

An evaluation of South African novelist Nadine Gordimer (1923-2014)

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“Sailors gag on stinking meat, children refuse to go to school. No one knows where the end of suffering will begin.” – *Burger’s Daughter*

South African writer Nadine Gordimer, winner of the 1991 Nobel Prize for Literature, died on July 13 at the age of 90. She was a remarkable figure in many ways and a writer whose works, created under the police repression and state surveillance of the apartheid regime, conveyed to readers an indelible hatred of oppression and injustice.

Gordimer was born into a middle-class Jewish household in 1923. Her father had emigrated from Lithuania and opened up a watch repair shop in a gold-mining town near the capital of Johannesburg. Her mother was born in London and emigrated to South Africa with her family.

Nadine’s upbringing was secular, and there appears to have been liberal dissent in the household about the conditions for blacks in South Africa, especially on the part of her mother, who founded a nursery school for black children. Gordimer later remarked that her father had “whole Jewish pogrom syndrome,” and this too may have played a role in her opposition to the oppression she saw around her as she grew up. She was to write movingly about the plight of Jews under tsarist rule.

Because her mother suspected (wrongly) that her daughter had a heart condition, Gordimer was educated in a convent and by private tutors, and kept away from physical exertion of any kind. As a result, she read voluminously, and published her first fiction as a teenager. She attended the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg for a year, during which time she first met and socialized with blacks. This “was more or less the beginning of my political consciousness,” she told an interviewer many years later.

In 1949, her short-story collection *Face to Face* was published, and her first novel, *The Lying Days*, an examination of her own upbringing, appeared in 1953. She achieved international prominence early on with the publication of her short stories in the *New Yorker* magazine.

The postwar period was a time of intensifying social and political crisis in South Africa. Racial segregation and the disenfranchisement of blacks and other non-whites became codified as apartheid in 1948 under the National Party government. The apartheid regime successfully bid, with US support, to become a bulwark of anti-communism on the African continent.

In 1960 the arrest of a close friend and the Sharpeville massacre, in which police killed 69 blacks during a mass protest against the discriminatory pass system, prompted Gordimer to draw closer to the banned African National Congress (ANC).

She attended the famous 1963 Rivonia Trial in which Nelson Mandela and other leaders of the ANC were sent to prison for life terms. She helped Mandela edit his famous speech, “I Am Prepared to Die,” given from the defendant’s dock at the trial.

Gordimer became a conscious opponent of apartheid in these years, and joined the ANC after it allowed whites to become members several years later. She hid ANC activists in her house and drove them secretly to rendezvous. She became a prominent public figure, particularly after she

achieved literary fame in South Africa.

In particular, Gordimer was drawn to—and, as a writer, absorbed and reflected on—the personal courage and sacrifices of many of the anti-apartheid leaders. Mandela’s defense attorney at the 1963 trial, Bram Fischer, a leader of the illegal South African Communist Party (SACP), was one of these. Fischer himself was arrested shortly after the trial and sentenced to life imprisonment. He died two weeks after his release in 1975.

Although there is no evidence that Gordimer ever became a direct supporter of the Stalinist SACP, it seems clear she had an understanding of its views, which coincided with the goals of the ANC in abolishing apartheid, but maintaining capitalism in South Africa.

A World of Strangers (1958), about a spiritually empty Johannesburg, was Gordimer’s first attempt to come to grips with the social tensions that had developed from the opposition to apartheid. Her 1966 novel, *The Late Bourgeois World*, concerns the ex-wife of a man who has set off a bomb against the regime, and then betrayed his comrades. The work is an analysis of the emotional consequences of the anti-apartheid struggle, particularly for the liberal white middle-class milieu at the time.

Her work observed the contradictions, shades of opinion and social types in South African society. She rejected the notion, espoused after the 1970s by supporters of the Black Consciousness movement, that white writers could not adequately write about the lives of blacks. In fact, throughout her career, Gordimer wrote persuasively about lives of people along the whole social spectrum of South Africa. At times she provided an almost panoramic view of that society.

She was a master of the short story, which she regarded as a higher art form than the novel. One of her early stories, “Country Lovers” (1950), treats the rapid transformation, after years of childhood affection and then romantic love, to fear and callousness in a relationship between the son of a wealthy Afrikaner farmer and a young black woman. For some people, she shows, social conditions are unarguable and cannot be changed.

The Conservationist (1974) concerns the death of a black laborer on a rich Afrikaner’s farm. As he watches how his workers respond to the death, the Afrikaner attempts to come to terms with his own social and emotional isolation. The novel won the Booker Prize for 1974.

For two decades, Gordimer was able to produce complex stories and novels about the impact of South Africa’s racial segregation and barbaric oppression of blacks on many sections of the population. But she wrote her most compelling work after 1976, when the student boycott in the black township of Soweto and the gunning down of hundreds of youth by the police began an extended pre-revolutionary situation in the country.

The Soweto Uprising inspired Gordimer to produce her best-known and undoubtedly most artistically satisfying work, *Burger’s Daughter* (1979). The novel is an account of the daughter of a fictional South African Stalinist leader, Lionel Burger, who is almost certainly modeled on Bram Fischer.

