

Gordimer: A leader quite prepared to grubby herself in struggle politics



It started on a Thursday midday, when the organiser of the Weekly Mail Book Week put down the phone, walked across the newsroom and interrupted me and my co-editor. “I think we might have a problem,” she said.

It was October 1988 and the “problem” was Salman Rushdie, due to arrive a week later to headline the event. “He says his book has been banned in India; he is getting death threats,” she said. “I asked him what he wrote about and he said, ‘I ripped into the Qur’an.’”

Ours was a small, anti-apartheid newspaper, the *Weekly Mail*. Gail Berhmann was an artist who was organising our annual literary event, with Rushdie billed as the year’s star guest. We had other problems too. A few months earlier, we had received a five-page letter from the government warning that we would be closed down under State of Emergency regulations if we continued to muster support for revolutionary organisations and foment feelings of hatred for the security forces.

Shortly after that they closed another “alternative” newspaper, the *New Nation*, for 13 weeks, and we thumbed our noses at them by running articles the *New Nation* had intended to publish, under the front-page headline, “What New Nation would have said”.

Two weeks later, a special *Government Gazette* was published, warning us to desist or face closure.

Another closure

Another warning arrived in April and the government closed another paper, *South*. There was little doubt that we were next. The only question was for how long they would shut us down. We could survive a few months without any income but after that we would have to find jobs.

We threw everything we had into a campaign to get the government to limit the closure, if not to stop it. At the same time, we were putting out our weekly newspaper with a small and nervous staff trying to cover the popular uprising that was spreading across the country at that time. And the book week, themed “Censorship under the State of Emergency”, was upon us.

Also, we had been through months of difficult negotiations to secure agreement from the broad anti-apartheid movement to allow Rushdie's visit and did not want to relinquish the breakthrough this represented. For two decades there had been a sport, arms, cultural and growing economic boycott of apartheid South Africa and at the *Weekly Mail* we broadly backed it (within the limitations of a law that prevented active support).

But there had been long debate about contradictions in the cultural boycott and the fact that, because conservatives easily flouted it, it sometimes affected anti-apartheid organisations more than others. The previous year, Oliver Tambo, the leader of the exiled ANC, which championed the sanctions, had cautiously and tentatively announced that they would try a selective boycott: they would allow progressive artists, writers and academics to be hosted by nonracial, anti-apartheid organisations under the right circumstances.

Approval came just a few weeks before the event and, with the anti-apartheid writers' union, the Congress of South African Writers (Cosaw), we sent a joint invitation to Rushdie. We announced the event in our paper with "Booker prize winners speak", which would bring Rushdie together with Nadine Gordimer and JM Coetzee, as a highlight.

Censorship

In Johannesburg, Rushdie would deliver a keynote on censorship, read from his latest work and take part in a panel discussion.

Then came the Thursday call that alerted us to "a problem".

I got hold of a copy of the book and gave it to a Muslim friend, Ghaleb Cachalia, asking him to read it and tell me how serious the problem was. He opened it up, read a few lines and gasped; read a few more and frowned. It seemed to be critical of the Qur'an on almost every page, he said. He took it home and called in the morning to say he had been up all night reading it, and it was brilliant and provocative. It was bound to cause trouble.

On the Friday, as the mosques emptied, we began to receive angry calls and threats of violence. The Africa Muslim Agency called for the book to be banned, the invitation withdrawn and apologies offered. The Islamic Missionary Society said that "there was every likelihood that [Rushdie] would be assaulted and that blood will flow. There are secret Muslim hit squads who have vowed to avenge the honour of the Holy Prophet Muhammed."

We issued a statement: "We are most perturbed to learn that Mr Rushdie's book has caused religious controversy. We had no intention of offending anybody's religious sensibility. However, we have invited him to highlight the issue of censorship and the situation in this country – and that need remains stronger than ever."

Then Rushdie phoned to say he had a cold and was pulling out. He had just returned from an abortive trip to Toronto where he faced massive protests. I called him and said in no uncertain terms that many people had stuck their necks out for him and he could not let us down. He agreed to come.

Searching for a solution

A delegation of about a dozen Muslim leaders came to our offices to try to hammer out a solution, along with Gordimer and Cosaw representatives. Among them were prominent Muslims who were sympathetic to our plight but fearful of what would happen if Rushdie came. They were eager to find a compromise but were outnumbered by the militants.

