viewpoint, ecology opens to broad purview the vast disequilibrium that has emerged from humanity's split with the natural world" (p. 22). Gordimer's novel makes this very "disequilibrium" visible: it shows how far the subject who thinks they own the land is actually from understanding it and establishing an ethical relationship with it. In this context, the study aims to examine, from a postcolonial ecocritical perspective, the colonial ownership logic underlying the protagonist Mehring's discourse of 'protecting' nature and how this logic deepens environmental injustice.

From a colonial viewpoint, nature is not a self-contained place for existence; it is a resource that can be possessed, restricted, and transformed into economic value. Mehring, the novel's main character and a white businessman, does not establish an ethical relationship with the farm he buys; on the contrary, he comprehends it as a domain of status, prestige, escape, and control. As Aydıntürk points out, Mehring views the farm more as an investment, a place to relax, and a status symbol than a place to live that should be respected (2021, p. 32). This observation is an important component of Mehring's approach to nature. The land is understood thus as an object of property that represents capital, masculinity, and white privilege rather than as a living ecological whole.

Therefore, Mehring's role as the "protector" of the land indicates that he is legitimizing colonial acquisition rather than practicing of conservation. His 'conservation' is an exclusionary mechanism that defines nature within his own language of power and invalidates indigenous peoples' historical relationship with the land.

In the novel, the relationship between nature and property is ideological, racial, and not just economic. For Mehring, the farm is more than just a living space; it is a limited sphere of dominion. This space controls both land and labour, as well as the natural environment and the human body are managed. In particular, the white property regime restricts black workers' access to the land, their right to have a say over the land, and their geographical visibility. Thus, the novel shows how colonial power organizes nature and humankind as objects of the same logic of power logic, rather than as two distinct world. In this context, anthropocentrism refers not just to humans' superiority over nature; but also to the question of who has power over nature. The novel reveals that when dominance over nature is combined with race and class privileges, it results in a far worse form of colonialism.

The body of the unidentified black man found on Mehring's farm serves as one of the novel's most powerful symbolic structures. This corpse, in addition to serving as a plot device to build tension to the narrative, represents the historical crimes suppressed by the Apartheid rule, the lives rendered invisible, and the realities concealed by the property regime. According to Aydıntürk, the body of the black man on the farm symbolizes the hidden crimes of the Apartheid system and the concealed history of the land which Mehring tries to own but cannot truly possess (2021, p. 27). At this point, the corpse represents re-emergence of historical memory that had been buried underground. Mehring's attempt to rapidly conceal the corpse via official procedures shows that colonial power wanted to control not only living bodies but also the dead and memory. However, the existence of the corpse serves as a reminder that the land is more than just an object to be owned; on the contrary, it is a carrier of the past, violence, and buried connections.

In this sense, *The Conservationist* is quite suitable for interpretation within the framework of environmental justice. Environmental justice is an ethical and political approach that emphasizes the unequal distribution of ecological risks, resource availability, and environmental burdens across society. This inequality is evident in the novel: while Mehring profits from the prestige, ownership, and symbolic power of the land, Jacobus and other black labourers face the burden of the land, its labour, insecurity, and restrictive regime. Thus, environmental injustice is established not only through polluted air, destroyed land, or damaged ecosystems, but also through labour exploitation, dispossession, and spatial alienation. The success of novel lies in its refusal to separate the exploitation of nature from the exploitation of humanity. Gordimer's work conceptualizes the ecological crisis not only as an environmental issue, but also as a historical form of injustice intertwined with colonialism, capitalism, and racism.

This study stands out from existing eco-critical readings in the literature by analysing the direct interaction between environmental justice and postcolonial ecology through concrete narrative scenes in the context of post-Apartheid South Africa. The study discusses not only the destruction of nature but also how the colonial order disregarded the ecological knowledge of the indigenous population (epistemic violence) and how this deepened spatial injustice, following an original approach.

This study will first examine the colonial and proprietary codes visible in Mehring's approach to nature. Subsequently, it will discuss how the spatial structure in the novel, particularly the farm area, produces a field of environmental injustice within the context of postcolonial ecocriticism. Finally, through the theme of the corpse in the novel, it will evaluate how the land functions as a

space of repressed memory, historical guilt, and ethical return. Thus, it will be argued that *The Conservationist* offers a powerful critical perspective on how ecological restoration is possible not only through the physical repair of the environment but also through the dismantling of colonial hierarchies and property regimes.

