

# **Narrating Moral Uncertainty in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Realism and Probability in *No Time Like the Present***

Sarita Chauhan

PhD Scholar (English) Reg. No. 1211126)

IIMT University

Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India

saritachauhan692@gmail.com

Dr. Kusum Tripathi

Assistant Professor, English

IIMT University

Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India

kusummsharma24@gmail.com

## **Abstract**

This paper contends that in *No Time Like the Present*, Gordimer formulates a post-apartheid realism by employing probability to reflect the moral uncertainty of modern South African life. The study shows how Gordimer adapts Miriam Allott's theory of probability, creating a narrative centred on unresolved ethical uncertainty and chance. Unlike previous scholarship, which has focused on depictions of disappointment and trauma, this analysis examines how probability functions as both an artistic and an ethical device, revealing the limits of narrative closure and the ongoing nature of freedom. The paper examines the connections between private life and public history, arguing that Gordimer links the domestic, professional, educational, and political spheres to challenge reductive narratives of national change. Through the experiences of Steve and Jabu, former anti-apartheid activists confronting the realities of freedom, I demonstrate that Gordimer's nuanced storytelling, persistent moral questions, and

ethical realism offer a new perspective on post-apartheid literature. Ultimately, the study argues that *No Time Like the Present* expands definitions of post-apartheid realism and provides a framework for seeing how probability highlights the persistent effects and contradictions of democratic modernity.

**Keywords:** Post-apartheid South Africa; Nadine Gordimer; realism; probability; ethical realism; moral uncertainty; postcolonial fiction; historical memory; political transition; South African literature

### **Introduction**

South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy in 1994 represented a significant political transformation, with the intent to end racial segregation and promote equality. Nevertheless, this shift did not redress the entrenched social, economic, and psychological disparities produced by decades of oppression. In the post-apartheid era, issues such as justice, historical memory, and collective identity persisted. In her 2012 novel, *No Time Like the Present*, Gordimer examines these themes through the narrative of Steve and Jabu, former anti-apartheid activists negotiating the paradoxes of freedom alongside personal and societal obligations. Rather than celebrating post-apartheid progress, the novel foregrounds persistent inequalities, corruption, and uncertainty, interrogating the moral implications of political transformation. Stephen Clingman observes that Gordimer's work analyses the interplay between history and consciousness, underscoring the complexities of identity and the incomplete nature of liberation.

This study examines the novel through the concepts of realism and probability, focusing on Miriam Allott's view of probability in realist fiction. Allott says realist novels feel believable because they show human behaviour, social settings, and moral uncertainty in familiar historical contexts (Allott 17–19). This sense of realism comes not just from facts, but from how probability helps create a story that feels true to life and psychologically real. Gordimer

uses this method: her characters are not idealised, but real people dealing with historical pressures, ideological conflicts, and tough moral choices. *No Time Like the Present* is realistic because it does not give simple answers to political or ethical questions.

The novel also shows how private and public histories are closely linked in post-apartheid South Africa. Everyday matters such as marriage, parenting, education, work, and migration are shaped by broader social and political forces. Gordimer's careful storytelling, use of broken conversations, and unresolved tensions all show that ethical life is uncertain and shaped by changing circumstances. In this way, the novel reflects Timothy Bewes' idea of 'ethical uncertainty' in postcolonial times, where change raises new questions rather than offering clear answers (Bewes 31-32). Gordimer's realism is not just about describing society, but about exploring moral uncertainty during the transition to democracy. *resent* uses realism and probability to tell the story of moral uncertainty in post-apartheid South Africa. It examines how Gordimer creates a believable world marked by uncertainty, ongoing issues, and unresolved social tensions, drawing on Miriam Allott's concept of probability and wider debates about ethical realism and postcolonial change. The paper argues that the novel represents a new kind of post-apartheid realism, shaped by uncertainty, ethical choices, and an incomplete democratic transition, especially through its focus on the connection between personal experience and political change.

### **Review of Literature**

Scholars have often studied Nadine Gordimer's work for its treatment of apartheid, racial injustice, political violence, and moral responsibility in South Africa. Earlier criticism focused on her anti-apartheid novels and their themes of resistance and liberal humanism. However, her later works, especially *No Time Like the Present*, are now gaining attention for exploring uncertainty, democratic change, and moral ambiguity in the aftermath of apartheid.

Since 1994, critics have noted Gordimer's shift from stories of direct resistance to examining the unresolved challenges of freedom in the new South Africa.

Stephen Clingman observes that Gordimer's fiction investigates the intricate relationship between history and consciousness, emphasising how political transformations inform ethical perspectives. He contends that her work examines history and self-awareness, with political shifts influencing her characters' ethical frameworks and identities (Clingman 7). Rather than offering mere political commentary, Clingman positions Gordimer's realism within larger historical currents. Similarly, Dominic Head asserts that Gordimer's later novels address themes such as uncertainty, fragmented identity, and moral instability, particularly salient in postcolonial society post-apartheid (Head 94–96). Both perspectives clarify how *No Time Like the Present* departs from narratives of direct resistance to instead scrutinise the ethical questions inherent in democratic life. Characters are portrayed as divided between private aspirations and public responsibilities (Newman 162–64). Gordimer eschews the depiction of heroic or idealised figures, instead presenting ordinary individuals confronting historically contingent moral dilemmas. The text's focus on ambiguity aligns with the realist principle of probability; Miriam Allott argues that a novel achieves artistry through a convincing portrayal of moral and social experiences within a recognisable historical context (Allott 17–19). Gordimer's stylistic approach is consistent with this realist tradition: her narrator is constrained, conflicts remain unresolved, and her characterisations possess psychological realism.

