

Nadine Gordimer's Role in the Politics of South Africa

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Nadine Gordimer was a pre-eminent white South African writer who challenged apartheid through her writings both fiction and nonfiction and her activities in the second half of the twentieth century. The major chunk of Gordimer's writing career coincided with the era in which the South African Government imposed apartheid on the indigenous people through rigorous legislation and rapid state control after the Nationalist government came to power in 1948. Her large body of work embodies in essence and spirit, the very ethos of the South African experience. She was awarded the Noble Prize for Literature in 1991 being the first South African and the third African and the first woman in twenty five years to have won this coveted prize. In the judgment of the Swedish Academy of letters, Gordimer won the prize for her outstanding literary works focussing on the effects of race relations in her society "of very great benefit to humanity". [Encyclopedia of world Biography] Three of her novels were banned by the South African Government in her career spanning over five decades from the 1950 which only goes to prove her to be of formidable literary stature. The major chunk of Gordimer's writing career

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Gordimer acknowledged in the 1960s that apartheid had been a significant impact on her life and works. Her celebrated assertions, "If you write honestly about life in South Africa, apartheid damns itself" and "people like myself have two births and the second one comes when you break out of the Colour bar" bear testimony to that fact.

Gordimer visited the black townships for the first time when she was part of a drama troupe which put up a performance of Oscar Wilde's "The importance of being Ernest". She was appalled on seeing the filthy surroundings and the intense poverty of the people residing in these slums. She was also dismayed at her complete lack of knowledge of the indigenous culture, ignorance about the culture of the natives. Gordimer came to know more about the native people when she read Upton Sinclair's "The Jungle" and realized the harsh reality of the native people. She had always imagined them to be exotic and when the truth dawned on her, she was shocked and filled with consternation.

After her studying in the Witwatersrand University, she started to mingle socially with the blacks especially with the artists and writers of Johannesburg. In the 1950s Gordimer became deeply involved with the Drum magazine and this led to her close interactions with many black writers and artists. The ethos of the 50s fostered multiracialism supported by the Congress Alliance thus provided the perfect ambience for giving birth to genuine friendship between the enlightened whites and blacks. Eskia Mphahlele became her first black friend. Both happened to be struggling young writers then, writing for magazines, 'Fighting talk' and 'Classic' respectively.

It was a time when black musicians led the cultural movement with people partying all night, visiting Shebeens etc. During this period, Gordimer developed a deep bond of friendship with Bettie du Toit, a trade unionist and political activist who was forced to leave the country and went on exile to Ghana. She held a special place in Gordimer's heart as the latter wrote –

“She remains unique in my affection and admiration because she has transcended the ties of blood and friendship to which most of us limit our active concern for the simple reason that we cannot feel anything beyond the orbit of relationship.” [Nadine Gordimer in foreword to *Ukubamba Amadolo* by Bettie du Toit].

In the 1960s, an event that shocked the entire country was the brutal massacre of the unarmed protestors at Sharpsville by the apartheid. This abominable event and the subsequent Treason Trial (1960) and Rivonia Trial (1963) which resulted in the imprisonment of most African National Congress activists including great stalwarts like Nelson Mandela led to a massive and strong repression of all kinds of protests. Sharpsville massacre had a deep and abiding impact on Gordimer and her friends. She said in an interview that it was “an incredible time when almost everyone I knew was in jail or fleeing” (Clingman, 75). Gordimer described the Treason Trial to have a momentous influence on her life. She was deeply involved in the political events of this time. Chief Luthuli stayed in her house during the trial and she also wrote a biographical sketch of him. After Nelson Mandela was sent to jail for life, she continued to work for the ANC which was an underground organization and became closely associated with Mandela's lawyer George Bizos. The apartheid Govt. came down with a heavy hand. Sophia town which was the hub of multiracialism during the 50s, was razed to the ground and an enclave called “Triumph’ was built in its place. Because of the repressory measures let loose by apartheid government, most of Gordimer's friends Eskia Mphahlele, Lewis Nkosi, Can Themba, Nat Nakasa had to