The meeting went on for six hours. Gordimer later said that there was an understanding that their faith had been offended but so had ours: “Freedom of speech is as much an article of faith for us as Islam is for you,” she said. It was an unexpected challenge: Could we hold up a secular article of faith against a mainstream religious one? Was our allegiance to free expression one of “faith”?

I was called out early because a sheriff of the court had arrived with a letter from the minister: “The production and publishing, during the period from the date of publishing of this order up to and including 28 November 1988, of all further issues of the periodical *Weekly Mail* is hereby totally prohibited.” It was the blow we had feared but it was also a victory. The ban was for only a month and we knew we could survive that.

Meanwhile, the meeting with the Muslim leadership broke up without a resolution. The next day Cosaw withdrew their support for Rushdie’s visit “with regret”.

Gordimer phoned London to convey the view that, to avoid violence and division within the liberation movement, he should not come. We issued a statement: “This decision will bring shame and disrepute upon the progressive movement in this country and we condemn it in the strongest terms. It is a victory for intolerance.”

It was quite a moment to criticise our friends but we were angry and upset.

Small victory

There was a suggestion that Rushdie address the Cape Town book week via phone but the publishers and bookstores that backed the event opposed it, fearing the repercussions. Mongane Wally Serote, one of our best-known writers in exile and head of the ANC cultural desk, did so instead. Again, a small victory in the face of defeat: getting a banned exile’s voice was some compensation for Rushdie’s absence, a lesser but not insignificant show of anti-censorship defiance.

But there was a deep sense of discomfort, and it was the inscrutable and unpredictable JM Coetzee, in his quiet, soft voice, who provided the fireworks that ignited one of the most electric encounters in literary South Africa.

“We have been overtaken by the politics of writing in an ugly, violent and unexpected form,” he told the Cape Town gathering. The “disinviting” of Rushdie left the *Weekly Mail* organisers “more than a little embarrassed” and “the South African intellectual community, among which I count myself, comes out of the affair looking pretty stupid”, he said.

He asked how we had ever got ourselves into the position where the writers’ union had a veto over our event.

“I believe and will continue to believe until I am otherwise convinced that some kind of trade-off took place in the smoke-filled room, some kind of calling in of debts, some kind of compromise or bargain or settlement in which the Rushdie visit was given up for the sake of the unity of the anti-apartheid alliance and for the sake of not making life too difficult for Muslims in the alliance,” he said.

‘Sorry spectacle’

With the freedom of a nonaligned writer unlikely to have ever joined a body like Cosaw, sitting alongside the firmly aligned Gordimer, he lambasted everyone involved: the *Weekly Mail*, “which stands by the principal of free speech but finds that it can live with the fact of free speech for selected persons only”; the booksellers who opposed the phone link with Rushdie; Cosaw “which is dedicated to freedom of expression, as long as it does not threaten the unity of the struggle” – and by implication Gordimer.

Why, he asked, did he still involve himself in this “sorry spectacle”? It was to register his protests against the silencing of Rushdie and to say certain things about fundamentalism.

What followed started quite plainly and mildly but gathered pace into what must be one of the most eloquent and devastating denunciations in literary record: “Islamic fundamentalism in its activist manifestation is bad news. Religious fundamentalism in general is bad news. We know about religious fundamentalism in South Africa. Calvinist fundamentalism has been an unmitigated force of benightedness in our history.

“Lebanon, Israel, Ireland, South Africa, wherever there is a bleeding sore on the body of the world, the same hard-eyed narrow-minded fanatics are busy, indifferent to life, in love with death. Behind them always come the mullahs, the rabbis, the *predikante* [ministers], giving their blessings.”

And then he turned on the writers’ union, represented that evening by Gordimer, who was looking shell-shocked.

“These words are addressed particularly to Cosaw. Don’t get involved with such people, don’t get into alliances to them. There is nothing more inimical to writing than the spirit of fundamentalism. Fundamentalism abhors the play of signs, the endlessness of writing. Fundamentalism means nothing more or less than going back to an origin and staying there. It stands for one founding book and thereafter no more books.

‘Prophet as writer’

“As the various books of the various fundamentalisms, each claiming to be the one true book, fantasise themselves to be signed in fire or engraved in stone, so they aspire to strike dead every rival book, petrifying the sinuous, protean, forward-gliding life of the letters on their pages,

turning them into physical objects to be anathematised, things of horror not to be touched, not to be looked upon. This is what Rushdie wrote about in *Satanic Verses* and why the fundamentalists of Islam want him dead. Rushdie presents the prophet not as prophet but as writer.

