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MIRIAM TLALI

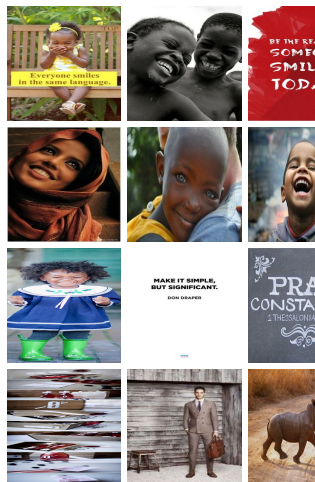
28/10/2015 • 21 Icons South Africa, News

Miriam Tlali never thought she would become a writer. “No, no, no,” she says. “But I did think I would become something. I wanted to become somebody, somehow. But the idea of becoming a so-called freedom fighter came much later when I realised the world I was living in.”

As a black woman living in apartheid, Tlali had to choose her means of protest well. The contempt shown by white South African toward black people left her confused and angry. The restrictions placed upon her actions by a white supremacist government agitated her. Instead of taking up arms, Tlali began to write.

She became the first black woman to have a novel published in South Africa. It wasn't easy. Her debut novel went through endless edits and censorship before it was

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AVBOB's CEO, Mr. Frik Rademan

28/10/2015

published – and later banned by the government. Still, she kept writing – challenging the regime with every sentence.

Tlali wrote her first book after lack of funding rendered her unable to pursue a university education in spite of the promise that she showed in school. She took a job as a bookkeeper at a furniture store. Her first time working for a white employer, the experience that inspired Tlali's first novel, Muriel at Metropolitan.

"You know, while I was still working there, I grew to become very unhappy and restless," she says. "Every Sunday, we would take our children to the freedom square to listen to our leaders speaking. People like Oliver Tambo, like Nelson Mandela. So I was very restless because I found that I was doing the kind of work which is done by people who are busy stalking Africans."

Tlali knew that she wanted to contribute to the struggle effort. But she was conflicted. Was she to remain working for people who she knew were adding to her own oppression? Or was she to abandon her work – and her income – in hope of making a difference? "I decided to leave my work," Tlali says simply. She realised she could fight the system with her pen.

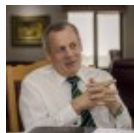
By this time she was living with her ill mother-in-law, helping with domestic chores by day and toiling away over an old, Remington typewriter by night. "It was about just that," she says of the plot of Muriel. "My restlessness. The things I learned about the kind of life that we had to lead, our poverty, everything about us. I wrote that."

Night after night, the ambitious young Tlali sat in her home in Soweto and laboured for hours to complete her first novel. Through her protagonist, Muriel, she was able to articulate her frustration and anger at apartheid, as well as her hope for a different future. By digging through all of her own pain at being seen as a commodity in her own country, she shone a light on the cruel reality of South Africa.

In 1969, she finished Muriel at Metropolitan. She had put everything into it but her work was not done. Publishing material that was critical of the state was just about

impossible. "It was very hard to get it published," Tlali says. "It sat collecting dust for around five years because I was tired of looking for a publisher. Most would read it and return it to me and say, 'Sorry, we can't publish this.'"

Skotaville Press finally published Muriel in 1975. After six years of effort, Tlali would have been satisfied with just that.



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She didn't know that she had become the first black woman to have a novel published in South Africa. "I was surprised," she says of her accomplishment. "I took it for granted, you know, because we have so many intelligent African women and I knew them. So I just assumed that one of them must have written something."

In spite of this, Tlali understood why no other black, African woman had written a novel and why no one had wanted to publish her book. She knew that the leaders of her country did not want to hear what she and those like her had to say. In apartheid South Africa, a voice like Tlali's was destined to be silenced. That she overcame these obstacles makes her achievements all the more remarkable.

Four years after it was published, the authorities predictably banned Muriel at Metropolitan. "I knew it was speaking against the system, against what I saw happening" she says. "I knew it wouldn't be accepted. But I didn't really mind about that. At least I had vented out all that was hurting me inside."

This was just the beginning for Tlali. Her second novel, Amandla, suffered the same fate as her first. Based on the Soweto Uprisings of 1976, it too was quickly banned – but both Amandla and Muriel managed to find audiences abroad. Determined to keep sharing her writing, she co-founded the magazine Staffrider. Taking its name from the practise of people hanging outside the carriages of the overcrowded, racially segregated trains, Staffrider became one of the most important literary presences of the 70s and 80s.

By 1986, Tlali's illegal works were unbanned. The apartheid structure was beginning to dismantle. South Africa's freedom was close. Aside from her literary contribution to this struggle, as a member of the Women's National Coalition, Tlali also assisted in drafting the Preamble to the South African Women's Charter.

In 2001, she was officially recognised as the first African woman to publish a novel in South Africa by the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology. In 2005, they again honoured Tlali as a recipient of their Literary Lifetime Achievement Award. Three years later, she was awarded the Presidential Award for her immense contribution to South African literature.

It's a testament to how far struggle heroes like Tlali have brought the nation. Now she is part of a country that

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honours those it once sought to oppress. "I think now is the time, she says. "Now I can write almost anything I like. Everybody accepts you."

This year, Miriam Tlali celebrated her 81st birthday. Still, she's a long way from running out of things to say. In the process of completing her autobiography, the author knows better than most that what she puts down on paper has the potential and the power to transform our world.

"Just a book by itself – if it has the right messages – can change a whole human being. It can remake a person. It can change someone into something he never thought he could be.

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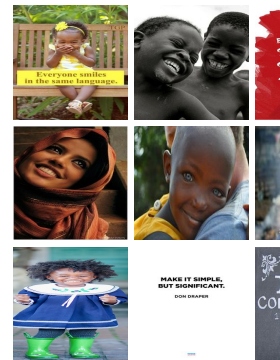
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