

MAREK PAWLICKI<sup>1</sup>

DOI: 10.15290/CR.2022.39.4.01

University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3477-0831>

# “A Stranger in a Strange Land”: Nadine Gordimer and Her Journey Through Egypt

**Abstract.** The aim of the article is to describe Nadine Gordimer’s political development in the late 1950s by analysing her travel essay “Egypt Revisited” (1959) and her short story “A Thing of the Past” (1959). In the first part of the article, Gordimer’s political stance is explained in reference to her non-fictional texts. It is argued that in the late 1950s Gordimer was torn between her liberal humanist belief in multiracialism and the awareness that this stance was becoming increasingly untenable in the changing historical circumstances. Her journey to Egypt in 1959 gave her a valuable opportunity to consider her political convictions in the wider context of the decolonization processes happening on the African continent. What is clear both in “Egypt Revisited” and “A Thing of the Past”—a short story inspired by her visit to Egypt—is her desire to transcend the colonial perspective by distancing herself from her racial and social origins. These texts also convey her belief that the decolonization processes in African countries force the white inhabitants of the continent to redefine themselves so that they can remain politically relevant in the new reality. This belief would become the basis of the political and artistic theories that she developed in the decades to follow.

**Keywords:** Nadine Gordimer, travel writing, Egypt, South African literature

## Gordimer’s politics in the 1950s

In 1959, one year before the Sharpeville Massacre, Nadine Gordimer published an article in which she admitted that—in common with many other white South Africans—she was considering leaving her country. While she never took this radical step and went on to become one of South Africa’s leading writers and public intellectuals, her article “Where Do Whites Fit In” (1959) gives an important insight into her state of mind at the time. Gordimer was clearly torn between her hope for social and political changes

---

1 Address for correspondence: Institute of Literary Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Silesia in Katowice, Grota-Roweckiego 5, 41-205 Sosnowiec, Poland. E-mail: [marek.pawllicki@us.edu.pl](mailto:marek.pawllicki@us.edu.pl)

in her country (the end of white supremacy and the beginning of a democratic system under black majority rule) and her rising sense of insecurity connected with her place—and the place of other white liberals—in South Africa. Her reflections go beyond the issue of legal rights and get to the heart of the matter, namely the question of belonging. To belong, she argues, is to be accepted by the wider community—a task that may take generations to bring to fruition, and may not happen in her lifetime. Faced with this realisation, Gordimer confesses that she is torn between “the desire to be gone . . . and a terrible, obstinate and fearful desire to stay” (Gordimer 1989: 34).

Considering Gordimer’s convictions in the socio-political context of her country, it can be argued that throughout the 1950s her political stance was essentially that of liberalism,<sup>2</sup> but Gordimer also referred to it as “the humanist approach, the individualistic approach” (Bazin & Seymour 1990: 135), adding that its essence lay in ignoring and defying the racial divisions imposed by the apartheid regime. As she commented at the end of the 1970s, back in the 1950s the intellectuals of South Africa believed in the value of personal relationships—the Forsterian principle of “only connect”<sup>3</sup> (Bazin & Seymour 1990: 102)—and were convinced that such relationships had the potential to bring about social and political changes. This belief was shared across the racial and political divide and became the foundation of the Congress Alliance,<sup>4</sup> whose members were guided by “the belief that a rampantly segregationist apartheid could be countered only and most effectively by a cross-racial or multi-racial front” (Clingman 1993: 45-46).

Gordimer’s belief in multiracialism is evident not only in her novels and short stories but also in her political writings, including her article about Albert Luthuli, the president of the African National Congress in the years 1952-1960, and undoubtedly the most influential African politician of the 1950s. Published in *Atlantic Monthly* in April 1959, “Chief Luthuli” is an expression of Gordimer’s deep admiration for Luthuli’s courage and determination, but it is also a statement of belief in the liberal humanist values that guided his actions (she describes his personality as “a symbol of human dignity” (Gordimer 1989: 38) and quotes from his 1952 statement “Our Chief Speaks,” in which he

---

2 In the 1950s Gordimer’s political stance was deeply influenced by Alan Paton, who described liberalism in the following way: “By liberalism I don’t mean the creed of any party or any century. I mean a generosity of spirit, a tolerance of others, an attempt to comprehend otherness, a commitment to the rule of law, a high ideal of the worth and dignity of man, a repugnance for authoritarianism and a love of freedom” (Blair 2012: 475).