“Cosaw ought to decide where it stands on the central question: on the right of Mr Rushdie to write against authority, and ought then to act according to its decision.”

He ended with a powerful questioning of the values of the liberation struggle, one which resonates today when the ANC government threatens freedom of expression.

“I am here with my tail between my legs like the rest of the participants, like the organisers too. That loose and fragile alliance of people, those who believe in freedom of expression and those who believe in freedom of expression for some people, we have suffered a crushing defeat.

“There are smiles in the mosques, there are chuckles in the corridors of Pretoria, where they issued Rushdie with an entry visa and then watched as we proceeded to self-destruct. We are so demoralised, afraid to pick up a phone and dial Mr Rushdie’s London number for fear someone will throw a bomb at us, that we have no sense of whether the Rushdie affair in a year’s time will have vanished from people’s memories or in a year’s time will go down in history as the moment after which people simply got tired of pretending there was any place for the liberal shibboleths like freedom of expression in the anti-apartheid struggle.”

There was long and extended applause. Gordimer’s small frame and hard-bitten face was frozen solid.

‘Public attack’

She took the microphone and said she was “surprised, shocked and distressed” that, having come to speak out about the treatment of Rushdie, she now needed to defend Cosaw.

“I think that it is very surprising to me that my friend and colleague John Coetzee, without really discussing it with me or anyone in Cosaw, has sprung this public attack upon us. But that is a democratic right and that is what we are here to defend.”

She said that his and the audience’s views were based on incomplete facts, partly as a result of the *Weekly Mail* being banned and unable to relay the details of what happened.

She described how Cosaw had stood firm in the meeting with the Muslim leadership and sought a compromise that did not prevent Rushdie from coming; how they had attempted at least to get assurances that he would not be harmed. But the threats were real and the violence imminent.

“What a cop-out? How was he to judge? He had not met these people, he had not seen the threats, the dangerous harassments, the notes under the door ... We could not agree to thrust the decision upon him and go out of it with clean hands.”

Polite applause

Gordimer's applause was more polite and respectful than enthusiastic. It was, after all, an elite, largely white, Cape Town literary audience.

Coetzee had kept his hands clean in a dirty situation. Gordimer had been prepared to grubby herself in the messy world of struggle politics. Both spoke and wrote from positions of relative privilege, protected by their white skins and international standing but dealt with it – and used it – in different ways. The debate about the role of the writer, which we might have hoped Rushdie to lead, was brought to life: it could not be more visible, even tangible, in the tension between these two powerful and very different personalities. If we wanted rich and memorable debate about the complications of writing under apartheid, we got it.

Gordimer read a statement from Rushdie in which he explained and defended his book. We were surprised that he had nothing to say about our country in its state of emergency, or our silenced newspaper, which was using up some of its support and goodwill in his defence, but we could understand why he should be tied up with his own situation. It was Berhmann who found the way to carve a victory out of this. Frustrated by not being able to pipe in Rushdie's voice in Cape Town, she was not going to let anyone stop her when the Book Week moved to Jo'burg. She set it all up, researched the right technical solutions, deceived the state-owned telephone company into providing the necessary equipment for what they thought was a theatre production (it was happening in the Market Theatre), secured Rushdie's agreement and then told us and the publishers about it when it was too late to pull back.

We had told other media that the event was off and had no newspaper of our own, so we could only spread it by word of mouth over two days. We were astounded when about 500 people crowded into the room to stare at a near-empty stage while Afrikaans writer Ampie Coetzee, sitting in a large armchair, conversed with an absent Rushdie, whose voice boomed through speakers and filled the room: "I'm very pleased to be with you, if only in this rather ghostly way."

State of emergency

The atmosphere was magical: in the gloom of a state of emergency, in the horrors of the last few weeks, it was another small triumph against those trying to silence Rushdie and ourselves. We had no newspaper but we were doing what we always tried to do: find imaginative ways to get around censorship, and share those ideas most challenging to authority.

