

# Winnie's facts and fictions, the stuff of pure drama

ONE of the most fascinating women whose story still inspires many people in the country is none other than Winnie Madikizela-Mandela. The former ANC Women's League president, who spent much of her adult life persecuted by the apartheid government and subjected to several banning orders in Brandfort, continues to enjoy a high profile role in society even after she stepped down from her position in the league.

Madikizela-Mandela's story is now the subject of a fictionalised story in a book by acclaimed author and academic Njabulo S Ndebele, called *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*. The novel is a story of five South African women who wait in agony for their departed husbands. The four ordinary women wait in private while Winnie Mandela waits in public.

Mannete Mofolo's poor husband leaves for a South African mine in Welkom. He never comes back. Delisiwe Skhosana's ambitious husband obtains a scholarship to study medicine in Scotland. When he returns after 14 years, he finds his wife has a four-year-old illegitimate child.

Mamello Molete's husband is self-exiled in Cuba, then jailed for 15 years on Robben Island. When he comes out to the new South Africa, he divorces her. He marries a white woman who has been a comrade. But Mamello Molete feels betrayed. She goes through "five nervous breakdowns" after the divorce. She attacks him in a letter: "I want to ask. Has it been worth it? To sacrifice me at the altar of non-racialism? Did you have to have a rainbow family:

## Prof N S Zulu reviews a book on the icon by Njabulo Ndebele

you [black], your [white] wife, and your coloured child?"

Marara Baloyi's rich husband is always out sleeping around with other women. He eventually dies of a strange disease

The four ordinary women play a game in which they address an imaginary Winnie Mandela. This is how they play it.

Delisiwe tells Winnie Mandela she is a "child of pitfalls". Though her face is a "brazen display of courage", her "vulnerability stands out". The "brazen display of courage" is a vindication that "something happened in your life", that "consigned your life to pure drama". She accuses Winnie Mandela: "What kind of pressures lead a famous, married woman to write to her [illicit] lover a letter that ends up in the newspapers, turning her private life into her public spectacle?"

She further asks Winnie how she felt when she was "so thoroughly abused by a young man" who took advantage of her "terrible vulnerabilities". But despite being humiliated, "you drew comfort from a desperate love for him".

Delisiwe Skhosana consoles Winnie Mandela that she, too, fell into such temptation. She had soulless intercourse with

a boy who was the age of her son. Her relationship with the young man became a "nightmare" because of his abuse. He became her "terror", and as she says, "a sin of commission". He always looked at her with "unveiled contempt" and his coming to her "whenever he wished of me to 'give' him", turned her into "an object".

The torture becomes so unbearable that she ends up shutting him out of her life for good when he demands another abusive "give". She charges: "Mfanyana [young boy], stop right there, you little monster! Get out of my house and don't ever come back. Go tell it to the whole township from the rooftops: the magogo [old woman] I've been fucking has had enough of me. You are mean and nasty and cruel and are dead to me."

Mamello Molete reminds Winnie that Major Theunis Swanepoel who used to raid her neat house in Soweto in the early mornings destroyed her precious and orderly life. Later, Major Swanepoel tortured her in jail. According to Mamello, Swanepoel's evil was written on his face, and he is described in the novel as "this evil incarnate". Swanepoel was "notorious and feared throughout the land among the oppressed". The height of his brutality to Winnie is presented as follows: "Major Theunis Swanepoel kept it all going from the secret autonomy of the torture chamber. That chamber made you, Winnie, catapulting you to a public position to challenge the outward symbols of power that it sustained. That was your apprenticeship to violence and power."

Then Winnie became a monster herself, as Mamello Molete observes. Her Mandela United Football Club is seen as her ultimate power of destruction, but Winnie tells her sordid story honestly: "In my hand I wielded the spear of one brand name; Mandela United FC. Men: drivers, bodyguards, kidnappers, torturers, murderers, fugitives, arsonists, spies, lovers, comrades, slaves, opportunists, hangers-on. I dominated them all. I, queen of Brandfort. They came, wanting me in secret, yet yearning to display their trophy in public. Opportunists. Dogs on heat. Men! I despise them. Except Nelson."

The reader wonders whether what is said about Winnie Mandela qualifies to be fiction. It pretends to. The fact that both the real and the fictional are presented as a powerful essay, overpowers the fictional and renders it the real. Consequently, a new discourse emerges - another life history of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela - the new biography: *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* by Njabulo S Ndebele.

Does she, the real Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, care about the content of the novel? Has she read it before publication? And what was her response? The fictionalised Winnie Mandela does not seem to care at all. She mocks: "If this imaginary book in which we women in waiting for our husbands gets published, please send me a copy." She tells her accusers, who symbolise ordinary women who have similar problems, but form gossip groups about her, that: "I feel calm and serene." I accept "your unsparing comments as well as your sympathy", but "I feel neither attacked nor venerated by you."

Is this perhaps the feeling of the real Winnie Madikizela-Mandela?

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THE REAL WINNIE . . . Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, a real life fictionalised in a new book