3 Gordimer is referring to Chapter XXII of E. M. Forster’s novel *Howards End* (1910).

4 The Congress Alliance was an organization that included South Africa’s major anti-apartheid parties: the African National Congress, the South African Indian Congress, the South African Coloured People’s Congress, the South African Congress of Democrats, and the South African Congress of Trade Unions.

emphasized the importance of “harmonious relations with other sections of our multi-racial society” (Gordimer 1989: 46)). Published in the same year as “Where Do Whites Fit In,” “Chief Luthuli” offers a counterbalance to Gordimer’s scepticism as to the future of white South Africans, but it should not be viewed unambiguously as an anticipation of a future multi-racial society. The two essays, when read together, paint a portrait of a writer who is torn between her abiding belief in liberalism and multi-racialism, and the sense that this stance may not suffice to ensure her (and other white South Africans) a place in the new, post-apartheid South Africa.

## **The late 1950s: anticipating change**

It is at the point when Gordimer began to have doubts about the political currency of liberalism (she would abandon this stance altogether in the 1960s) that she looked beyond her immediate surroundings and considered her position (and that of other whites) in the wider context of the African continent. This opportunity was offered by her travels across Africa that began in the mid-1950s and lasted throughout her life. In the years 1954-1977, Gordimer visited five countries: Egypt, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (with a brief visit to the Republic of the Congo), Madagascar, Botswana, Ghana, and the Republic of Transkei, one of the Bantustans<sup>5</sup>. The Africa she saw fascinated her; as she wrote about the political transformations on the continent in the 1960s, “Africa, however troubled it may be, has never been more interesting than it is in this decade” (Gordimer 1989: 171). In her seminal study *Imperial Eyes*, Mary Louise Pratt argues “that important historical transitions alter the way people write, because they alter people’s experiences and the way people imagine, feel and think about the world they live in” (Pratt 2008: 4). This general assumption is also true in Gordimer’s case: the processes of decolonization that she observed in the aforementioned countries not only fascinated her but also profoundly influenced her perception of the continent, including her own country.

While the impact of Gordimer’s African travels on her political and artistic development is significant, if it is mentioned at all, it is usually discussed in the most general of terms. Stephen Clingman, in his classic study *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: Histories from the Inside*, rightly argues that by the end of the 1950s Gordimer began to see clearly that “the ultimate current of history in South Africa—past, present and future—is black, and not white: that the latter is a subset of the former” (Clingman 1993: 78). Clingman adds that Gordimer’s travels in Africa, “may well have had an influence on her perception of the direction in which the continent was heading” (Clingman 1993: 78). That the

---

5 The Bantustans (also referred to as homelands) were self-governing territories where much of the black population of South Africa was relocated. Ten in total, they existed from the mid- to late 20th century.

continent was heading towards change was clear to Gordimer, who by the late 1950s had the growing realisation that the processes of decolonization would bring power back to the African people.

The socio-political changes taking place in countries like Egypt and the Belgian Congo were, no doubt, evident to many observers at the time; Gordimer, however, took this truth both as a lens through which to look upon the African continent and a foundation on which to build her role as a writer and public intellectual. In short, Gordimer's belief was that the dynamically evolving political circumstances necessitated rapid change on behalf of the white inhabitants of the continent and especially those who decided to stay and contribute to the democratic transformations. Gordimer herself had her part in this process of change when, by the late 1950s, she began to question her race—and race in general—as a determining factor in the shaping of her identity. Indeed, in the early 1960s, she described her political development in the following words: “First, you know, you leave your mother's house, and later you leave the house of the white race” (Bazin & Seymour 1990: 9). For Gordimer, who left her parents' house at the age of twenty-two,<sup>6</sup> the decision to distance herself from her conservative, middle-class background was the first step to her political emancipation.