leave South Africa and take refuge in other countries. Outraged by the reactionary measures taken by the government to crush and stifle the voices of an entire generation of black intellectuals and artists, Gordimer wrote essays and spoke against the abominable suppression of the cultural aspirations and achievements of the blacks. She started actively campaigning against censorship in her own country. She supported and championed the cause of the black writers of South Africa. Her stature as international literary figure began to grow stupendously as she became Vice President of the International Association of Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists and Novelists (P.E.N.) and the regional representative of the Congress of South African writers. She was a proactive member of the Anti Censorship Action Group (ACAG) COSAW and strongly campaigned against censorship throughout the world. Gordimer waged a relentless war against apartheid but her stance changed from that of a liberal to a radical one in the 1970s. The 1970s saw the rise of black consciousness movement which became an exclusive movement comprising the blacks and which looked upon the white writers as insignificant in their movement against injustice to the blacks.

In the 1980s, as the regional representative of COSAW, she became actively involved in the workings of the organization and also became deeply committed to the activities of the cultural wing of the ANC. She had frequent interactions with Wally Serote, the head of the ANC cultural wing at London. Another very significant event that marked Gordimer's life in the 80s was the Delmas Treason Trial (1985-88). Twenty two UDF activists were charged with conspiring with the banned ANC to bring about the downfall of the state. Gordimer had to vouch for the "good faith" and character of some of activists with whom she was acquainted like high profile Popo Molefe and Patrick "Terror" Lekota. Lekota was a well known UDF leader who in the later years i.e. after the

1994 elections became the premier of the North West region under the patronage of ANC. Gordimer had to be often present in the court during the trial at Delmas which was 120km from her home. Besides defending Lekota, she also testified in favour of the other accused members like the distinguished Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo and Allan Boesak. Her involvement in this trial had a literary side to it. Gordimer helped to smuggle Lekota's book while he was writing in the prison in the form of letters to his daughter with the assistance of his lawyers.

Gordimer became a member of the ANC as soon as it gained a legal status in 1990. It was a criminal offence to be associated with a banned organization but Gordimer remained a committed member of the banned ANC all the time for she believed that

“We need to love truth enough to pick up the blood – dirtied, shamed cause of the left, and attempt to recreate it in terms of what it was meant to be, not what sixty five year of human power prevention have made of it.” (Essential Gesture, 283)

Winning the Noble Prize in 1991 was a moment of great victory for the South African nation as both the Prime minister F W De Klerk and the ANC led by Nelson Mandela were overjoyed and congratulated her officially. Arch Bishop Desmond Tutu expressed himself as “over the moon for Nadine” where as Andre Brink, another well known South African novelist described the event as “The coming of age of South Africa writing” She was described by the Time magazine as “South Africa's restless white conscience”. (Authors and Artists for Young Adults)

In the post apartheid times Gordimer actively campaigned for HIV/ AIDS detection, prevention, care and spreading awareness about the disease because the disease is a major health problem in the country.

In 2004, Gordimer was involved in a fund raising campaign for AIDS for the activist organization “Treatment Action Campaign by getting 20 major writers to contribute

short stories for the book "Telling Tales". Gordimer has spoken on foreign policy of other nations' matters and discrimination beyond her own society. Gordimer was involved in joining six other Nobel Prize winners in a public letter to the USA in 2005 to refrain from stabilizing the communist government of Cuba. In 2011, Gordimer signed the "Stockholm Memorandum" along with 20 other Nobel Laureates at the third Nobel Laureate Symposium on Global sustainability in Sweden (Wikipedia on 1/06/2013)

Nadine Gordimer continued to write both fiction and nonfiction to her last days and the critical essays that continue to be written on her only go to prove that she was one of the major literati writing in any language in the present age.

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