Post-apartheid criticism has also highlighted ongoing inequality and the lasting effects of history in democratic South Africa. Rita Barnard notes that much South African fiction after apartheid questions positive stories of national reconciliation, instead showing ongoing economic divides, urban insecurity, and social breakdown (Barnard 141–43). Similarly, Timothy Bewes argues that postcolonial modernity is often morally unclear, with the violence

of history still shaping society after liberation (Bewes 31–32). These ideas are especially relevant to *No Time Like the Present*, where freedom is incomplete, and its moral basis remains uncertain, even after apartheid officially ended.

Other scholars have examined Gordimer's integration of personal and political themes in her novels. Kathryn Harrison observes that Gordimer frequently represents domestic life as intimately connected to systems of race, law, and political power (Harrison 58-60). In Gordimer's narratives, marriage, parenting, sexuality, education, and work are shaped by broader social and historical forces. This interplay is central to *No Time Like the Present*, where Steve and Jabu try to reconcile personal aspirations with social obligations. Despite this, the novel has received less critical attention for its approach to realism and probability. Most studies focus on political transition or post-apartheid disillusionment, rather than investigating how Gordimer uses realist probability to generate moral uncertainty and ethical contingency. This study addresses that gap by analysing how the novel constructs moral ambiguity through its representation of historical circumstances, unresolved social conflict, and psychologically credible moral experience.

### **Research Gap**

Scholarship on Nadine Gordimer covers many topics, including apartheid, race politics, liberal humanism, resistance discourse, and postcolonial identity. Her later novels have also been studied for themes of democratic transition, disillusionment, and social inequality—especially in post-apartheid South Africa. Researchers such as Clingman, Head, and Barnard have greatly advanced the understanding of Gordimer's views on history, politics, and ethics. Yet, the link between realism, probability, and moral uncertainty in *No Time Like the Present* remains less explored.

Most previous research has concentrated on the novel from a political perspective, a post-apartheid disillusionment or a social critique, and has not adequately explored the ethical

ambiguity Gordimer creates using realist narrative techniques. Likewise, while political commitment is a common focus of discussion in Gordimer's work, few studies explore how the principle of probability is applied to ordinary moral experience, contingent decision-making, and unresolved ethical conflict in the novel. The relationship between private and public lives, especially in the realist representation of domestic duties, schooling, work and vocation, and the democratic liminality, is also underdeveloped in the current critical field.

In addition, a significant amount of current research on post-apartheid fiction focuses either on collective historical trauma or on national transformation, without sufficient attention to the psychological and ethical issues of freedom. Liberation in *No Time Like the Present* does not lead to moral certainty or social completion but rather to new anxieties, compromises and moral negotiations. This realism of Gordimer's has not been fully explored in the study of post-apartheid literature.

This study aims to fill this void by analysing how Gordimer uses realism and probability to depict moral uncertainty in democratic South Africa. The paper examines the novel's creation of a morally complex historical world of ambiguity and contingency, and of an incomplete transformation, drawing on Miriam Allott's work on probability and other ethical realist and postcolonial theories of transition. In so doing, the study should be seen as a valuable addition to the scholarship on ethical realism in post-apartheid literary discourse, which situates *No Time Like the Present* as a major work.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The present study examines Nadine Gordimer's novel *No Time Like the Present* through the lenses of realism, probability, and ethical uncertainty in post-apartheid South Africa. Recent scholarship has focused on Gordimer's later works, highlighting themes of democratic disillusionment, trauma, and the fragility of postcolonial modernity, while earlier themes of

apartheid resistance have remained largely unchanged. Analyses of her late works note ambiguity, fragmentation, and unresolved ethical tensions as key characteristics.

This study is grounded in the theory of probability in realist fiction as developed by Miriam Allott, which emphasises the believable depiction of human action and moral feelings in historical settings (Allott 17–19). Probability entails not only factual correctness but also psychological and ethical credibility. Gordimer's narrative in *No Time Like the Present* embodies this principle by avoiding melodramatic conclusions and instead highlighting everyday uncertainty, compromise, and social contradiction.

The study also addresses Georg Lukács's conception of realism as a mode that can illuminate the connection between individual experience and historical process. Realist fiction, Lukács argues, is a depiction of social totality, established by the link between the private life and the broader historical constructions (Lukács 38-39). Gordimer's novel is inescapably bound to the political reality of democratic South Africa and domestic experience. The unfinished legacy of apartheid constantly informs questions about race, education, migration, employment, corruption and social mobility. Thus, Gordimer's realism does not merely describe the social; it is a realisation of ethical consciousness in a political transition, in history.

The latter fiction of Gordimer has also been the subject of recent criticism that further lends credence to this approach to interpretation. Leon de Kock Zander's "The Ambiguous Aesthetics of Nadine Gordimer's Late Style" (2022) proposes that Gordimer's later novels increasingly employ ambiguity and fragmented narration to portray the uncertainties of present-day South African society. In the same way, much of the talk about *No Time Like the Present* tends to focus on the novel's portrayal of the instability, moral exhaustion, and unhealed social traumas of post-apartheid South Africa rather than on democratic fulfilment. This scholarship thus reinforces the view that Gordimer explicitly challenges triumphalist discourses of liberation by highlighting contingency and moral uncertainty.