Gordimer's attempt to view herself at a distance from her racial and social origins is visible in her works, including her modest but significant contribution to travel writing.<sup>7</sup> Gordimer's travel essays not only give us insight into the state of the countries that she visited but also reveal her own state of mind, the “culture-specific and individual patterns of perception and knowledge” (Korte 2000: 6), which as Barbara Korte writes, can be traced in all examples of travel writing. The image of Gordimer that emerges from these essays is that of a traveler who takes “the fact of departure, initial severance from a home culture” (Clark 1999: 14) as an opportunity to reflect upon her political position as a white inhabitant of the African continent. In these essays, Gordimer takes the stance of an observer—“a stranger in a strange land” (Gordimer 1989: 152)—who is witness to the post-colonial processes unfolding in the countries described and, more widely, on the African continent. Observing the end of white rule and the consequent political marginalisation

---

6 This decision is mentioned in her autobiographical essay “A Bolter and the Invincible Summer” (1963). Describing her life before her early twenties, she writes about the state of intellectual torpor that she experienced in her youth: “My existential self was breathing but inert, like one of those unfortunate people who has had a brain injury in a motor accident and lies unhearing and unseeing” (Gordimer 1989: 24). She adds, “I cannot understand why I did not free myself in the most obvious way, leave home and small town and get myself a job somewhere” (Gordimer 1989: 24). She made this decision at the age of 22, when she enrolled at the University of Witwatersrand.

7 I adopt the definition of travel writing as “first-person prose accounts of travels that have been undertaken by the author-narrator” (Youngs 2013: 3).

of white expatriate communities is chiefly an act of anticipating her country's future—Gordimer no doubt shared the hope that South Africa would follow in the footsteps of the countries she visited—but it is also an exercise in humility, as Gordimer predicted a future that would be politically uncertain for the white minority.

In the years 1959-1977, Gordimer published six travel essays: “Egypt Revisited” (1959), “The Congo River” (1960-1961), “Madagascar” (1969), “Pula!” (1970), “Merci Dieu, It Changes” (1971), and “A Vision of Two Blood-Red Suns” (1977). These essays should be read not only in the wider context of Gordimer's essays and articles but also her fictional works, which further reflect her stance regarding the processes of decolonization in Africa. Discussing every essay in detail is impossible in the scope of one article; what is possible and worthwhile is to concentrate on Gordimer's first contribution to travel writing—“Egypt Revisited” (1959)—and, on this basis, to explore what Casey Blanton called the “relationship between self and world” (29); in Gordimer's case, the interplay between her political convictions and the reality that she observed during her two journeys to Egypt. In the late 1950s, those views were on the cusp of an important change, as Gordimer was beginning to question her belief in liberal humanism and was redefining her role as a writer and public intellectual. Gordimer's artistic and political development will be explored first in the context of “Egypt Revisited” (1959) and then the story “A Thing of the Past,” published the same year as the essay.

### **“Suez hangs in the air”: Gordimer's two visits to Egypt**

Egypt was the first foreign country that Gordimer visited—doing so in 1954, with her husband Reinhold Cassirer. The second visit to Egypt took place five years later, and it is this trip that she describes in her essay “Egypt Revisited,” first published in the London magazine *National and English Review* in January 1959. Gordimer, then, is writing primarily for a British audience, who, by the late 1950s, were no doubt curious to learn about Egypt following the Suez Crisis. Gordimer was well-qualified to give them such insight—she had visited Cairo in the March of 1954, in the wake of the 1952 coup organised by The Free Officers and during the domestic power struggle between Gamal Abdul Nasser and Mohammed Naguib (a conflict that would end in 1956 with Nasser's victory and the imprisonment of Naguib). Revisiting Cairo in 1958, Gordimer recalls the tense atmosphere of 1954 and describes the atmosphere of confidence, palpable after Egypt's moral and diplomatic victory in the Suez Crisis in November 1956; as she writes, “Suez hangs in the air, a confidence that inflates even the meanest street-urchin chest” (Gordimer 1989: 148).