While Aydıntürk (2021) offers a broader eco-critical reading of the novel and Aydıntürk and Geçikli (2026) focus on anthropocentrism, capitalism, and ecofeminism, this article narrows the discussion to environmental justice and epistemic violence. It argues that *The Conservationist* should be read not only as a critique of anthropocentric domination, but also as a narrative that shows how colonial property regimes redistribute ecological burdens, silence Black ecological knowledge, and transform the land into a racially structured space of exclusion.

Arıkan's Leopoldian reading is particularly valuable in terms of describing Mehring as a "false conservationist" and in showing that the novel questions the reduction of land to property. However, the current study departs from Arıkan by shifting the focus from land ethic to environmental justice and argues that Mehring's false conservationism also operates through racialized dispossession and epistemic exclusion (Arıkan, 2017).

1. Nature as a Commodity: Sense of Colonial Ownership, False Conservationism, and Ecological Othering

As Arıkan (2017) points out through a Leopoldian framework, Mehring's relationship with the farm is based on ownership rather than reciprocity. In this sense, the land is reduced to what Jenkins (2007) calls a "commodity rather than community," while, as Monson (2004) suggests, the farm does not seem to have an existence beyond serving Mehring.

From a colonial perspective, the landscape is not perceived as an ecological entity with its own internal balances, biodiversity, and historical memory; rather, it is seen as a geography to be controlled, parceled out, and reorganized according to the principle of productivity. In *The Conservationist*, Nadine Gordimer, through the character of Mehring, vividly expose this property-centric perception of nature. Throughout the novel, the farm is not only a physical space but also an ideological space where the white colonial subject embodies their power and reinterprets the land through the logic of capital. Therefore, Mehring's purchase of the farm stems not from a real sense of belonging to the land or ecological sensitivity, but from the desire to reinforce his class status, make his capital visible, and establish absolute control over the space. Indeed, as Aydıntürk and Geçikli (2026) emphasize, for Mehring, the farm is designed not as a living space deserving respect, but as an investment tool, a place for relaxation, and a symbol of status.

As Arıkan (2017) emphasized, Mehring's perception of the land solely as an investment and a prestige tool positions him as a "false conservationist" in the Leopoldian sense. According to Arıkan, Mehring cannot establish an ethical connection with the land because he approaches it not as a 'community' but as a 'commodity' or 'an object to be conquered'. Ironically, the character's so-called conservationism makes indigenous people, who are the true owners of the land, and the ancient and ethical relationship with nature invisible, while he exploits nature in accordance with his own power fantasies.

For Mehring, nature is not a living entity that carries meaning on its own, but rather an instrumental realm that only gains value to extent that it provides an economic profit. His relationship with the farm is determined not by ecological sensitivity or land ethics, but by capitalist criteria such as investment, return, loss, and productivity. In this understanding, beauty is defined not by nature's inherent existential quality, but by its contribution to production and its

transformation into profit. This colonial-capitalist understanding of nature is succinctly expresses in the novel as follows:

> If he had put his mind to it and if he had had more time, he knew he could have made it pay, just the same as anything else. But then there would be an end to tax relief, anyway; it would be absurd. Yet land must not be misused or wasted and he had reclaimed these 400 acres of veld, fields and vlei that he had probably paid a bit too much for, a few years ago. It was weed-choked, neglected then (a dirty piece of land, agriculturally speaking), yet beautiful - someone who was with him the first time he went to look at it had said: — Why not just buy it and leave it as it is? — He himself was not a sucker for city romanticism and he made sure the rot was stopped, the place cleaned up. A farm is not beautiful unless it is productive. (Gordimer, 1974, pp. 17-18)

This economic instrumentalization, especially his focus on tax benefits, is much more clearly seen in the drought scenes of the novel. For Mehring, the ecological crisis is not an ethical warning, but a merely accounting-based financial situation. This approach is described in the narrative as follows: “The farm didn’t depend on surface water. He didn’t depend on the farm. He would have to buy a large amount of additional feed for the cattle, but that could all go down as a tax loss” (Gordimer, 1974, p. 38). This quotation shows that Mehring acted solely for the sake of damage management and financial advantage, rather than out of a sense of responsibility for the land or the living beings on the farm. According to him, drought and infertility problems are not ecological failures, but merely financial factors that can be included in the tax system.