The paper references Timothy Bewes' work on ethical ambiguity in postcolonial modernity, noting that "the legacy of the violence and inequality of the past can remain visible in the social consciousness of the postcolonial societies even after the transition to political change" (Bewes 31-32). This is evident in *No Time Like the Present*, where freedom is incomplete and psychologically unsettled in post-apartheid South Africa. Steve and Jabu navigate the tension between personal ambition and community duty, revealing the moral ambiguities that arise from democratic transitions.

Additionally, Rita Barnard's analysis of post-apartheid South African fiction highlights ongoing inequalities, urban insecurity, and social fragmentation, which challenge narratives of national reconciliation (Barnard 141-43). Gordimer's novel reflects these concerns, portraying the realities of corruption, crime, economic inequity, and political anxiety, illustrating a failure to transform and a continuity of history.

In the present study, therefore, realism is not just mimetic representation, but a mode of ethical and historical inquiry. Probability becomes the principle in Gordimer's construction of a morally credible narrative world characterised by ambiguity, contingency, and unresolved democratic tensions. *No Time Like the Present* is a novel that is both realistic and morally ambiguous; it is a new kind of post-apartheid realism that can address the unfinished and contradictory realities of a democratic South Africa.

## **Methodology**

This study uses qualitative textual and interpretative analysis to examine how moral uncertainty, realism, and probability are shown in *No Time Like the Present*. The paper takes an interdisciplinary approach, combining literature and postcolonial studies, and is based on close reading, contextual interpretation, and engagement with key ideas in realism and ethical awareness. To ensure a thorough analysis, the study focuses on specific scenes and themes, including family interactions that highlight the tension between private life and public duties,

dialogues that reveal unresolved moral questions, and everyday decisions that reveal ethical ambiguity. The methodology includes a detailed examination of scenes such as the family's discussions of emigration and education, Steve and Jabu's reflections on their activist past, and depictions of work and social spaces, to show how Gordimer creates a world marked by probability and moral uncertainty. The study also examines narrative techniques such as fragmented dialogue, shifting viewpoints, and interrupted conversations to highlight historical and ethical incompleteness. This approach explores Gordimer's character development, narrative structure, dialogue, and the link between private experience and public history, showing how these elements help create a believable moral world. Close textual analysis is the main method used in this study. The novel is examined in detail for its narrative techniques, themes, and moral tensions through close reading. Special attention is given to how domestic life, political anxiety, educational goals, migration, corruption, and democratic instability are portrayed in post-apartheid South Africa. The study examines how ordinary experiences can acquire ethical and historical meaning in Gordimer's realist storytelling.

The paper also employs an interpretative postcolonial method, situating the novel within the socio-political context of post-apartheid South Africa in the democratic era. The study does not take the text as an independent literary work but rather considers the connection between fiction and historical metamorphosis. In this respect, the methodology aligns with Stephen Greenblatt's view of the relationship between literary representation and social energy in a particular context (Greenblatt 5-6). Gordimer's fiction is thus read as a literary exploration of ongoing inequalities, moral ambiguities, and the unfinished legacies of apartheid.

The study also uses a realist analytical approach, based primarily on the concept of probability developed by Miriam Allott and the concept of historical realism developed by Georg Lukács. To clarify how these theories will inform the analysis, specific textual moments from the novel are examined. In the context of Allott's principle of probability, the study will

analyse how Gordimer crafts the scene in which Steve and Jabu debate emigration, illustrating the psychological realism and moral plausibility of their hesitation without idealising their choices. Similarly, Lukács's historical realism will be applied by closely reading scenes where the characters' domestic concerns, such as decisions about their children's schooling or negotiating everyday professional dilemmas, become inseparable from the broader social legacy of apartheid, revealing the interplay between private experience and public history. These theoretical approaches can help study how Gordimer depicts morally viable characters and socially realistic conditions in the context of South African history without resorting to documentary realism or ideological allegory. Thus, the analysis focuses on ethical ambiguity, contingency, and psychological plausibility as key elements of Gordimer's post-apartheid realism.

Peer-reviewed books and scholarly criticism on Nadine Gordimer, post-apartheid literature, realism, and postcolonial ethics are used in the study. Only established academic sources are included for bibliographic reliability and scholarly consistency, avoiding unsupported web material and unverifiable claims. Primary references are aligned with the edition of the novel in focus. The paper discusses how *No Time Like the Present* depicts the post-apartheid experience as one of ethical ambiguity and historical realism, supporting the thesis that Gordimer's view of democratic transition involves ongoing moral negotiation and incomplete transformation.

### **The Ethics of Democratic Transition and Realism**

*No Time Like the Present* paints a picture of post-apartheid South Africa as a place marked more by uncertainty than by fulfilment. While the novel shows that apartheid has officially ended, it also makes clear that democratic change does not erase old inequalities or moral problems. Gordimer does not celebrate national liberation, but instead points out ongoing

corruption, economic inequality, social violence, and instability in the democratic state. The novel's realism comes from its refusal to treat political change as a simple moral victory.