While Gordimer does offer some insight into the political situation of the country, she takes the readers' knowledge of postcolonial Egypt for granted, choosing instead to focus on the impact of Suez on the moods and attitudes of the country's inhabitants, both the colonials and the Egyptian people. It is this joint interest in these two

increasingly separate social groups that yields a bifurcated vision of Egypt: one which is, no doubt, closer to Gordimer's readers and one which remains foreign, and ultimately unknowable. The beginning of the essay suggests that Gordimer is writing from the perspective of a colonial in a postcolonial country; in the first paragraph, she describes her arrival in Egypt and the quizzical welcome that she received from a friend (a foreigner who had spent thirty years in the country): "It's worse than ever here, it's lovely" (Gordimer 1989: 148). This ironic formulation, Gordimer goes on to say, is expressive of a wider attitude felt among the narrow group of white colonials whose love for their adopted country (and "love" is precisely the word used by Gordimer) still enables them to identify closely with that country, despite the social and political changes. Anticipating her readers' failure to grasp the intricacies of this standpoint, Gordimer declares herself to be an insider—a white African writing about other white Africans. Later in the essay, she makes this point even clearer, when she mentions "my emphatic identification with the dispossessed foreign community" (Gordimer 1989: 152), clearly suggesting that her understanding of the moods prevalent in the foreign community is based on knowledge, experience, and shared emotion.

Despite declaring her empathy with the white expatriates in Egypt, Gordimer chooses not to follow this thread; instead, she makes it clear that her main interest is in the more elusive position of the Egyptians: "[T]he hopes, fears and prides of the people of the streets" (Gordimer 1989: 149), or, as she puts it more succinctly, "[T]he voice of the people" (Gordimer 1989: 149). This standpoint is, as Gordimer explains, considerably more difficult to grasp because of the linguistic and cultural barrier, but it can be intuited by what she describes as careful observation and "the shiver of receptivity on my skin" (Gordimer 1989: 149). What is expressed here is Gordimer's belief in the power of the writer to reach a deeper understanding of reality by means of empathy and imagination. Taking into account the central importance of careful observation in the creative process, it should not come as a surprise that Gordimer not only succeeds in describing in detail the bustling life of Cairo but also stages the act of observing; in one passage, she describes standing on the balcony of her apartment and watching the comings and goings of the people below:

At sunset . . . I had stood on the balcony of the flat where I was staying, and had watched the people below, never ant-like as in big cities of the West, but leisured, in full cry, pushing carts, selling peanuts and roasted maize cobs, balancing coffee cups, zigzagging the hazard across hooting cars and the little red petrol tanks . . . drawn by jingling, brass-cluttered donkeys. (Gordimer 1989: 152)

While Gordimer privileges vision<sup>8</sup> in her descriptions of Cairo, the passage nonetheless evokes the sounds and smells of a bustling street. The vivid description, full of evocative detail, is reminiscent of Gordimer's early writing – the “sensuous sensibility” (Bazin & Seymour 1990: 195) that she identified as a hallmark of her first stories. More important in the context of travel writing, this scene is firmly rooted in the tradition of postcolonial writing. In *Imperial Eyes*, Mary Louise Pratt famously argues that the landscapes drawn from the balconies of third-world cities are a continuation of the monarch-of-all-I-survey scenes in colonial writing: “Here, like their explorer forebears, postcolonial adventurers perch themselves to paint the significance and value of what they see” (Pratt 2008: 212). To illustrate this tendency, she quotes from Alberto Moravia's *Which Tribe Do You Belong To?* (1972) and Paul Theroux's *The Old Patagonian Express* (1978). In contrast to Moravia's and Theroux's descriptions of “joyless cityscapes” (Pratt 2008: 213) (and, for that matter, entirely empty of people), Gordimer's description of a street in Cairo is highly dynamic, expressive of the city's vibrancy. Unlike the “ant-like,” hurried human traffic of Western cities, the Egyptians are described as confident and assertive in their day-to-day activities. It is this confidence, assertion and determination that she sees as Egypt's most valuable political currency.