Mehring's view of land solely as an investment tool and tax advantage is the complete opposite of Aldo Leopold's (1949) concept of 'land ethic'. While Leopold defines land not as economic property, but as an 'ethical community' including humans, Mehring relies on a colonial approach that exploits the entire ecosystem. For Mehring, the land is simply an investment commodity with increasing market value: “he paid 100 Rands an acre; high at the time must be worth more than double by now” (Gordimer, 1974, p. 42). Therefore, Mehring's perception of nature is based on a colonial economic policy that evaluates soil fertility not within the framework of ecological sustainability, but within the framework of criteria for financial profit, a contradiction that makes the title of the novel so ironic.

The term *The Conservationist* as the novel’s title forms the main source of Gordimer's irony. Mehring’s "conservationist" identity does not represent a figure establishing an ethical relationship with nature; instead, it serves as a mask concealing a colonial mind-set focus on surveillance and controlling over the environment. As Aydıntürk points out, the farm for him signifies “a place to get away from the context of stuffy airports, duty-free drinks, and cutlery cauled in cellophane” (Gordimer, 1974, p. 19, as cited in Aydıntürk, 2021, p. 34). This expression highlights the superficial and consumption-oriented tendency of the colonizer to view nature as a holiday escape.

Arne Naess (1973), in his definition of the deep ecology, signifies that nature has an intrinsic value that is not limited to its benefits for humans. For Naess, all living entities are equal components of the ecosystem, and humanity’s claim to total control over nature is an ethically unacceptable position. However, in *The Conservationist*, Mehring's relationship with nature completely contradicts to this ecological wholeness. The character's evaluative criteria are entirely utilitarian and instrumental in nature. This attitude, where conservation becomes a tool to maintain power and authority over both the land and the workers, is clearly illustrated in the novel:

> On the farm it is the time for conservation - buildings to be repaired, fire-breaks cleared, he must go round all the fences with Jacobus. The sort of jobs they’ll never think to do unless

> you push them to it. A place must be kept up. His energy rises in inverse proportion to winter slackness: sitting there warming themselves against the wall of the kraal, while the weekly bags of mealie meal are sure to be doled out and their poor little devils trail to the pump for water. (Gordimer, 1974, p. 78)

As demonstrated by Arıkan (2017), the title *The Conservationist* does not signify a simple message about protecting nature. This practical and control-oriented attitude perfectly shows the deep irony in the title of the novel. While the title, as Gorak (1991) points out, also refers to the ecological concerns of the 1970s, Mehring's conservationism, as Ogungbesan (1978) argues, is shaped by a desire to own and control rather than ethical responsibility.

Another important point is how Mehring uses his property rights to as a 'decision-maker' over nature. He perceives in himself the sole right to measure, control, and redefine every aspect of the farm. This authoritarian relationship with the land is linked to a common colonial attitude. It is considered that the knowledge of nature and the right to intervene the land belong solely to the colonizer. That feeling of being superiority extends beyond nature to encompass everything Mehring perceives as the 'other'.

Mehring's relationship with the landscape cannot be considered separately from the colonizer's relationship with the "other." For him, the land is not a living environment for developing a reciprocal relationship; it is sensed as a silent, vulnerable object on which dominance might be established. As Aydıntürk (2021) states, "Mehring has an egocentric mentality and believes he is in control of nature" (p. 35). Mehring's approach to animals is similarly shaped by this restricted vision. Mehring assesses the animals not as subjective beings but in terms of their economic productivity, as stated in the following passage:

> Although he has spoken to the servants nothing seems to be done. There are too many cats around and God knows how they keep alive, anyway. He has suggested to Jacobus that there are too many cats, but being Jacobus, he just grins and counters with another positive statement: There are too many rats. Cattle apart, you can't get them to care for any animal. He would like to keep a beautiful dog on the farm, a collie or a pointer, but there's no one to look after it during the week. (Gordimer, 1974, p. 72)

This selfish approach to living beings reflects his broader perception of the environment. As pointed by Monson (2004), in Mehring's way of reading the land, the identity of the external world always remains secondary to his own self-construction; therefore, the farm is never placed as an environment in which reciprocal relations are established. Instead, it merely serves as an extension of his own subjective power.