The story follows Steve and Jabu, two people involved in the anti-apartheid movement who now live in a post-apartheid world. Their interracial marriage reflects political change, but their daily lives still involve worries about race, education, work, crime, and social mobility. Instead of using dramatic political events, Gordimer shows these issues through quiet narration and everyday details. This approach aligns with Georg Lukács's idea that realism reveals larger historical processes through ordinary life (Lukács 38-39). Steve and Jabu are not shown as heroes, but as real people dealing with complex social realities.

The novel's realism relates to Miriam Allott's notion of probability, which holds that the events in fiction should be psychologically and socially believable within recognisable historical conditions for the reader (Allott 17–19). The novel's realism follows Miriam Allott's idea of probability, which says that events in fiction should feel believable both psychologically and socially within real historical settings (Allott 17–19). Gordimer avoids showing an ideal version of democratic freedom and instead presents uncertainty as a normal part of post-apartheid life. Steve's disappointment with politics and Jabu's worries about their children's future reflect wider concerns about the country's moral direction. Their thoughts about emigrating also highlight the tension between political loyalty and personal safety in democratic South Africa. dimension as they cannot be divorced from the broader issues of post-apartheid society. Rita Barnard states that many post-apartheid novels expose the ongoing inequality and insecurity in the face of official discourses of reconciliation (Barnard 141-143). In *No Time Like the Present*, private life is a site where the national contradictions are negotiated and experienced on an ongoing basis.

This sense of moral contingency is reinforced by the novel's narrative structure. Gordimer often uses broken dialogues, incomplete thoughts, and unanswered issues, in which

no clear ideological position is taken. The novel does not see freedom as a secure accomplishment, but rather as an unfinished moral and historical project. This narrative approach resonates with Timothy Bewes's suggestion that postcolonial modernity does not necessarily lead to moral certitude, but is frequently ambiguous, with historical violence still affecting the consciousness of the present (Bewes 31–32). Thus, Gordimer's fiction is replete with the unfinished business of apartheid.

From a realist perspective, Gordimer questions the idea that political freedom leads to moral unity or social fullness. Rather, *No Time Like the Present* is a picture of democratic South Africa as a place in which negotiation is still in progress between hope and disillusionment, freedom and insecurity, aspiration and compromise. The novel is therefore not realistic only in its documentary aspect but also in its psychologically plausible depiction of people who try to build up values and moralities under historically volatile circumstances.

### **The concept of domesticity and space, and historical anxiety.**

Domestic life is a key arena in which the fears and ambiguities of post-apartheid South Africa are lived and negotiated in *No Time Like the Present*. Gordimer always straddles the boundary between the personal and the political, showing how ordinary family issues are intertwined with larger systems of historical inequality and democratic instability. The house in the novel is thus not portrayed as a private haven set apart from public existence, but as a space constantly influenced by the uncertainty of the nation, the violence of the social, and the disillusionment of the political.

This intimacy and history are evident in the relationship between Steve and Jabu. Their interracial marriage symbolises the legal and political changes that occurred in South African society after the end of apartheid, yet the novel repeatedly implies that social reconciliation is not yet complete. It is a constant presence in everyday life, a concern for crime, education, economic insecurity, and racial tension that intrudes into even the most mundane decisions of

parenting and professional responsibility. Gordimer's realism is reflected in a focus on these daily transactions rather than in blatant political dramatisation.

The couple's fears about their children's future take on special importance in the story. Decisions on education and migration are not only regarded as personal preferences but as ethical responses to South Africa's uncertain state of democracy. Steve and Jabu are faced with a growing realisation that political freedom has not led to social stability or institutional trust. The fact that they consider emigrating is a sign of a greater moral dilemma: the collective political obligation versus the private familial obligation. Gordimer, therefore, portrays post-apartheid citizenship as psychologically divided between hope for national transformation and fear regarding social deterioration.

This portrayal of domestic uncertainties aligns with Rita Barnard's observation that post-apartheid fiction highlights the instability of social spaces and historical fragmentation beneath the official democratic narrative (Barnard 141–43). Gordimer's novel illustrates how the domestic sphere reflects broader national contradictions, with historical violence persisting in the consciousness of ordinary middle-class individuals.

The narrative style compounds this sense of anxiety, using interrupted dialogues, shifting perspectives, and inconclusive discussions that challenge moral certitude. This approach enhances realism, as emotional tension builds through psychologically valid interactions rather than dramatic authorial intervention. Thus, the uncertainty faced by Steve and Jabu is both historically credible and ethically resonant. This portrayal of domestic uncertainties aligns with Rita Barnard's observation that post-apartheid fiction highlights the instability of social spaces and historical fragmentation beneath the official democratic narrative (Barnard 141–43). Gordimer's novel illustrates how the domestic sphere reflects broader national contradictions, with historical violence persisting in the consciousness of ordinary middle-class individuals.

The narrative style compounds this sense of anxiety, using interrupted dialogues, shifting perspectives, and inconclusive discussions that challenge moral certitude. This approach enhances realism, as emotional tension builds through psychologically valid interactions rather than dramatic authorial intervention. Thus, the uncertainty faced by Steve and Jabu is both historically credible and ethically resonant.

The novel is also a testament to the persistence of memory in post-apartheid domestic experience. Steve and Jabu's past as anti-apartheid activists is a fundamental part of their moral selves, but the democratic present constantly calls into question the values that underpinned their political struggles. Their reflections reflect the challenges of balancing revolutionary ambition with the compromises and disenchantments of life in a normal democracy. Gordimer's fiction constantly deals with the connection between historical consciousness and personal identity in a shifting political landscape, as Stephen Clingman writes (Clingman 7). This relationship is especially tenuous in *No Time Like the Present* because liberation itself seems unfinished.