The most significant political gesture that Gordimer makes in “Egypt Revisited” is to adopt the colonial perspective only to reach beyond it to a subject position that she calls “a stranger in a strange land” (Gordimer 1989: 152). This latter identity is described by Gordimer as the one that she adopts by default when travelling; indeed, it was only her visit to Cairo, where she was hosted by white colonials, that evoked her short-lived “emphatic identification”. Leaving Cairo for Upper Egypt, Gordimer hints at the sense of liberation, as if it was only at the point of leaving the expatriate community that she was able to direct her attention to the true purpose of her visit: observing and noting the changes in the country. She describes the culturally uneventful and uninspiring life of Cairo—the result of Egypt's turning away from European political and cultural influences—and the formation of a new elite in the country, composed of senior army officers and their families. The main change that she detects on her second visit to the country is the mood of “national confidence” (Gordimer 1989: 153), which she sees on the streets, in the museums—however dilapidated they may be (she describes visiting the Cairo Museum and observing schoolchildren being taught about the rich history of their country)—and, most importantly, on the building site of the Aswan High Dam.

Looking at the structure of “Egypt Revisited,” it is readily apparent that Gordimer's arrival in Aswan marks both the culmination and the conclusion of her essay: it begins

---

8 In this tendency she is not unlike many other travel writers; as Margaret Topping writes, “[T]he privileging of vision as the most reliable . . . sense by which to mediate the encounter between the traveller and the world is a familiar trope of travel writing” (Topping 2020: 194).

with her brief visit to Cairo and continues with her journey up the Nile and arrival in Aswan, which, as she is quick to point out, is not only the site of the dam (in the first stages of its construction) but “also a lively Arab town” (Gordimer 1989: 155) (it was a city of 55,000 people when Gordimer visited it in 1958). It is the people—the Egyptian workers—who are the centre of Gordimer’s description of the Aswan High Dam; while foreign investment is mentioned in passing, the focus is on the Egyptian workmen who are charged with the construction of the hydroelectric power plant. Standing atop the dam and observing the workers toiling below, Gordimer describes her admiration for this communal effort, which, in her eyes, expresses the country’s atmosphere of hopefulness for the future. The hope, for Gordimer, lies in the fact that the work is done by Egyptians for Egyptians: “When the power station is completed, it will be theirs to use; it does not merely feed them now, but will change their lives” (Gordimer 1989: 156). In a gesture that seems oddly patronising, Gordimer adds that the Egyptians need not only food and better living conditions but also a sense of achievement, which is brought by the construction of the dam.

The conclusion of “Egypt Revisited” may be the weakest point of her essay but is also worth discussing insofar as it conveys Gordimer’s political position as it was in the late 1950s. In the article “Where do Whites Fit In” (1959), published the same year as “Egypt Revisited,” Gordimer anticipated the inevitable end of white supremacist rule in her country, arguing that in this new socio-political order, the white South Africans who decide to stay in South Africa will have to reconcile themselves to an auxiliary role in society: to use her words, they will become “foreign experts” (Gordimer 1989: 36) (a phrase that she inserts in inverted commas), that is, intellectuals whose role is solely to impart technical, scientific, and cultural knowledge to black South Africans, without claiming any kind of entitlement to their own role in the future of the country. The word “foreign” is crucial here, insofar as it points to the gesture that the white South Africans must make, namely the ceding of power and authority in favour of their black compatriots. It is this drastically altered balance of power that Gordimer addresses when—at the end of “Egypt Revisited”—she describes the construction of the Aswan High Dam. She goes so far as to erase any signs of “foreign experts” on the construction site: the investors from Switzerland, Germany, and Austria are present as machines (“the clumsy steel giants of Europe” (Gordimer 1989: 155)), not as people. Gordimer’s positive, if idealised, vision of Egypt clearly deemphasizes the dangers of neo-colonialism (a topic that received ample attention in the other five of Gordimer’s travel essays) and capitalizes on the communal effort of Egypt’s inhabitants in the building of their country.



## Exploring the moods of the colonials: “A Thing of the Past”

The unmistakable tone of hopefulness in “Egypt Revisited” has the effect of marginalising any of the fears and apprehensions of the white colonials who have decided to stay in Egypt. The people Gordimer meets in Cairo are curiously (and stoically) detached from the political reality, as if they did not expect to be affected—not personally, at least—by the changes in their country. While Gordimer is clearly uninterested in exploring the mindset of the colonials in her essay, she attempts this task in her story “A Thing of the Past.” “A Thing of the Past,” originally published in the British magazine *Encounter* in 1959 and reprinted in Gordimer’s fourth short story collection, *Friday’s Footprint* (1960), explores the mindset of white colonials, especially their growing sense of alienation from socio-political reality. Set in Egypt in the years following the Suez Crisis, the story concentrates on the lives of colonials who find themselves in a hostile political climate and are, in effect, torn between their desire to emigrate and the sense of attachment to the country in which they were raised. For Irene Achilet, the daughter of the wealthy Achilet Pasha, life in Egypt consists mainly in socializing with other colonials in the cosmopolitan cities, in isolation from the socio-political reality of the country. As we learn, Irene “did not belong to Egypt,” although

