

## Nadine Gordimer: Farewell to a great spirit



Nadine and Ngugi arrested in Amherst! No, no, it was not the case, but that's how my wife, Njeeri, imagined the headlines in Kenya and South Africa in response to the picture of Gordimer and me entering a police car under the shadow of a heavily armed officer.

It was in 1991. Both of us were visiting the prestigious college in Massachusetts, United States, at the same time. The visits had been scheduled long before, but Gordimer's presence coincided with the news of her winning the Nobel prize in literature. Now she was not just another visiting writer but a Nobel laureate. The crowds were curious. Amherst College arranged a police escort, more for her than me, but at joint events we travelled together.

Gordimer was struck by the irony of the situation and remarked, with a wry smile, at the fact that she and I had entered a police car voluntarily. I was shining in the reflected glory of her Nobel, I told her, and she deftly deflected the focus by saying it was not yet in her hands.

It was our first one-on-one encounter, but it was as though we had known each other all our lives. Through books, of course, yes, but some of our books had shared a similar fate in being banned in apartheid South Africa at various times. There was a difference in our literary ages: by the time I wrote my first two books, *The River Between* and *Weep Not Child*, she had already published at least two major fictions, *The Lying Days* and *A World of Strangers*, in addition to a significant body of short fiction.

She was not at the now-famous conference of African writers of English expression at Uganda's Makerere University in 1962, but her name was constantly in the air. Es'kia Mphahlele, Lewis

Nkosi and Arthur Maimane – writers most closely associated with the Sophiatown renaissance – invoked her name in sessions on South African writing. So, even in the high noon of apartheid, these writers, its opponents and victims, saw her as one of “us”.

### **Colour line**

She was of course on the other side of the colour line that marked other differences. She could still live in South Africa, her country of birth and upbringing, but many other South African writers were then in exile. Others, such as Alex La Guma and Dennis Brutus, were in prison or under house arrest.

The writers at Makerere acknowledged the kinship, which was obvious in their many references to Gordimer. It was during that conference that her name became indelibly etched in my mind.

That was in 1962, and now, in 1991, we had met for the first time – not in Africa but in the US, and in sharply contrasting circumstances. The reversal of fortunes was clear in that Amherst ride in the police car. I was in exile from Daniel arap Moi’s dictatorship in post-colonial Kenya, and she was at home in a post-apartheid South Africa, symbolised by the recent release, from 27 years in prison, of her friend Nelson Mandela.

Though some of the Sophiatown writers or *Drum* writers such as Can Themba and Bloke Modisane had passed on, a good number of the others were now back in South Africa, echoing the title of that great creative documentary, *Come Back Africa*, which once captured the spirit of optimism in the resistance culture of Sophiatown.

In Gordimer’s body of work, including *The Late Bourgeois World* and *Burger’s Daughter*, and her under- and above-ground support of the liberation movement, she had contributed to the historic return that had seen the once-banned liberation movements unbanned and the principle of one person one vote, once criminalised, now enshrined in South Africa’s new Constitution.

### **Return of exiles**

Two years after that first meeting, I would visit South Africa to witness the unfolding drama of a democracy once demonised. My trip was by courtesy of the newly founded Congress of South African Writers, which had Gordimer as its first patron and also its main financial backer. Poet Keorapetse Kgositsile, a recently returned exile, was among my guides on my tour of the different parts of South Africa, where I met activists of all ages, as well as Nelson Mandela, at the ANC offices in Johannesburg.

Gordimer was away, but through Kgositsile she sent her apologies and a message of welcome. In my talks with Kgositsile, Gordimer emerged as a major literary figure in the drama of the unfolding cultural landscape of the new South Africa at its birth.

She wrote a sterling reference for me when, in 2002, the University of California, Irvine (UCI), was considering me for the positions of distinguished professor of English and comparative literature as well as founding director of its International Centre for Writing and Translation.

When, in 2013, the same institution elected to award me the UCI Medal, the highest the university could offer, UCI again turned to Gordimer for her words. She recorded a video tribute, now on YouTube, that was so touching it made me teary. It was not just the words but also her finding the time and the space in her busy life to do this.

Whenever I look at it, the video takes me back to our last face-to-face meeting. It was at the 2010 Gothenburg Book Fair, a massive phenomenon, a kind of literary mass market, with jostling but friendly madding crowds. Gordimer and I ran into each other by chance. She was with her friend, Per Wästberg – both were past presidents of PEN International, an organisation instrumental in my release from Kamiti Maximum Security Prison in Kenya in 1978.