Gordimer thus reshapes realism into a genre that can explore the psychological nuances of a democratic transition, through the depiction of home. The everyday lives of marriage, parenthood, work and community take on political dimensions as they can no longer be separated from the unresolved tensions of the post-apartheid society. In the novel, domestic realism is therefore not a political escape, but a thoroughly ethical examination of the effects of historical insecurity on daily life.

### **Probability and Everyday Moral Conflict**

A major theme of *No Time Like the Present* is the depiction of moral issues in everyday, believable ways rather than in dramatic, ideological terms. Gordimer's ethical tension is built through the mundane, as political uncertainty slowly grows out of the everydayness of work, family and social life. The narrative technique of this work is echoed in Miriam Allott's

discussion of probability in realist fiction, in which the believability of the literary work relies on the ability to depict psychologically and socially recognisable experience (Allott 17-19). Thus, the novel's realism is not purely documentary but lies in its ability to depict moral ambiguity as a common state of democratic life.

Steve's growing discontent with the post-apartheid political system reflects a realist principle. As an anti-apartheid activist and lawyer, his disillusionment arises not from a shift in ideology but from witnessing corruption and social injustice firsthand. His experiences highlight a moral dilemma rooted in historical context.

Jabu's perspective adds complexity to the narrative. Her commitment to social service and education reform shows her faith in democracy, yet she, too, feels the instability of contemporary South Africa. The couple debates moving to the U.S., grappling with loyalty to their shared history versus concerns for safety and their children's future. Gordimer's narrative does not simplify these moral conflicts, enhancing the story's probabilistic realism.

The ethical ambiguity is not far removed from Timothy Bewes' claim that postcolonial modernity can produce uncertainty as political freedom does not remove the historical structures that constitute social consciousness (Bewes 31-32). In Gordimer's novel, freedom is psychologically insecure as the democratic present is haunted by the inequalities and tensions of the apartheid past. Moral choices are thus not absolute but relative, conditioned by competing demands and partial historical change.

Gordimer's novel employs a realist approach to language and dialogue, often leaving exchanges unfinished or ambiguous, reflecting the ethical uncertainty in post-apartheid society. Her lean prose style favours ordinary speech and emotional depth, enhancing the psychological realism of her characters rather than making them ideological symbols. She explores how ethical struggles affect the professional middle class, intertwining issues like career advancement and financial security with broader themes of democracy and justice. In her later

works, such as *No Time Like the Present*, Gordimer shifts focus to the moral ambiguity and historical context of postcolonial life, moving away from the ideological certainties of her earlier writing.

The novel's realism, thus, lies in its refusal to offer definitive moral solutions. The ethical life, Gordimer suggests, is an ongoing negotiation influenced by memory of the past, uncertainty about the present, and conflicting social obligations. The novel creates a moral world that is credible in terms of probability, and in which uncertainty is an everyday part of democratic modernity.

### **Private Life and Public History**

An important aspect of *No Time Like the Present* is its erasure of the divide between private experience and public history. Throughout the novel, Gordimer repeatedly shows how domestic life in post-apartheid South Africa cannot be separated from the larger political and historical realities. Issues relating to family, work, school, sexual identity and social change are constantly influenced by incomplete legacies of apartheid and the precariousness of the transition process. Thus, the novel is about private existence as historically located, not politically disengaged.

The relationship between Steve and Jabu is an example of intimacy and political awareness. Their marriage is not only a personal one, but the result of a historical change that could only occur through the repeal of apartheid laws. But Gordimer doesn't make interracial marriage a symbolic solution to racial conflict. Rather, the story emphasises the ongoing problem of social anxiety and structural inequality in democratic South Africa. The couple's normal life shows that legal change does not necessarily resolve historical tensions or ethical uncertainties.

This is indeed a process of merging personal life and history, and it is highly characteristic of the realist tradition as defined by Georg Lukács, who suggests that realism

"shows" historical totality by depicting the everyday social relations (Lukács 38–39). Gordimer's realism too unfolds through mundane domestic scenarios that slowly reveal a wider national contradiction. Parenting, professional responsibility and neighbourhood insecurity become politicised issues not only because they are not abstracted from the social realities of post-apartheid society, but because the three are inextricable.

The book emphasises the psychological burden of historical memory, with Steve and Jabu reflecting on their anti-apartheid struggles against a backdrop of a corrupt democratic state. Their memories of resistance clash with present-day experiences of corruption and ideological fatigue. Gordimer portrays history as an active force shaping current ethical awareness. Stephen Clingman notes that her fiction explores the link between consciousness and historical change. In "No Time Like the Present," political transition does not erase historical trauma but creates new moral challenges, as characters grapple with maintaining their convictions in a compromised and unstable social environment.

The novel highlights the conflict between democratic freedom and individual responsibility through the experiences of Steve and Jabu, who are committed to social justice while grappling with personal security and family stability. Their contemplation of emigration underscores the tension between national belonging and private moral duty, with Gordimer refraining from portraying either choice as ethically definitive. This refusal of moral absolutes enriches the narrative's realism, as ethical conflicts arise from historical antagonism rather than simplistic ideology.