These scenes demonstrate how even living beings are instrumentalised to serve Mehring's egocentric position and personal preferences. Similarly, the description of the Transvaal landscape as "dull and low-keyed" (Gordimer, 1974, p. 20) reflects Mehring's perspective on the land, as seen from the outside and as a property owner, rather than from the inside. As a result, the novel depicts how colonial domination ideologically colonizes and destroys not just human beings but the landscape and the ecosystem as well.

2. Epistemic Violence and the Erasure of Indigenous Ecological Knowledge

Colonial domination does not only mean the occupation, limitation, and economic restructuring of the land; it also undermines the historical knowledge-based relationships created with that territory. In this context, colonialism operates as through control over knowledge as it does through physical violence. In *The Conservationist*, Mehring positions the Western rational and

proprietary knowledge system as the sole valid authority, systematically devaluing the indigenous ecological knowledge accumulated over generations of Black workers. Thus, experience gained through long-term living practices with the land is excluded from the official knowledge hierarchy; knowledge is only considered 'legitimate' when expressed in the language of the white landowner. This aspect of the novel makes visible the process defined in postcolonial ecocriticism as 'epistemic violence': even if indigenous knowledge is not destroyed, it is trivialized, silenced, and pushed outside of decision-making mechanisms. This is clearly seen when Mehring completely ignores Jacobus's practical knowledge about the flooded land:

> Jacobus considers a moment. — Is too much water. Too much. - He goes through the motions of pitching a spade, lifting earth, and then standing back, the imaginary spade has dropped, he is dismayed: — As soon you digging, the water's coming again. Even in that camp up there, not so near the river, when I'm start dig, is filling up. — No, no, that doesn't matter. That's nothing. If you find the proper place, the proper slope, after a day that big water will have flowed away. Then slowly every day the earth will drain, it'll dry - come I'll show you where - (Gordimer, 1974, p. 293)

As this dismissal of Jacobus's experience clearly demonstrates, Gordimer's novel not only discusses the colonization of nature, but also the question of who can speak about, know about, and decide about nature. Mehring's authority on the farm is not based solely on property rights; it is also based on the claim to have the final say on what constitutes knowledge, skill, and 'appropriate' agricultural methods. Therefore, in the novel, epistemological superiority and economic superiority function as two colonial structures that reinforce each other. Although the black workers' knowledge of the land is practically indispensable, it is constantly diminished at the discursive level; their experience is reduced not to knowledge, but merely to physical labour.

Mehring's view of Black workers reflects the colonial subject's approach to indigenous knowledge. The character legitimizes his own authority by claiming that the workers do not understand the land or the production processes. According to this viewpoint, the workers are not intelligent people capable of reading their own environment; rather, they are viewed as physical bodies that must follow the orders. The use of the racist and offensive term 'Kaffir' demonstrates this disrespectful mind-set at the level of language. This perspective is explicitly expressed in the narrative as follows:

> You can't trust a kaffir about the scale, I can tell you that. You can teach them as much as you like. It doesn't matter to them, you see, if it's so much or so much. To them it seems the same. They'll know better just by picking it up on their backs. I've had some boys who can tell how much you'll get, just picking the bales up. (Gordimer, 1974, p. 54)

This passage implies Mehring's doubts about black workers' technical capacity and reduces their knowledge production to basic perception. Yet, this creates a siginificant contradiction; while the white authority recognizes the existence of indigenous knowledge, he refuses to accept it as valid knowledge. As Aydıntürk (2021) emphasizes, Mehring places the indigenous people in a position of being "incapable of doing anything without Mehring's permission" (p. 41). Workers are not seen as subjects who understand their own environment, but they are just bodies in need of guidance. The use of racist terms like 'Kaffir' encourages this mental degradation at the linguistic level, eventually reducing workers from thinking individuals into simple functional units of labour.

