

Gordimer: Allergic to nonsense, and tired of idiotic questions



These things happen; they just do. Just the other day some of us so-called “literary comrades” were reflecting that, since the year 2013 – and to much fanfare everywhere where literature is not torture – we have marked centenaries of the Algerian-French writer Albert Camus and the publication of the French writer Marcel Proust’s *Swann’s Way*.

But at what point would we celebrate – as a nation – any centenary of an acclaimed literary figure from here, our home, who has distinguished themselves on the international stage, and for a period that will be forever time-transcendent.

The discussion dragged; a boxing match nearly ensued.

Imagine, then, the horror with which I received the News the next morning that Nadine Gordimer had left the land of the living. Nadine Gordimer, over whom pugilism nearly ensued, is no more. And, much as we knew that the end for her was near (she was 90, after all, and frail), it still felt like a sucker punch.

But who was Nadine Gordimer? Professor Ntongela Masilela and who is based in the United States, has studied Gordimer’s work closely, says: “She was one of the best writers in the post-World War II era, in full standing with other winners of the Nobel Prize in Literature, be it Gabriel Garcia Marquez or Derek Walcott, or José Saramago from Portugal or Octavio Paz from Mexico – whom she fully adored – or Doris Lessing, with whom they were like ‘literary sisters’ when they commenced their literary careers in the late 1940s.”

Politically, Masilela says, Gordimer was on the left like Marquez and Saramago but, unavoidably, her fiction was influenced or determined by apartheid “in that it stood firmly in resolute opposition to this political and social disease that tragically afflicted our country”.

“Her literary characters always stood creatively for a better future in surpassing the horrible present,” she says.

Master of critical realism

Gordimer was one of the outstanding masters of the style of critical realism developed by Balzac in France and Tolstoy in Russia in the 19th century and culminating with Thomas Mann in Germany and Andrei Platonov in Russia in the middle of the 20th century, says Masilela.

“Her favorite writers were Isaac Babel from Russia and Joseph Roth from Austria, who wrote in their fictions of the interwar period between 1919 and 1939 about the destruction and disappearance of Jewish Culture in Europe.”

Professor Njabulo S Ndebele, when I asked him about the near impossibility of imagining a South African novel without Nadine Gordimer, said: “The novels of Nadine serve as a historic marker. They are a significant part of defining an era in South African history – the rise of apartheid and its ultimate demise.” Ndebele also spoke of the consistent quality of Gordimer’s *oeuvre*; and that the way she managed to balance “artistic form and technique was near impeccable”.

Poet Mbuyiseni Oswald Mtshali – who in the early 1960s worked closely with Gordimer – said: “Nadine’s personal life transcended race, creed, gender, colour, ethnicity, culture. If ever there was a citizen of the world, Nadine was the personification of that species.

“In 2012,” he said, “she gave me permission to translate her beautiful short story *Children* into *Abantwana* in isiZulu, including a song *Abantwana Bomhlaba* (Children of the World). I have completed the project and will in the near future present it to the whole world.”

But she was also tough and “allergic to nonsense”, was our Gordimer, as our poet laureate, Keorapetse Kgositsile, puts it.

“I remember at a media conference of the Congress of South African Writers in the 1990s when some correspondent asked whether South Africa was on the verge of going the communist route, and she said, and I quote her verbatim, ‘We are tired of these idiotic questions that the people of South Africa are not accountable to themselves.’ That was Nadine, as I knew her.”

Tiisetso Makube is a Johannesburg-based writer and poet whose debut novel, Native of Nowhere, is due out later this year.

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