Gordimer's narrative style shows how political discussions emerge in everyday life rather than formal debates, reflecting the disjointed nature of post-apartheid society. This connection between personal experience and historical awareness redefines post-apartheid realism as an ongoing exploration of ethical dilemmas. Democracy breeds new uncertainties

that require continual moral negotiation, linking private life in *No Time Like the Present* to the unresolved historical tensions of democratic South Africa.

### **Ethical Ambiguity and the Limits of Liberation**

One of the hallmarks of *No Time Like the Present* is its refusal to tell simple stories of political liberation. Gordimer consistently depicts post-apartheid democracy as morally unfinished, revealing the dissonances between revolutionary idealism and the realities of current governance. The novel emphasises compromise, uncertainty and institutional instability rather than freedom as a condition of moral clarity or social fulfilment. In so doing, Gordimer calls into question triumphalist narratives of the national transition and explores the psychological and ethical implications of living in an unfinished democracy.

Throughout the novel, there are indications that the historical structures created by apartheid can only be partially overcome by liberation. Despite the constitutional transformation, economic inequality, social violence, racial anxiety, and bureaucratic corruption still influence experience on a day-to-day basis. So, Gordimer opposes any definition of history that might be linear, in which political change inevitably leads to moral improvement. This view is very similar to that of Rita Barnard, who states that post-apartheid South African fiction often challenges the "contradictions of official narratives of reconciliation and democratic renewal" (Barnard 141-43). The fragility of freedom in *No Time Like the Present* is, in part, brought into question by the ongoing relevance of historical injustice in the present social reality.

Steve's growing disenchantment with democratic systems is indicative of this moral ambivalence. His previous involvement in anti-apartheid activism arose from a shared political conviction and ethical certainty. Yet, the present democracy continually challenges him with corruption, inequality, and ideological disintegration, complicating his revolutionary ideals. Gordimer dexterously avoids cynicism, and Steve's uncertainty stems from the challenge of

maintaining moral commitment in historically problematic social environments. This psychological complexity and resistance to ideology's simplicity create the novel's realism.

Jabu's point of view also shows the boundaries of freedom in post-apartheid society. She has remained dedicated to education and social responsibility, believing in the possibility of democracy, but becoming more aware of the fragility and uncertainty of life today. Throughout the story, questions about public safety, institutional decay, and the future of younger generations make for an ethical unease. Gordimer depicts these fears not as individual fears but as historically situated responses to democratic insecurity.

The novel's ethical ambiguity clearly aligns with Timothy Bewes' description of postcolonial modernity, in which liberation often yields unresolved tensions rather than ideological resolution (Bewes 31–32). Democracy in Gordimer's fiction is a site of constant negotiation between aspiration and disappointment, collective responsibility and individual survival. The moral certainty is continually undermined by the historical fragmentation and political unevenness of social reality.

Gordimer's understated prose effectively conveys moral complexity without overt judgment, revealing contradictions and uncertainties through dialogue and character interactions. This psychological realism stems from characters who are indecisive and emotionally hesitant, aligning with Miriam Allott's idea that fiction gains authority through plausible moral and social representation rather than exaggeration.

While the novel acknowledges the anti-apartheid movement's significance, it challenges the notion that liberation can resolve the moral dilemmas of history. The political freedom depicted remains unfulfilled and cannot address structural inequality or psychological fragmentation. Instead of celebrating a completed democratic achievement, the unstable democratic present requires ongoing moral negotiation. Through this portrayal of ambiguity,

Gordimer redefines post-apartheid realism, suggesting that true freedom is found in continuous moral engagement with the unfinished realities of society.

### **Narrative Restraint and the Realism of Uncertainty**

One of the interesting things about *No Time Like the Present* is that it is not a particularly flashy book, which is an important factor in its depiction of moral uncertainty and historical instability. Gordimer eschews dramatic plotting, sentimental resolution, and explicit ideological statement. Instead, the novel unfolds in bits of conversation, moments of reflection, everyday household tasks, and normal social interactions. This narrative economy mirrors the realist probability of the text, since the ethical tension builds over time through psychologically believable experience rather than melodramatic conflict.

Gordimer's prose style is restrained, emphasising ambiguity and incompleteness. Decision-making and emotions are often uncertain, reflecting the lack of moral certainty in post-apartheid society as South Africans strive for democracy. This narrative fragmentation illustrates the unresolved nature of contemporary South Africa.

Gordimer's approach aligns with Miriam Allott's view that realism portrays ordinary behaviour in familiar social contexts (Allott 17–19). Her characters, like Steve and Jabu, are not idealised figures but ordinary men navigating a complex moral landscape shaped by historical transition. The novel's realism is also enhanced by its focus on common experience. Many of the scenes are devoted to what appear to be mundane pursuits, such as work, family talk, educational issues, trips, and neighborhood exchanges. But these common experiences slowly reveal other fears: corruption, insecurity, inequality, and political fragmentation. Gordimer shows us that democratic instability is not just the stuff of extraordinary political events, but the stuff of ordinary social life. The novel's realism, then, is its capacity to turn ordinary life into a field of history and ethics.

This interplay of narrative and historical consciousness reflects Georg Lukács' concept of realism, which shows social totality in ordinary experience and historically based characterisation (Lukács 38-39). Like Gordimer, the novel, too, ties into the concept of broader national transformation, without turning its characters into ideological abstractions. It is the subtle pressures that inform the decisions and emotions of everyday life that make historical processes visible.