Mehring's approach minimizes workers from individuals with feelings and histories to simply units of labour. As Aydıntürk and Geçikli (2026) point out, workers are often portrayed not as people who read nature, but merely as 'inanimate machines' that follow directions. This shows a clear

connection between the objectification of labour and the commodification of nature. The following quote about the legal status of workers proves this objectification:

> —D'you think he's ever asked about your papers? He doesn't care if anyone's got papers or not, as long as you work. That's all he knows. And if the police catch you, he can just look in your face and say he doesn't know who you are, that's all, you're someone hiding with his boys on the farm. What has he got to worry about? (Gordimer, 1974, p. 102)

In this view, the worker's identity becomes completely useless because only the value of them is recognized. This loss of subjectivity influences every aspect of daily life; even workers' access to basic essentials is regulated by a system operated by Jacobus. Furthermore, the linguistic hierarchy established by the figure of Jacobus also determines the communication models of the colonial order: "Jacobus did not talk to the Indian as he did to a white man, nor as he would to one of his own people" (Gordimer, 1974, p. 30). This reveals how colonialism is not only an economic but also a linguistic order.

This linguistic order goes beyond basic communication; because of the colonial knowledge regime, the local people are often excluded from ecological decision-making processes. Although the black workers have a better understanding of the land and its natural rhythms than the others, the white land owner holds the final power. This 'decision-making role,' as emphasized by Aydıntürk (2026), is a clear example of environmental injustice. Even though Mehring knows nothing about agriculture and animal husbandry, Mehring makes all decisions just because he owns the farm. Furthermore, the workers' instinctive knowledge about water management and seasonal changes are silenced by Mehring's 'profit-oriented' calendar. This 'profit-oriented' approach and direct exploitation of labour become most evident when he forces Jacobus into unlicensed medical treatments rather than seeking for professional assistance:

> There's a cow making a good recovery from what old Jacobus had the sense to recognize as mastitis, and, what's more, to treat with the right injection. — How did you know how to put it in, Jacobus, eh? You're a clever doctor now, eh? — He doesn't need much encouragement to mime, step by step, exactly how he filled the syringe, etc. — Always I'm look nicely when the doctor he's here for the cows. — — I'll save plenty money, now, eh, Jacobus, we won't need the doctor any more. — (Gordimer, 1974, p. 291)

At the end of the novel, nature brings its own justice and fights against this epistemic oppression. The body of the unidentified black man, whom Mehring ignored and buried, surfaces in the floodwaters, showing that his ownership of the land was never real. The burial of the body by black workers according to their own traditions represents the transfer of spiritual and ecological authority over the land from Mehring to the true 'conservationists.' Mehring's complete loss of control may be interpreted as a demonstration that nature will not obey colonial knowledge systems and that justice can only be achieved when the local knowledge and traditions are respected and recognized.

Colonial property regime over the workers controls the relationship of dependency that affects even trivialities of daily life. For example, the fact that workers can only access basic necessities from a specific shop on the farm road, and Jacobus distributes their weekly sacks of corneal, demonstrates their absolute economic and spatial dependence on white authority. Moreover, the old wallet full of 'permit papers' that the character Witbooi has kept for years, but which have no official validity, is a striking example of how the colonial system kept workers constantly under surveillance and uncertainty.

3. Race, Labour and Nature: The Dynamics of Environmental Justice

The concept of environmental justice is an ethical and political approach that point out that ecological destruction, environmental risks, and inequalities in access to natural resources are not distributed equally in society. Instead, the poor and colonized communities are forced to bear most of these burdens. In *The Conservationist*, this injustice appears not only as the destruction of nature but also as a multi-layered system of exploitation based on race, class, and place. The novel draws a direct connection between industrial pollution in Transvaal and the racist hierarchy prevailing on Mehring's farm. Thus, nature and the "other" are devalued within the same colonial-capitalist logic.

In the novel, Transvaal is represented as a geography where nature is unconsciously exploited in accordance with the logic of capitalist production and industry. Alptekin (2015) defines capitalism as a rational economic mode of production defined through rational technology, the commodification of commercial life, and the ownership of the means of production. This rationality is concretized in the novel by Mehring's view of nature as merely a 'calculator' focused on efficiency and profit. However, this rational production process has also brought about ecological destruction in Transvaal, resulting in the pollution of water, air, and soil. Pollution is a tool of class division in this geography; the white minority who profit from production are located in sterile areas, while the working class, waiting by the roadside, are exposed to the waste and dust of industry. This stark contrast is vividly depicted in the novel:

