

WRITING TOWARDS A COMMON FUTURE

by David Robbins



Richard Rive



Nadine Gordimer

What is the state of South African writing today? Is it essential to see it in strictly defined compartments, the one Black, the other White? Will it be possible, at some point in the future, to forge a common literature? These, and many other related questions, were dealt with in key papers delivered by two of the country's most prominent writers, Nadine Gordimer and Richard Rive, at the Culture and Resistance symposium held in Gaborone in July this year. While Rive confined himself to "the role of the Black writer in South Africa", Gordimer offered an often chilling overview not only of the current situation for White and Black writers but of the problems which will confront them, and the state of art generally, in the "post-apartheid" era of the future.

Both speakers agreed that the relationship between literature and the specific conditions and divisions in South African life defined the pre-occupations and dilemmas of writers, on whatever side of the colour line. "The nature of contemporary art here, in the aspect of subject-matter, is didactic, apocalyptic, self-pitying, self-accusatory as much as indicting. Apartheid, in all its manifestations....informs the ethos of what is produced,"

Gordimer said. Rive's opinion was that: "The position in which the Black writer finds himself prescribes a special role for him. He must explore his environment and if it is a discriminatory environment he must explore the origins, effect and consequences of that discrimination."

Or Gordimer again: "Innate creativity can be falsified, trivialised, deflected, conditioned, stifled, deformed and even destroyed by the State, and the state of society it decrees. It is from the daily life of South Africa that have come the conditions of profound alienation which prevail among South African artists. The sum of the various states of alienation IS the nature of art in South Africa." By "various states of alienation", she clearly meant that both Black and White writers were alienated, but in completely different ways. "The Black artist," she explained, "lives in a society that has rejected his culture for hundreds of years." But he is now using this alienation, in other words his own Blackness, as the "inevitable point of departure towards his true selfhood".

For the Black artist, social relevance is the supreme criterion, because it is only in terms of this relevance that

his work will be judged by other Blacks. "And they are the supreme authority since it is only through them that he can break his alienation." But Gordimer pointed out that relevance in this sense and "in the context of the absolutes placed upon the Black artist by the new post-apartheid society to which he is dedicated" had another demand. "Struggle is the state of the Black collective consciousness and art is its weapon. The Black artist accepts this as the imperative of his time. Weapons are inevitably expected to be used within an orthodoxy prescribed for the handling of such things. "There is therefore a kit of reliable emotive phrases for writers, a ready-made aesthetic for painters and sculptors, an unwritten index of subjects for playwrights and a list of approved images for photographers. But agitprop (agitation/propaganda) binds the artist with the means by which it aims to free the minds of the people. It licences a phony sub-art."

Rive expressed something similar when he warned that if the Black writer restricted himself to one viewpoint he could "skate perilously near to outright propaganda and dogma. He might be sacrificing HOW it must be said for WHAT must be said and not realise that the two are indistinguishable. If he confines himself to a viewpoint, his creativity must suffer." Yet Rive stressed that the Black writer could not remove himself from the realities of South African life and deal only with abstract universalities.

"If he ignores the society in which he functions and ignores the problems of that society, is he not open to the accusation that he has abdicated from his responsibility as a human and concentrated on his art?" Rive pointed out that Jane Austen had written novels during the Napoleonic wars, but "Waterloo was thousands of miles and centuries removed from the quiet of Austen's Mansfield Park and Northanger Abbey". Soweto, Guguletu and Bonteheuwel, on the other hand, are "in and around us and are happening to us at this very moment". The writer should use his writing to create and maintain a climate within which he hopes meaningful change will become effective, he said. "The role of the writer is to expose ruling class motives and give shape and direction for the future."

It was comparatively easy, Gordimer suggested, to create a people's art during a period when the central experience of all was oppression by a ruling class. But what will happen when oppression is shaken off and "experience breaks up into differing categories of class-experience"? In answering this, Gordimer said that the avowed Black aim of creating a culture springing from the people, and not an elite, involved a rejection of European-based White culture which has been seen as an interruption in the progression of pre-colonial African culture. In the words of Rive: "Part of the colonialising process is to deny a subject people access to

their past, either by cutting them off from it or by making them ashamed of it."

But unless Black artists can achieve "a strong organic synthesis" between the past and the technological present, "recognised as something distinct from the inherent threat of all-White culture", their art will be merely nostalgic, Gordimer said. "There will be an hiatus between modern life and art for them, and they will be in danger of passing into a new phase of alienation." Rive, too, touched on the same subject. Once the post-apartheid future had been realised, he said, the Black writer "would have other problems to face and other battles to fight".

And what of the present state of alienation and the problems confronting the White writer? Gordimer spoke of his "double alienation", the first from his own White-based society whose values he sees to be in an "unrecognised state of alienation" and from which, for a generation at least, he has rebelled; and second from Black culture which cannot accept him since it is consciously seeking to define itself "without reference to those values that his (the White writer's) very presence among Blacks represents". "For a long time the White artist assumed that the objective reality by which his relevance was to be measured was somewhere out there between and encompassing Black and White," she said. "Now he finds that no such relevance exists. The Black has withdrawn from a position where art, as the White saw it, assumed the liberal role of conciliator between oppressor and oppressed. If the White artist is to break out of his double alienation . . . if he is to find his true consciousness and express in his work the realities of his place and time . . . he has to admit openly the order of his experience as a White as differing completely from the order of Black experience."

Gordimer explained that this involved finding a different way, from that open to the Black artist, of reconnecting his art to the total reality of the "disintegrating present", and yet to attempt the same position his Black counterpart aims for in terms of his relevance to commonly-created cultural entities corresponding to a common reality – in other words an indigenous culture. Gordimer suggested that the White artist could perhaps take his place in an indigenous culture of the future by acknowledging that the implicit nature of the artist is as an agent of change. He should be "always moving towards truth, true consciousness, because art itself is fixed on the attainment of that essence of things." It was the artist's nature to want to change the world, she said. "The revolutionary sense, in artistic terms, is the sense of totality, the conception of a 'whole' world. Whether this 'whole' world is the place where Black and White culture might become something other, wanted by both Black and White, is a question we at this conference cannot answer; only pursue." □