

Bad Times for Two Bards

THE spate of censorship unleashed by the education department of Gauteng province in South Africa seems to brook few bounds, as even the 'classics' are taken to cleaners. In efforts at 'tidying-up' and 'sanitizing' the school curricula, a sizeable volume of works by Shakespeare and Jonathan Swift are being shoved towards the door for recently proclaimed sins. Shakespeare is claimed to be "boring, unlikely and ridiculous", while Swift is replete with humour regarded as "foreign" to South Africans.

An appointed committee of teachers who arrived at these conclusions decried the purported failings of the English bard, Shakespeare, as including a lack of "cultural diversity", predilection with "unhappy endings" and failure to "promote the South African constitution's rejection of racism and sexism." Based on the criteria appealed to by the committee, *Julius Caesar* could not survive an enshrined sexism as it "elevates men", while the *Taming of the Shrew* and *Antony and Cleopatra* were not only undemocratic, but also racist. *Hamlet* was claimed to lack optimism as much as it is not "uplifting", *King Lear* is "too despairing", violent, "unlikely and ridiculous".

Interestingly, *The Merchant of Venice* slipped through censorship, even when many observers of the fare wondered how its thinly-veiled anti-semitism could pass for anything other than racism. Equally, surviving the shove are *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet* which must have been judged by standards precluding the declared criterion of "unhappy endings." Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* journeyed out of reckoning by reveling in alien humour.



Nadine Gordimer

PERHAPS in an ironic twist of circumstance, South African liberal intellectual, essayist, and 1991 Nobel Laureate in Literature, Nadine Gordimer, who has spent most of her adult life and career in the strive against racism and apartheid in South Africa, both as writer and African National Congress (ANC) activist, had to bear the brunt of certain 'transformations' laying hold on the South African educational system. Her 1981 novel, *July's People*, has become the fourth in a 22-book oeuvre to slide into the grip of censorship.

Described as a "political novelist celebrated for her grasp of history and delicate sensitivity to the human tensions of apartheid", and proponent of the "essential gesture" that merges the role of literary and political activists, Gordimer who has reiterated her belief in South Africa's post-1994 democracy, is the most recent victim of the ethos she warred against for over four decades.

In April 2001, the education department of Gauteng province, the most important in the country, declared Gordimer's book as flawed, "deeply racist, superior and patronising", which means it has to be removed from school curricula. And, this consolidates an earlier position in which three of her books had been censored by the apartheid regime.

Gordimer's Leash

The wave of reactions issuing from this act of censorship has prominent South African writers, who have written to protest the Gauteng province's education department's decision and are planning to write the ruling ANC about this act of "political correctness gone mad", rallying to her defence.

In her career as literary artist, Gordimer's contemplation of South African society as 'deformed' in the various imbalances and distortions it engenders among races, examines the delusions evident in white society, the ignorance pertaining to the black folk and their ways, and depicts with supreme understanding, the workings of the master/slave relations that has riddled the country for so long.

July's People, now regarded as having an improbable plot and reinforcing a questionable past, deals with a revolutionary moment when a reversal occurs and a white household seek refuge with their black servant. This is when some of the latent dictatorial attitudes of the servant starts to evolve.

The shock attending this latest censorship of Gordimer's book by the Gauteng education department, as related to by sections of literati and readers seems to be the deliberate, if willful, attempt at perpetrating silence by knocking off the chronicle of a reality now considered 'racist.' Even then, the reality under representation, if not a slew of interpretation, could be preserved as testament of what is undesirable about the past, and what needs to be desperately forestalled.

Born in Transvaal, South Africa, Nadine Gordimer won the Booker Prize in 1974 for her narrative work, *The Conservationist*, and rejected the prestigious women-only Orange Prize in 1988.

Gathering Tongues

A throng of voices seem to be re-focusing and lending remarkable verve to the growing corpus of recent African literary writing. Apart from Tade Ipadeola, whose newly published collection of poetry *A Time of Signs* is regarded as a triumph of exquisite crafting, some of these purveyors of the written word - having undergone considerable literary exposure, even when some of their works have not been published - include the South African civil activist/ writer, Nomboniso Gasa. Her prose writings, *Dancing with Grandmother* and *In the Heart of My Song* are set to be released by Cape Town publishing firm, David Phillip. Equally, award-winning Nigerian poets, Angela Agali and Emman Usman Shehu are about coming out with their poetry collections, *Waking Dreams* and *The Blue in My Blood*, while Helon Habila's "Love Poems" made the shortlist for the 2001 Caine Prize.