> The newspaper, ash, bones and smashed bottles come from the location; the boxes and board and straw come from the factories and warehouses not far across the veld where many of the location people work. People waiting at the roadside for buses cover their mouths with woollen scarves against the red dust; so do the women who sit at their pitches selling oranges or yellow mealies roasting on braziers. The scavengers are patient - leisurely or feeble, it's difficult, in passing, to judge - and their bare feet and legs and the hands with which they pick over the dirt are coated grey with ash. (Gordimer, 1974, p. 92)

As seen in these descriptions, environmental degradation is not an abstract background, but a material reality that directly contacts bodies. Those exposed to pollution are not those who profit from the production system; they are the workers and the poor waiting by the roadside. As Aydıntürk and Geçikli (2026) state in their study, pollution in Transvaal is not only an environmental consequence, but also the spatial reproduction of class geography.

This spatial reproduction of class geography is not merely an environmental consequence; it reflects the deeper logic of colonial capitalism that simultaneously exploits both land and labour. From a social ecological perspective, the desire to dominate nature and the desire to dominate humanity are different manifestations of the same logic of domination. In Mehring's farm, land is coded as 'surplus', and the worker as a 'replaceable unit'. Aksu (2010) defines the basic components of the capitalist mode of production as private property, free market, competition, and division of labour (pp. 11-17). These components are embodied in Mehring's farm management in the novel; Mehring, using his property rights, employs workers without social security and at low wages, reducing labour to merely a mechanical process that produces surplus value. For Mehring, the value of a worker, like the exploited land, depends solely on their usefulness in the production table.

Colonial domination, rather than being a singular form of oppression, presents a layered structure established at the intersection of class, race, and gender hierarchies. Warren (1997) defines the fundamental assumption of ecofeminism as the inseparable link between the oppression suffered by women, people of colour, and lower classes, and the exploitation of nature. In *The Conservationist*, Mehring's claim to property transforms into a broad right of disposal encompassing

not only land but also women's bodies and the labour of Black workers. This intersectionality, as pointed out by Warren (1997), allows the white male subject in the novel to legitimize his absolute authority over the land, his sexual rights claims over women, and his racial superiority over workers, all within the same rhetorical framework. As emphasized by Aydıntürk (2021), for Mehring, indigenous women and nature are a common field of 'exploitation' where colonial fantasies are satisfied and possessive desires are objectified.

The oppression of women and nature by colonial domination appears as mutually reinforcing processes within an ecofeminist framework. Merchant (1996) argues that with the rise of modern science and capitalism, nature has transformed from a living and organic 'mother' image to a 'passive machine' that is experimented on and exploited. Mehring's approach to nature and women in *The Conservationist* is a typical reflection of this mechanization process pointed out by Merchant. For Mehring, just as land is an area of 'output' focused on productivity and profit, women are similarly reduced to 'objects' in which possessive desires are satisfied. As emphasized by Aydıntürk (2021), Mehring's appropriation of nature and the commodification of the female body are both consequences of the same patriarchal and capitalist mechanism of domination.

The following statement about the legal status of workers demonstrates how environmental injustice are connected with labor exploitation: "He doesn't care if anyone's got papers or not, as long as you work" (Gordimer, 1974, p. 102). This approach proves that colonial capitalism recognizes both land and people only in terms of their functional value. As noted by Aydıntürk and Geçikli (2026), Mehring views indigenous workers not as human beings, but merely as 'inanimate machines'. Thus, environmental injustice is directly related not only to the controlling of land but also to the exploiting of labour power.

For Mehring, the value of both a worker and an animal depends on solely on their utility to his business. This approach, which Peter Singer (1990) describes this kind of thinking as 'speciesism'. This shows up in the novel by coding animals not as subjective beings, but only as 'stock' or 'assets' based on their economic value. This situation shows how colonial domination integrates living beings into the capitalist production chain and ignores their capacity to suffer. Mehring's authority on the farm is based on his desire to manage nature and people with the same practical logic. Bookchin (2013) emphasizes that hierarchical societal structures tend to be aggressive towards nature. In the novel, the dispossession and silencing of the black workers, alongside treating the land as a mere economic data point, perfectly illustrate this integrated mechanism of domination.