The novel, with all the tragedy of a childhood full of parents’ arrests

and of constant surveillance by the police, shifts subtly back and forth between Rosa Burger's perspective and those of more distant narrators, including friends, acquaintances—even the state security services—and the author. Many readers find the work difficult. There is undoubtedly a certain amount of postmodern playing with competing “narratives” in the book, but, if the reader puts in the effort, he or she will gain a rich and complex impression of South African society from many vantage points.

Rosa Burger encounters, for example, a range of political opinion among Black workers, businesspeople and intellectuals, some of whom articulate the selfish outlook that dominates the ruling elite in the country today. Others are well to the left of the ANC and the SACP. While Rosa is at a party in the house of a sports promoter in Soweto, one character says, for example:

“White liberalism will sacrifice the long odds on attaining social justice and settle for letting blacks into the exploiting class. The ‘enlightened’ government crowd will sacrifice the long odds on maintaining complete white supremacy and settle for propping up a Black middle class whose class interests run counter to a black revolution.”

Rosa visits France where she encounters the complacency and ideological reactions on which much of the French intelligentsia stuffed itself after 1968. In one discussion she hears, “The phenomenon of the Gulag arose in the Soviet Union, but its doctrine comes from Machiavelli and Descartes ... when rationalism destroyed heaven and decided to set it up here on earth, the most terrible of all goals entered human ambition.” Rosa has her doubts—“Her cheekbones were taut with amazement”—but this has an effect on her. There is a certain passivity to Rosa, and she finds little in Europe that can help her sort out the role she should play in life or in politics in South Africa.

Rosa is rejected by old friends who are now associated with the Black Consciousness movement in London. She returns to South Africa somewhat muted by what she has encountered in Europe. Shortly after her return, the Soweto Uprising erupts. The last scenes of the novel take place in prison.

Burger's Daughter runs through almost every layer of a society on the eve of a social revolution. Rosa Burger, as the daughter of the leading activist, can view all of this with some sense of perspective. She can see the development in individuals enter a new stage, and she has the “privilege” of being able to hear what many sorts of people expect and want from a mass movement. But Rosa remains an observer of and not a participant in the struggle. The Soweto Uprising changes her position, but not in a favorable way.

After *Burger's Daughter*, Gordimer continued to approach the question of how the struggle against apartheid affected people of all sorts. In the short story, “A City of the Dead, a City of the Living” (1982), a local man shelters an anti-apartheid fighter in a township. His presence is both intimate and disruptive in the crowded house. His arrest comes later, when he is betrayed by a member of the family.

But there was also a distance in Gordimer as a narrator of people elated or confounded by great events. *July's People* (1981), for example, is a “dystopian” novel about the fate of a family of middle-class whites during a black national revolution. It concerns the tensions around the family's salvation by one of their black servants. It repeats much of what she had already said in the 1950s and 1960s about relations between the races (and classes) in South Africa.

The reversals of individual position and power in *July's People* don't add much to our understanding of how lives might be overturned in a genuine social revolution. It is telling that the uprising itself is somewhat distant. It reflects, one feels, the program of compromise with the social order as a whole that the ANC and the SACP advocated.

The release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 showed that important sections of the South African ruling elite, and their allies in Washington and elsewhere, were considering how apartheid might be dispensed with but

capitalism preserved.

It is perhaps significant that Gordimer was one of the first people Mandela asked to see upon his release. Gordimer won the Nobel Prize next year, the same year that saw the beginnings of the establishment of a multi-racial bourgeois regime in South Africa.

Over the next several years, she opposed censorship by the new government and its reluctance to act on the AIDS crisis, but as an artist Gordimer responded to the new political conditions by continuing to focus on the inequities of life, now distinctly in minor key, primarily in relation to the racial identity problems of the middle class. *The Pickup* (2001) is about immigration and cultural alienation, *Get a Life* (2005) about illness and environmental activism.

Her final novel, *No Time Like the Present* (2012), is about a post-apartheid marriage between a white man and black woman who have participated in the struggle against apartheid but must now decide where to send their child to school. “They must confront,” author Francine Prose noted, apparently without irony, “the less critical but pressing concerns of middle-class existence.”

In her later stories, Gordimer explored incidents of the Holocaust and Jewish life. In one story, a memorable passage treats Jews hiding in a wheat field during a pogrom in tsarist times.

Gordimer was an extraordinary writer, and submitted to penetrating artistic analysis, as few others of her generation did, some of the great social struggles of her day. She had the opportunity to become formed as an artist at a time and a place where masses of the oppressed fought with courage and resolution against cruel conditions. She unquestionably imbibed much of this spirit in her writing and her personal life.

However, Gordimer was no more able to escape the great problems of culture and political life than any other artistic figure of the mid- to late-20th century, especially those problems created by the betrayals of Stalinism and other labor bureaucracies.

The genuinely Marxist political culture that might have helped her assess the South African struggle's various phases and its inner logic was not easily available to Gordimer. Her work after *Burger's Daughter* showed difficulty in making an artistic reckoning with South African society. The subordination of the working class over decades to the nationalist program of the ANC and the SACP played a central role in disorienting artists.

Nadine Gordimer died in her sleep in Johannesburg, the city in which she had spent most of her life.



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