



STORYTELLER Writer Miriam Tlali during the portrait shoot in Soweto, Joburg, for photographer Adrian Steirn's 21 Icons project

PHOTO: GARY VAN WYK

“
A good book by itself,
if it has the right
messages in it, can
change a person, his
outlook, his persona;
it can change a
human being into
something he never
thought he could be

— Miriam Tlali

Herstory

SPOKEN TRUTH

The 19th icon of the second season of 21 Icons SA is Miriam Tlali, the first black woman in South Africa to publish a novel. Muriel at Metropolitan, which was published in 1975, was a semi-autobiographical work. Tlali is also the author of the critically acclaimed *Amandla*, published in 1980.

The portrait features a famous quote lifted from her literary work inscribed across glass. The photo is shot through the glass, and the words slightly obscure Tlali's face, which is symbolic of the subjective interpretation of words, including literary expression and production, through the looking glass of oneself.

In an intimate conversation, Tlali talks about her life as the first black South African female author. Born in Doornfontein, Joburg, she grew up in Sophiatown - the legendary community within Joburg that was completely destroyed because it was the sole area where Africans were permitted to take permanent title to land.

She attributes her passion for reading from a young age to her teachers. "We had very good teachers. These people had been the first royal readers. They had learnt teaching under the United People's Party and they all spoke English really well," she says.

Matriculating at the young age of 15, Tlali's teachers were always in awe of her stories and she used to help write their personal and business letters.

Because positions were reserved for white students at Wits, she could not study literature there, although that's what she wanted to do.

With her hands full of William Thackeray and Charles Dickens classics, she later attended the Pius XII Catholic University College (now the University of Lesotho). Unable to continue her studies due to financial constraints, she found a job as a book-keeper at a furniture store.

Feeling demotivated and despondent at this job, she left her position to be a stay at home mother and to look after her ailing mother-in-law. During this time, she penned her first novel and, in 1969, Tlali had written and completed *Muriel at Metropolitan*. "I was surprised that I was the first black woman to write a book. I took it for



BEHIND THE ICON
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granted that there must be someone else who had authored literature, only to find out that when I had finished writing and submitting it to the publisher, that I was in fact the first African woman in South Africa to write and publish a book."

The novel was only published in 1975 and, in 1979, the book was banned by the apartheid government. But it was published internationally by Longman African Classics under the title *Between Two Worlds*. The South African

government censored her work and cut out certain chapters, phrases and sentences.

"A few months after the books were published, I was in Lesotho at the time, I tried to stay away from South Africa because I was ashamed of this book, the way they had cut it, and I didn't like it."

Tlali remembers women from a Jewish organisation selling her book and she felt really proud. She chuckles as she remembers one woman asking her if she really wrote it. "I said 'yes', and she said 'No, some white man must have written it for you.'" Tlali laughs it off as she says: "They assumed that as Africans, we were inferior human beings and we were incapable of doing things such as writing novels."

Based on the 1976 Soweto uprising, Tlali published her second novel, *Amandla*, in 1980. This novel was very different from her first and displayed no tolerance. Rather, it took a committed activist stance.

During this time, she toured England and visited the homes of ancient writers, those responsible for the classics that she used to devour, and she realised that she had to document everything.

Tlali says that when she came back from the trip to London, she knew she had to write *Amandla*. "I feared no political opponent at the time and was already being pursued by the boers. It was difficult for me to write because they could come at any time, and they would come in the night and search the house."

They would take her material and question why her writing was in English and not in her native language.

Banned only weeks after it was published, *Amandla* was translated into several languages, including Japanese, Polish, German and Dutch.

In 1984, she wrote a collection of short stories titled *Mihloti* (meaning "tears") and in 1989, *Footprints in the Quag* was published.

As an author, Tlali has travelled the world and represented South Africa in several countries. In 1978, she was invited to an international writing programme at Iowa State University in the US. Between 1989 and 1990, Tlali was a visiting scholar at the Southern African Research Program at Yale University.

Tlali has received many accolades for her contribution to the literary profession, including being honoured by the department of arts, culture, science and technology for being the first black South African woman to publish a novel. In 1995, she was honoured with a Literary Lifetime Achievement Award; and, in 2008, she received the Order of Ikhamanga (silver).

Tlali founded the publishing house Skotaville. As a member of the Women's National Coalition, Tlali helped draft the preamble to the SA Women's Charter.

In 2013, Tlali celebrated her 80th birthday.

Watch Miriam Tlali on SABC3 at 8:27pm today. For more information, visit 21icons.com



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