

Nobel Prize in Literature 1991



Nadine Gordimer

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1991 was awarded to Nadine Gordimer "*who through her magnificent epic writing has - in the words of Alfred Nobel - been of very great benefit to humanity*".

The Swedish Academy has decided to award the Nobel Prize for Literature for 1991 to Nadine Gordimer. She is a South African, her mother English, her father Lithuanian. Her work comprises novels and short stories in which the consequences of apartheid form the central theme. She was born in 1923.

Gordimer writes with intense immediacy about the extremely complicated personal and social relationships in her environment. At the same time as she feels a political involvement - and takes action on that basis - she does not permit this to encroach on her writings. Nevertheless, her literary works, in giving profound insights into the historical process, help to shape this process.

A landmark in the first half of her career is the novel "A Guest of Honour" (1970). This is a close- textured and pregnant novel, classical in style. With great intensity she succeeds in conveying the complexity of events as a nation comes into existence. The

returning former colonial administrator becomes involved in the conflicts and is torn by loyalties in several directions. The course of events is reflected in the parallel love affair of the protagonist. His adventitious, totally unheroic death gives rise to reflection on the role of the individual in the great game for the future

Since the middle of the 70s Gordimer has developed a more complex technique in her novels. This phase of her writing has produced three masterpieces: "The Conservationist" (1974), "Burger's Daughter" (1979) and "July's People" (1981). Each in its own way illustrates conceivable personal standpoints in the complicated spiritual and material environment of an Africa in which black consciousness is growing. Gordimer takes the question of the justification of the privileges of white people - even benevolent white people - to its extreme.

Among these powerful novels "July's People" deserves particular mention. The events in Soweto form the background against which the novel is set. Confronted by armed rebellion, the Smales, a white family, flee with the help of July, their boy, to his own village, where they have to survive in a primitive, evacuated hut. As time goes by, the master-servant relationship is turned upside down by the family's increasing reliance on July. The ambiguity of the novel's title etches itself fast - July's people are the white family he still serves but also the members of his tribe. The description of the cultural and physical coarsening which the circumstances evoke is masterly. Communication between husband and wife dries up. He tries to articulate the new situation without the old phraseology, "but the words would not come". To refer to his wife, a pronoun is used: "Her". Not 'Maureen'. Not 'His wife'... The ones who find it easiest to adapt, both linguistically and socially, are the children. The author has her reasons for using the children's relationships to cast light on those of the adults in the novel.

Gordimer's latest book "My Son's Story" was published in 1990. Its subject is love in an insupportable society, the complications and obstacles inherent in the path to change. The relationship of the lovers is described with great tenderness. At the same time the unyielding political reality constantly intrudes. The twofold narrative perspective makes

richly faceted description of the characters possible, its most surprising element being the heroism finally exhibited by the wife. The novel is ingenious and revealing and at the same time enthralling because of its poetic values.

The powerful novels should not make us forget the shorter works. Compact and dense, they are extremely telling and show Gordimer at the height of her creative powers. "Selected Stories" (1975) provides a survey. The fundamental themes are reworked successfully, as the title story in the collection "A Soldier's Embrace" (1980). Gordimer's specifically feminine experiences, her compassion and her outstanding literary style characterise her short stories as well.

Biobibliographical note

Nadine Gordimer was born on 20 November 1923 in Springs, a small mining town near Johannesburg in South Africa, of immigrant Jewish parents. Her father, a jeweller, came from Lithuania (then in Russia), her mother, from England. After being educated at a convent school, Nadine Gordimer studied at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. She has travelled extensively in Africa, Europe, and North America, where she has often undertaken lecture tours, but has continued to live in Johannesburg; married since 1954 to a businessman, Reinhold Cassirer. The couple have a son and each has a daughter from a previous marriage.

Nadine Gordimer began to write at the age of nine and her first short story was published in a South African magazine when she was only fifteen. Her first collection of short stories, *Face to Face*, was published ten years later in 1949. Her first novel, *The Lying Days*, appeared in 1953. She has now published 10 novels and 7 collections of short stories, as well as a few volumes of literary criticism and in addition, a large number of articles, speeches and lectures on different subjects. Some of her books have at times been banned in her native country.

Nadine Gordimer has always aspired to live as a private individual outside the public eye, but international fame and the many major awards which followed (among them the Booker Prize in 1974 for *The Conservationist*), honorary doctorates abroad (she

has declined one in South Africa), various positions (she is, for example, Vice President of International P.E.N.), and her continual involvement on behalf of literature and free speech in a police state, where censorship and persecution of books and people exist, have made her "the doyenne of South African letters".

For more details please visit:

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1991/press.html