Nearly three decades later, South Africa confronts the issue of free speech again. We have enjoyed it, in fact revelled in its abundance since Nelson Mandela's release in 1994, protected by a strong Constitution and a Constitutional Court that has stood firm on the issue. But we have a government, dominated by the ANC, that finds the print media to be hostile and intrusive and that now threatens media freedom. They complain of intrusions into privacy and a lack of respect for dignity – a particularly sore point in a country still healing the wounds of apartheid.

More substantially, they decry what they see as a cynicism towards the "transformation project", the bid to break the racial patterns inherited from the country's troubled history.

They feel under siege from a highly critical media, which in many cases has moved into an oppositional role in the absence of a strong parliamentary challenge to the ANC.

The ANC has proposed a statutory media appeals tribunal to adjudicate on complaints against the press, and passed a Protection of State Information Bill, known as the “secrecy Bill”, to clamp down on leaks and whistle blowing and threaten investigative journalists with hefty sentences for a wide range of “state security” offences.

Draconian draft

The first draft of the Bill was draconian but, in the face of formidable public and media opposition, it was delayed for two years. Once again, we had to take to the streets and corridors of power to fight measures to restrict free media. Once again, we plot ways to get around potential censorship. The final version was considerably improved but still threatens 25-year sentences for those who leak information that might endanger “state security”, loosely defined.

At the forefront of the fight to prevent this clampdown, again, was Gordimer, as engaged and vocal and firm as ever. She wrote a lengthy condemnation in the *NY Review of Books* and led a posse of prominent writers in a call for these measures to be scrapped.

Coetzee now lives in Australia, having put in place a physical distance from these fights that match the emotional one he always had. But it is his ringing words of 1988 that leave us wondering: When the writers’ union backed off from the Rushdie invitation in 1988 under threat from religious extremists, was this the moment when freedom of expression was downgraded in liberation movement priorities? Or was it when we allowed for a selective boycott that gave the movement the capacity to decide which cultural exchanges were acceptable, and which not? Has this come back to haunt us now?

Is there still a place for “the liberal shibboleths like freedom of expression” in the post-apartheid struggle?

Anton Harber is now Caxton professor of journalism at the University of the Witwatersrand. The Weekly Mail is now the Mail & Guardian. Salman Rushdie is still Salman Rushdie.

With thanks for material from You Have Been Warned: The First Ten Years of the M&G, by Irwin Manoim (Viking, 1996).

Fond memories of a brave woman

Leading human rights lawyer George struggles to hold back the tears as he talks about the death of his friend Nadine Gordimer.

“She was very courageous and very straightforward,” he says. “One of the most memorable things for me was her bravery before the hostile judge in the Delmas [Treason] Trial. This was a

really brave woman. She wasn't prepared to mince her words when asked about the condition of her country and its people."

Bizos describes the prosecutor's attack: "[He] asked her if she was a member of the ANC. She said no, but that she was a supporter and believed that the people in the dock were legitimate leaders and that political offenders shouldn't be treated as ordinary criminals. Then the prosecutor asked her what she thought of Umkhonto weSizwe, and she said: 'That's the same as the ANC, isn't it?'"

Bizos says that, though he met Gordimer at the University of the Witwatersrand in the late 1940s, it was only later, when he started taking on political cases for writers, that he and Gordimer became close friends.

He remembers buying Gordimer's first book, *The Lying Days*, in 1953. "I went to the small bookshop in Pritchard Street when it was launched. I managed to find eight shillings to buy a copy. It was an eye-opener for many of us – recording our experiences, thoughts, concerns – hence the title."

Gordimer attended many of the political trials of the time. Bizos chuckles as he talks about one of their lighter moments together at the Rivonia Trial, in which Nelson Mandela was the main accused.

"We played a trick, for her to come with me, supposedly as my assistant as a lawyer, to the cells where the accused were held below. She held my papers [as a decoy]. She came and encouraged them and told them about the campaign for their release."

Although Gordimer left university without getting her degree, Bizos says she was "as well informed as the best lawyers in the field. She made her position known in your pages [the *Mail & Guardian*] and in the pages of other publications about the struggle we fought for".

According to Bizos, her books and short stories relating to apartheid were a tremendous encouragement to both black and white people.

Bizos visited Gordimer regularly in her final days and she confided to him that her health was no longer good.

He says he will sorely miss his visits to her on his way home from work in the evenings, when she would question him about what he was working on. "She wanted to be informed," he says, "and she always encouraged me and wished me well."

His voice is wavering. – *Gabi Falanga*

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