she seemed to have been conditioned by the lives of the people, of whom she had never been in the least aware, to something of their acceptance of the passing of kings and palaces and the successive waves of conquering hordes. (Gordimer 1960: 164)

Irene’s ignorance of the country’s history results from her contention that she does not belong with “the other people” and does not identify with their historical and cultural heritage. This should not be seen as a refutation; it is, rather, a passive acknowledgment of difference between herself and the other white colonials on the one hand and the rest of the population on the other. What underlies her self-imposed ignorance is the contention that it is possible to live on the margins of history simply because this is precisely what her ancestors succeeded in doing. Irene’s husband, Max Leonard, a South African by birth, shares none of her optimism, but he is similar to Irene in his search for a place unaffected by the recent historical changes. When the political climate becomes more nationalistic, Max is reminded of a fact that he had known long before the crisis: “They had floated like oil on the thin, poor life of the country—Irene, himself, all of them. Lately he had begun to struggle with a guilt like nausea at the surfeit of the life that he had lived” (Gordimer 1960: 165). There is the sense that history has at long last caught up with him, in that he is once again reminded of what he had felt when living in South Africa: the hostility or, as Gordimer phrased it in “Where do Whites Fit In?”, the “unwelcomeness” of Africans. It seems that Max’s growing sense of

discomfiture is not so much resultant from his feeling of guilt, but rather from the awareness that it is no longer possible to lead the same kind of life. There is the sense that if it had not been for the political changes, the feeling of guilt would not have emerged, or it would have been suppressed in an attempt to maintain a comfortable and sequestered existence.

In “A Thing of the Past,” Gordimer shows not only the ethical dubiousness of the stance represented by Irene and Max Leonard but—more importantly—the historical untenability of such an attitude. In the background of the story is the awareness of the inevitability of change, as well as the contention that any attempt to avoid or obscure this knowledge will lead to the kind of rootlessness experienced by the Leonards, who are torn between their desire to leave their country and start anew (they plan to build a villa in Italy) and their attachment to the past. This conflict is clear at the end of the story, when, having made the decision to emigrate to Italy, Irene looks back upon her life in Egypt: “I was born here, everything’s happened to me here. My whole life. This house—it’s the house my father built for me” (Gordimer 1960: 177). Ultimately, it is not at all clear whether the Leonards will leave the country: it is equally possible that the fear of dispossession—both in the material and in the cultural sense—will make them stay. In a sense, they are caught between their desire to flee the country and an unproductive attachment to the past—unproductive in the sense that it does not give them a solid sense of identity and does not constitute the basis for the kind of constructive action that is required to eliminate the stasis of their present life. The title of the story points to this tension, introducing an ironical note to the story: the Leonards’ peaceful life may indeed be a thing of the past, but their attachment to this life is certainly not. Whether they will ultimately be able to free themselves of these sentiments and respond to the demands of the present—in their case, either to face up to the socio-political changes in Egypt or quit the country—remains unclear.

While “A Thing of the Past” has an element of historical inevitability, there is also the sense that the rootlessness and alienation experienced by its protagonists are, to some extent, self-inflicted. This interpretation is tenable in the context of the article “Where Do Whites Fit In?”, especially Gordimer’s comment (quoted at the beginning of this article) about the sense of national belonging being shaped by one’s personal and political commitments. Perhaps if the white protagonists of “A Thing of the Past” had taken the time to create social and political attachments outside of their immediate circle, they would feel a stronger sense of connection with the country, despite the political changes. As it is, they live in the ruins of the illusion that they can find a place left untouched by historical changes, where they can lead an undisturbed and peaceful existence. The gradual breakdown of this illusion comes with a strong sense of inevitability—there is the implication that historical events will sweep through colonial society, finding its members helpless and unprepared.

