



WOMAN IN WAITING: Winnie Mandela serves as a unifying motif and national metaphor in Njabulo Ndebele's new novel. PICTURE: SUNDAY TIMES

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NO WOMAN, NO CRY

Although it provides insight into the private struggles of Winnie Mandela, Njabulo Ndebele's new work is a slightly uneasy novel that started out as an essay

GAIL SMITH

THE *Cry of Winnie Mandela* is a novel about four women who engage in imaginary conversations with Winnie Mandela.

The women: Mannete Mofolo, Delisiwe S'khosana, Mamello Molete and Marara Joyce Baloyi, are all women who, like Mandela, have spent time waiting for their husbands to return.

Mannete waits in a Lesotho village for a husband who disappeared into the migrant labour system in Johannesburg and who never reappears. Delisiwe's husband goes abroad to study and returns after 14 years to discover she's had a child with another man, whereupon he divorces her. Mamello's husband disappears without a trace, resurfaces in exile in Cuba, is arrested on his return to South Africa and imprisoned on Robben Island where she visits him like a dutiful wife. On his release he divorces her and marries another woman within weeks. Marara's husband is a philanthropist and drunk, who dies ignominiously. She nonetheless buries him in keeping with the tradition of what's expected of a good wife.

The novel is built around these characters and the game they play with the most famous wife who waited: Winnie. In the course of the game, they ask her questions and talk about shared experiences: the anguish of waiting, frustrated sexual desires, alcohol abuse, infidelity, rejection and abandonment.

The Cry of Winnie Mandela mixes fact and fiction; it weaves the facts of Winnie's life into the fiction of the four women's lives. While the four women approach Winnie with considerable respect, and spend an inordinate amount of energy in trying to find the most respectful way of addressing her, the novel does not spare Winnie's blushes.

Delisiwe, whose betrayal of her husband and marital vows is evident in the existence of a child, raises the thorny issue of infidelity and asks Winnie: "What kind of pressures lead a famous, married woman to write a

THE CRY OF WINNIE MANDELA

By Njabulo Ndebele

New Africa Books, R120

love letter that ends up in the newspapers, turning her private life into a public spectacle?" The letter in question, written to Dali Mpofu (a controversial ex-lover of Winnie's), is reprinted and deconstructed in great detail by Delisiwe in her attempt to answer her own question, and to share her own dirty secret: sexual frustration assuaged in the arms of a younger and unworthy lover.

Ndebele is an acclaimed essayist and theorist, and the novel's portrayal of women who wait provides a deep and rich context to the life and experiences of a woman who has been highly visible, contested and contentious since the middle of last century. It provides some insight into her private struggles and pain.

It broadens the lens and sheds light on the thousands of South African women subjected to life as "unmarried married women" and problematises the notion of the faithful, sexless, comrade wives who held the home fires burning while men went out to fight liberation struggles, dig for gold, earn fame and fortune in foreign academic institutions, or who just never came home preferring to pursue wine, women and song.

The Cry of Winnie Mandela is an awkward novel. According to its author, Njabulo Ndebele, it began as an essay. And this is the source of its awkwardness: it remains too self-conscious, constantly pulling one into the writer's predicaments and struggles with the characters. Ndebele's analytical voice is prevalent throughout, and he speaks through the women like a ventriloquist. The tone of their conversations remains discourteous and he ultimately does not succeed in withdrawing sufficiently in order to allow the relaxed essence of sista-gathering to emerge.