The novel's narrative style is also tightly controlled, which helps to keep the book from lapsing into political didacticism. While the text's themes are grave issues of corruption, inequality, crime, and democratic instability, Gordimer does not make direct moral judgements about characters or events. Rather, moral ambiguity arises in the form of contradiction and uncertainty. This denial of authorial authority is part and parcel of the ambiguity of postcolonial ethical consciousness, as Timothy Bewes puts it, in which historical transition undermines the certainty of ideological positions (Bewes 31-32).

Furthermore, Gordimer's disjointed narrative pattern reflects the psychological state of post-apartheid South Africa. Characters constantly shift between memory, politics, and present anxiety, creating a continuity of history rather than separating time. Unresolved memories of apartheid shape the democratic present, illustrating historical persistence and ethical incompleteness in contemporary South Africa.

In a political fiction genre often marked by narrative excess, *No Time Like the Present* is more contained and probabilistic. The novel neither offers revolutionary optimism nor absolute disillusionment; instead, it portrays democratic life as ethically unstable, historically contingent, and emotionally fragmented. Gordimer's measured prose emphasises the ongoing and partial nature of post-apartheid freedom.

### **The Post-Apartheid and Historical Continuity**

Ultimately, *No Time Like the Present* inscribes a new post-apartheid realism, which is defined by its attention to historical continuity and ethical incompleteness. The novel is set in democratic South Africa, but apartheid is not yet dead nor is it eradicated from consciousness, social relations and institutional structures. Throughout Gordimer's novel, she shows that political change does not obliterate the past or necessarily improve the material situation. But the democratic present is marred instead by the unfinished business of racial segregation, economic injustice and ideological violence.

Both Steve's and Jabu's experiences indicate that the past shapes ethical life today. A history of anti-apartheid activities is an integral part of their notion of justice, responsibility and national belonging. But what used to hold political opposition together is becoming harder to hold together in the face of corruption, social polarisation, and democratic turmoil. So, Gordimer illustrates liberation not as a historical closure but as a situation of constant intersection between past and present.

It is an expression of historical continuity: as Stephen Clingman has said, Gordimer's fiction always deals with the relationship between historical change and individual awareness (7). *No Time Like the Present* is a book in which memory is not a nostalgic recollection, but rather a living moral force that helps to shape perception and decision-making in the present. Characters constantly re-enact current fears, struggles, imprisonment, resistance and political ideals in their previous lives. The democratic country thus appears historically overlaid rather than temporally dissociated from apartheid.

The novel also challenges the idea of social cohesion in the aftermath of democratic change. Gordimer exposes as inviolable the corrosive influence of entrenched inequalities, urban insecurity, educational disparity and institutional distrust as a constant part of the post-apartheid world. This is because, as Rita Barnard writes, post-apartheid literature often shows the uneven and disjointed nature of national transformation (Barnard 141-43). Democratic

South Africa, as depicted in Gordimer's fiction, is thus neither entirely liberated nor failed, but rather in a state of perpetual contradiction and instability. Significantly, Gordimer's realism does not reduce social complexity to deterministic pessimism. Despite the constant worry and disillusionment, the novel emphasises ethical responsibility and human interdependence. Despite the uncertainty about the future, Steve and Jabu are steadfast in their belief in education, social justice and caring for family. Their moral dilemmas are, therefore, indications of moral engagement rather than of ideology's collapse in less-than-perfect historical moments.

This realist representation is still based on the principle of probability. Gordimer builds a world of history in which tensions emerge from psychologically believable experiences and ordinary social interaction. Political change impacts characters ambivalently, emotionally and sometimes inconsistently, contributing to the moral integrity of the story. This probabilistic realism avoids the novel becoming either a celebration or a condemnation of the utopian/dystopian perspective. Rather, democratic transition is seen as a historically contingent, compromising, ambiguous and incomplete process. The novel's final mood also suggests the historical openness and ethical ambiguity. But Gordimer doesn't try to resolve the political issues, and the future of the nation and the characters remains undecided. The theme of narrative incompleteness in the novel reflects its central idea: post-apartheid democracy is unfinished history, not a national achievement. The realism of *No Time Like the Present* lies in its refusal to smooth over historical facts and make them artificially homogeneous.

The novel is an attack on post-apartheid realism, which centres on the ordinary, the historical, and the ethical ambiguity. Gordimer demonstrates that democratic freedom is not a matter of constitutional transformation or political representation alone, but also of the everyday moral compromises individuals living in an unequal past make. *No Time Like the Present* is thus a strong literary text that can be read as a sign of democracy's uncertainty and persistence, as well as the precarious ethics of post-apartheid modernity.

## Reimagining Post-Apartheid Realism

In *No Time Like the Present*, Nadine Gordimer reconfigures the realist tradition so as to depict the ethical and historical complexities of democratic South Africa. Gordimer's post-apartheid realism differs from the political realism often grounded in ideology or mass revolutionary consciousness in that it features ambiguity, contingency, and psychological fragmentation. The novel, therefore, shifts the focus from political realism to a prolonged exploration of moral uncertainty in the daily democratic experience.