## Conclusion: embracing change

In the 1960s, Gordimer continued her task of exploring the attitudes of colonials in African countries, often emphasizing their sense of rootlessness and dislocation. In 1972, she collected these stories together in her sixth volume *Livingstone's Companions*. Explaining the choice of title to her British publisher, Gordimer noted that the characters in this collection have in common the fact of being “Livingstone’s companions”—and the same can be said of all the white people who live on the continent. In Gordimer’s view, Livingstone sowed the seeds of the current conflicts, which the inhabitants of the continent are still forced to confront.<sup>9</sup> In the 1970s, those conflicts were acutely felt not only by Gordimer but also by other politically-involved white South Africans. In the wake of the Soweto Revolt, the Black Consciousness Movement flatly rejected the liberal humanist ideal of multiculturalism and challenged white South Africans to redefine their role in the country. Gordimer undertook this task in “Relevance and Commitment,” an address that she delivered at the University of Cape Town in 1979. In her view, the only way that the white writer can discover that eponymous relevance and commitment is by acknowledging the position in which he has found himself: “[H]e has to admit openly the order of his experience as a white as differing completely from the order of black experience” (Gordimer 1989: 139). Acknowledging this difference is the starting point in the search for a new form of self-expression—one which would make it possible “to reconnect his art through his life to the total reality of the disintegrating present” (Gordimer 1989: 139). Anticipating the time after the end of apartheid, Gordimer goes on to argue that if the white artist succeeds in changing his life and art—and is accepted in this attempt—he can claim his place in the culture of his country by doing so “in the implicit nature of the artist as an agent of change, always moving towards truth, true consciousness, because art itself is fixed on the attainment of that essence of things” (Gordimer 1989: 142). In Gordimer’s conception of art, which she developed in the 1970s, change and truth come across as two key principles that are inextricably connected. To show the truth about people living in her times is to explore how their thoughts and emotions are shaped by the changing political circumstances. While discussing this view in more detail is outside of the scope of the present article, one important thing should be noted: Gordimer’s belief in change as a historical necessity and an artistic principle has its roots in the late 1950s, specifically in her early travels in Africa. Observing the processes of decolonization in Egypt and other countries, Gordimer grew convinced that it is only by embracing change that she could remain relevant as a writer and public intellectual. This awareness laid the grounds for her political and artistic development, leading to the creation of her finest literary works.

---

9 Gordimer expressed this view in a letter to Alan D. Williams (12 March 1971). The letter is part of the Gordimer archive in Lilly Library in Bloomington (Indiana).

## References

- Bazin, N. & Seymour M. (eds.). 1990. *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Blair, P. 2012. The Liberal Tradition in Fiction. In: D. Attwell, D. Attridge (eds.), *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, 474-90. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Blanton, C. 2002. *Travel Writing: The Self and the World*. New York: Routledge.
- Clark, S. 1999. Introduction. In: S. Clark (ed.), *Travel Writing and Empire: Postcolonial Theory in Transit*, 1-28. London: Zed Books.
- Clingman, S. 1993. *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Gordimer, N. 1960. *Friday's Footprint*. New York: The Viking Press.
- Gordimer, N. 1965. *Not for Publication: Fifteen Stories*. London: Gollancz.
- Gordimer, N. 1989. *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*, ed. Stephen Clingman. London: Penguin Books.
- Korte, B. 2000. *English Travel Writing from Pilgrimages to Colonial Explorations*, trans. Catherine Matthias. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Pratt, M. L. 2008. *Under Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge.
- Topping, M. 2020. Seeing. In: A. Pettinger, T. Youngs (eds.), *The Routledge Research Companion to Travel Writing*, 193-207. London: Routledge.
- Youngs, T. 2013. *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

\*\*\*

**Marek Pawlicki** is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Literary Studies at the University of Silesia in Katowice. He is the author of the book *Between Illusionism and Anti-Illusionism: Self-Reflexivity in the Chosen Novels of J.M. Coetzee* and articles on the works of J.M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, Iris Murdoch, William Golding, John Banville, Anne Enright, and Colm Tóibín. His critical interests include South African literature, postcolonial studies, memory studies, and ecocriticism.