The most powerful symbol of this domination and its eventual failure is the unidentified black man's corpse at the center of the novel. As Aydıntürk (2021) notes, the body on the farm symbolizes the hidden crimes of the apartheid system and the buried history of the land that Mehring tries to claim but can never truly possess. The initial indifferent burial of the corpse, followed by its re-emergence through floodwaters, demonstrates that nature cannot be fully disciplined by the colonial ownership system. Nature's ultimate rejection of this order and the reclamation of the land are profoundly expressed in the final burial scene:

> 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 put him away to rest, at last; he had come back. He took possession of this earth, theirs; one of them. (Gordimer, 1974, p. 323)

Analyzing this final scene, as Arıkan (2017) emphasizes, the black workers' ritualistic burial of the corpse at the end of novel renders visible the land's ethical and historical interlocutors rather than its legal owner. In this sense, the burial scene is not only the closure of a death, but, as suggested

by the work of Postel (2007) and Ogungbesan (1978), it represents the return of repressed belonging to the land.

The flood disaster shatters Mehring's sense of control. As Aydıntürk observes, "a flood eventually resurfaces the body of the black man" and he completely loses control of his life" (2021, p. 26). The ceremonial reburial of the body by black workers symbolizes that justice arises not from colonial authority, but from the ethical practice of the marginalized. As highlighted by Aydıntürk (2026), this final scene is a powerful metaphor for black workers being the real conservationists and inheritors of the land. In the end, the novel shows that environmental justice is an ethical duty. It emphasizes that nature can only be protected within a system where all beings are respected and historical memory is recognized.

Conclusion

This study examines Nadine Gordimer's novel, *The Conservationist*, from the perspective of environmental justice and postcolonial ecocriticism. It reveals how colonial domination shapes nature, labour, space, and knowledge. The world in the novel is not only a historical narrative reflecting the socio-political problems of Apartheid South Africa, but also a powerful ecological critique that proves how land is redefined through ownership, power, and exclusion. In this respect, the work proves that the environmental crisis is not limited solely to the destruction of the natural environment, but is directly linked to processes such as racial inequality, dispossession, labour exploitation, and the erasure of historical memory.

The findings obtained throughout the study have shown that the novel's protagonist, Mehring, does not have an ethical, reciprocal, and holistic relationship with nature. Instead, he perceives the land as property that can be owned, controlled, and transformed into economic value. As emphasized by Aydıntürk (2021), for Mehring, the farm takes on meaning not as a living space, but as an investment tool, a place of relaxation, and a status symbol. Consequently, the term 'conservationist' in the novel's title ironically points not to a subject who protects nature; on the contrary, it shows a colonial subject who wants to possess and manage nature under the pretense of conservation. Gordimer, while criticizing the capitalist understanding of nature where land is only considered valuable as long as it is productive, also makes visible the connection between ownership and ecological alienation.

Thus, by extending Arıkan's (2017) Leopoldian reading of the "false conservationist" through the lenses of environmental justice and epistemic violence, this study demonstrates that the novel interrogates not only the ethics of the land-human relationship but also the mechanisms of racially organized ecological exclusion.

Another important conclusion of the article is that environmental injustice is not limited to the destruction of the physical environment, but is also produced in the realm of knowledge and representation. The systematic devaluation of the local ecological knowledge of Black workers by the colonial authority and their exclusion from decision-making processes reveals the epistemic dimension of domination. As stated by Aydıntürk and Geçikli (2026), the suppression of indigenous knowledge and the reduction of workers to mere mechanical labour constitute a violation of environmental justice in the realm of knowledge. Therefore, in the novel, the colonization of nature and the silencing of indigenous knowledge are considered two complementary aspects of the same logic of domination.

The unidentified black man's corpse at the heart of the novel constitutes the intersection of environmental and social justice. The reappearance of the body in the floodwaters is a return of the historical crimes and erased memories that the colonial property regime sought to suppress. As

Aydıntürk (2021) states in her study, this corpse symbolizes the suppressed history of the land that Mehring sought to possess but could never ethically own. The ceremonial burial of the corpse by black workers at the end of the novel confirms that the spiritual and historical belonging of the land belongs to those who understand it not as property, but as a living space and a place of memory.

In conclusion, *The Conservationist* asserts that ecological restoration and a sustainable society can only be achieved by destroying colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal systems. Literature is not solely a source of aesthetic pleasure; it is also a critical form that addresses issues of environmental ethics, historical responsibility, and social justice. Gordimer's work serves as a compelling reminder that protecting nature can only be justified within an ethical framework that considers humanity, memory, and justice together.

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