Probability is a key element of this reworked realism. The believable representation of morally and socially recognisable experience gives realism its authority, as Miriam Allott claims (Allott 17-19). But Gordimer employs this principle not only to reflect social reality but also to examine the moral limbo produced by historical transition. That's why the experiences of Steve and Jabu seem believable: they're internally contradictory and emotionally complicated, and they're situated in history. They are also unsure about political institutions, migration, social responsibility, and familial obligations, reflecting the overall instability of post-apartheid society.

The novel is also a redefinition of realism, as it explores ethical consciousness rather than merely external political events. Gordimer's narrative attention is always on reflection, hesitation, moral conflict, and emotional negotiation. Change is therefore not only portrayed as institutional change, but as change in the psychological constraints on the normal human relationships. This would be in line with Georg Lukács's interpretation of realism as a literary genre capable of showing the connection between individual consciousness and the historical process as a whole (Lukács 38–39). Gordimer's fiction makes history tangible through the implicit tensions that play out in the domestic and working worlds.

As the novel does, it calls into question triumphalist notions of democratic liberation. Corruption, insecurity, inequality and institutional instability are recurring themes in

Gordimer's works, which continually put these elements to the fore as the salient features of present-day South Africa. But there is no cynical politics or pessimistic determinism in the text. Instead, the story is aware of the fragility of moral responsibility in imperfect social structures. In an era of growing doubt about the democratic present, Steve and Jabu continue to struggle with the issues of justice, care, education and belonging. The novel is thus an exploration of the persistence of ethics in historically unstable conditions.

This moral dimension is largely similar to Timothy Bewes' discovery that "postcolonial modernity" is "a space of moral ambiguity" that is "the result of the violence of history that haunts the present social consciousness" (Bewes 31-32). It is this instability that Gordimer's post-apartheid realism captures. The democratic present cannot be separated from the memories, inequalities and ideologies that have been handed down from apartheid. Freedom, hence, seems to be more conditional and incomplete than historical absolutism. The novel's narrative structure enacts a restrained realist reconfiguration. Gordimer avoids dramatic endings, ideological declarations, and clear-cut moral judgments. Discussions are often disjointed, feelings remain unresolved, and political issues are largely unresolvable, reinforcing the text's probabilistic realism, in which social reality appears historically incomplete and ethically unstable.

*No Time Like the Present* illustrates that a democratic transition cannot be fully captured by celebratory national narratives. Instead, it focuses on everyday moral dilemmas as individuals strive for meaningful lives in an inequitable past. Post-apartheid realism thus becomes a literary gesture that confronts uncertainty, contingency, and incomplete transformation. By employing probability, moral ambiguity, and historical continuity, the novel probes realism as a mode of moral questioning rather than mere documentation. Gordimer's post-apartheid fiction engages with an open, unstable democratic space, making it

a noteworthy contribution to contemporary South African literature and broader discussions on realism, postcolonial modernity, and ethical awareness in transitional societies.

### **Conclusion**

This paper examines the intersection of probability, ethics, and history in Nadine Gordimer's *\*No Time Like the Present\**, reframing post-apartheid realism. By focusing on the lives of Steve and Jabu, Gordimer challenges triumphalist narratives, depicting freedom as an ethically complex and unstable state. The novel illustrates that the end of apartheid does not erase social disparities, psychological stresses, or historical traumas. Using Miriam Allott's concept of probability, the study shows that Gordimer's realism derives its strength from the authentic portrayal of everyday life. Instead of ideological simplicity, the narrative conveys moral struggles through mundane experiences, interrupted dialogue, and unresolved dilemmas. Moreover, private life in the novel interlinks with public history, as themes of education, migration, and social responsibility gain political significance. *No Time Like the Present* thus redefines post-apartheid realism as an ongoing ethical negotiation rather than a final resolution.

This study advances the field by illustrating how probability functions as both an artistic strategy and an ethical framework in Gordimer's fiction, revealing the tensions of post-apartheid life. By placing uncertainty at the core of realism, it challenges conventional views that associate post-apartheid realism mainly with documentary representation. The analysis emphasises a realism that acknowledges the complexity of democratic transition, showing how individual experiences mirror broader historical legacies. Ultimately, Gordimer's novel offers a nuanced portrayal of post-apartheid South Africa, characterised by instability, compromise, and the ongoing influence of history.

**Conflict of Interest:** The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

**Copyright:** © 2026 by Sarita Chauhan, Dr. Kusum Tripathi retain the copyright of their original work while granting publication rights to the journal.

**License:** This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, allowing others to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon it, even for commercial purposes, with proper attribution. Author(s) are also permitted to post their work in institutional repositories, social media, or other platforms

### Works Cited

- Allott, Miriam, editor. *Novelists on the Novel*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959.
- Barnard, Rita. *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place*. Oxford UP, 2007.
- Bewes, Timothy. *The Event of Postcolonial Shame*. Princeton UP, 2011.
- Clingman, Stephen. *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside*. 2nd ed., University of Massachusetts Press, 1992.
- de Kock, Leon. "The Ambiguous Aesthetics of Nadine Gordimer's Late Style." *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2022, pp. 150–162.
- Gordimer, Nadine. *No Time Like the Present*. Picador África, 2012.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*. University of California Press, 1988.
- Head, Dominic. *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950–2000*. Cambridge UP, 2002.
- Lukács, Georg. *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*. Translated by John and Necke Mander, Merlin Press, 1963.
- Newman, Judie. *Nadine Gordimer*. Routledge, 1988.