I was accompanied by my Gothenburg-born son, Bjorn, who could not believe his luck at meeting the two iconic figures of world literature – they were moving about, frail but unbowed, and enjoying the fair. We talked briefly and, guess what? Gordimer and I both recalled our encounter in Amherst, when we rode in a police car together, glorying in the crowning achievement of her long literary life.

### **True to her art**

She remained true to her art but she also knew that the politics of struggle gave energy to her art; she was born on the other side of the colour line, but she built bridges across it. Speaking truth to power was the real power of her art.

She may have passed on, but her 90 years among us were a blessing. Her presence and energy are forever alive in my memory. She remains a kindred spirit for, beyond the writing and activism, she was an unwavering supporter of writing in African languages.

The quantity and quality of her literary output – from short stories and novels to essays – earned her many awards but, in the end, the biggest award for her was the affection and the respect she got from people of all races in South Africa and across the globe.

Her written words will forever be an integral part of the collective memory of the world.

*Ngugi wa Thiong'o is a novelist and a professor in the departments of comparative literature and English at the University of California, Irvine.*

---

**Dear Nadine Your Name is Hope**

You were born on the wealthy side of the colour divide  
You built bridges across the divide  
Even when apartheid destroyed or burnt them down with hatred  
You went back at it with pen courage and hope

*Dear Nadine Your Name is Hope*

You found the crying; you wiped their tears  
Those without food; you shared what you had kept aside  
Those that were thirsty; you shared the water you carried  
The tortured you uplifted them with words of hope

*Dear Nadine Your Name is Hope*

You found swords raised  
You just raised your pen  
A miracle came to be  
The pen had power greater than the sword

*Dear Nadine Your Name is Hope*

What then remains to say:  
You found broken hearts  
You put them back together with words  
From a pen that flowed ink instead of blood

*Dear Nadine Your Name is Hope*

Even though you're now with Mandela and others  
Even though we don't see you with our earth-bound eyes  
We have inherited hope from your words  
That you have spun these 90 years

---

### **Nadine Ritwa Riaku Ni Mwihoko**

*Nadine witu ritwa riaku ni mwihoko*

Waciariirwo murimo wa utonga wa gikonde  
Ukiambiriria gwaka ndaraca kuringa mukuru  
O na Abatheindi ya citharia kana gucicina na rumena  
Wacokaga o ho na karamu na umiriru na mwihoko

*Nadine witu ritwa riaku ni mwihoko*

Wakorire mararira ukamagiria maithori  
Mahutie ukimenyurira iria weigiire  
Manyotie ukimakundia maria wekuiire  
Maranyarirwo ukamomiriria na ciugo cia mwihoko

*Nadine witu ritwa riaku ni mwihoko*

Wakorire moyaniire mabanga  
Wee no karamu woiyire na iguru  
Kiama gikiringika  
Karamu hakigia hinya ukirite wa ruhiu

*Nadine witu ritwa riaku ni mwihoko*

Ngukiuga atia munene gukira uu:  
Wakorire magikua ngoro  
Ukimekira ngoro na ciugo  
Cia Karamu karaita rangi handu ha thakame.

*Nadine witu ritwa riaku ni mwihoko*

O na wathii kuria aaMandela mari  
O na twaga gukuona na maitho guku thi  
Ni twakugaya Mwihoko wi ciugoini ciaku  
Iria Watuura uugaga Muaka mirongo kenda

---

“As a writer and as a human being, Nadine Gordimer responded with exemplary courage and creative energy to the great challenge of her times, the system of apartheid unjustly imposed and heartlessly implemented on the South African people. Looking to the great realist novelists of the 19th century as models, she produced a body of work in which the South Africa of the late 20th century is indelibly recorded for all time.” – *JM Coetzee*

“The social history that she composed through her ... works of fiction shows her to have been an indefatigable champion of humanity who will continue to affect readers for generations to come.” – *Barack Obama*

“Her work sought to challenge all of us critically to reflect on the things we find comfort in believing without question.” – *Thabo Mbeki*

Source : <http://mg.co.za/article/2014-07-17-nadine-gordimer-farewell-to-a-great-spirit>