Nadine Gordimer: A rich legacy for young artists

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, delivered in 1957, Albert Camus said: "The writer's role is not free from difficult duties. By definition he cannot put himself today in the service of those who make history; he is at the service of those who suffer it."

Nadine Gordimer, who died in her sleep in Johannesburg on July 13, was one such writer. She dedicated her life and work to the service of those who suffer history and not those who make it.

Born in the East Rand mining town of Springs in November 1923 to European Jewish immigrants, Gordimer began writing at an early age. The Children's Sunday Express published her first short story, The Quest for Seen Gold, when she was 15 and she went on to write more than a dozen novels and hundreds of short stories and essays.

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To reflect on Gordimer's relevance today is to pose the question: What is the role of the writer and, more broadly, the arts in contemporary South African society? In Gordimer's example, it is as a witness

to history. In her work she walked beside South African society, observing it, and pointed out its ridiculousness with moral clarity.

In spite of this, it would be a mistake to consider Gordimer's work purely as politics without considering its aesthetic merits. In an interview with the Paris Review, she said: "The real influence of politics on my writing is the influence of politics on people. I am dealing with people; here are people who are shaped and changed by politics. In that way my material is profoundly influenced by politics."

Much more than politics

Yewande Omotoso, the author of Bom Boy, agrees that Gordimer's work is much more than politics: "If young writers look to Gordimer and merely see that their art must be political then I think much of the lessons her life and work present us with would have been lost."

In the same vein, Neelika Jayawardene, a literature professor at New York State University and one of the founding editors of the blog Africa is a Country, says that to read Gordimer is to "encounter the best of a beautiful storytelling tradition".

Gordimer's work is concerned with both the aesthetic and the political. If young people read Gordimer today, this will be the relevance of her work. It is relevant both for its startlingly beautiful prose and its storytelling techniques. And the influence of politics in her work can inspire young artists to address the current political landscape in which they exist without being encumbered by it.

The great Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe once said: "It is clear to me that an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant – like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames."

In the early 2000s, when asked if South African fiction had been made redundant by freedom, Gordimer responded: "On the contrary. We've got plenty of problems."

This then is the relevance of Gordimer to readers and writers of a younger generation: that her literary works and statements are not works that can be left behind and forgotten about, and that their role as the testament of those who suffer history is a space artists can still fill today.

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