

BOOK REVIEWS

BOOK REVIEW: *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* by Njabulo Ndebele David Philip Publishers 2003

It is said that Freud posed the following question, but was unable to answer it: What does a woman want. In Freud's own words: "The great question that has never been answered and which I have not yet been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is 'What does a woman want?' " The latter-day Freud documented hysteria, obsession and castration, anxiety in the unconscious, as part of what he thought a woman was made up of. Frantz Fanon in *Black Skins, White Masks* asked and answered the question: What does a Black Man want? Later Helen Cixous and Catherine Clement in *The Newly Born Woman* would take us a long way into articulating what a woman wants. While Alice Walker in *In Search of our Gardens*, Trinh Minh-ha in *Woman, Native, Other*, bell hooks and other scholars began to ponder about question: what does a black woman want? The literary works of Sindiwe Magona and Antjie Krog among others, have taken us further along the journey of gaining insights into what a South African woman would want of her life and of the world.

Njabulo Ndebele in his latest work helps to answer the question: what does a (black) South African woman want. In this way, he re-writes the literary landscape and lays bare the (female) fullness of the South African nation through letting the voices of women speak, cry, articulate their anguish and their joy – hence the title of his book – *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*. It could be said that his task is a radical repositioning of South African women within a literary terrain that up until now has not received the full attention it deserves.

The book begins by describing and analysing the longing of women for the men they love, the high standards of fidelity at which they are judged by the world, the hardships that are the lot of these women whose men have been taken away from them or who have chosen to abandon them for one reason or another. Ndebele looks at four women, each one's plight in dealing with what he calls "the inescapable condition of living in the zone of absence without duration" and within the individuality of each one's pain, he finds a story that needs to be told, something redeeming that can be extracted, that "partakes of the essence of beauty." As he says, "they all make up that gaze that captures the condition of life through time measured in states of waiting. That gaze is the enduring, eternal solidity of being. It is a condition of beauty that balances doom with triumph. The look of coming and going." The women, after telling their stories, finally meet and plan a conversation with Winnie Mandela since "only Winnie was history in the making. There was no stability for her, only the inexorable unfolding of events; the constant tempting of experience. The flight of Winnie's life promised no foreknown destinations. It was an ongoing public conversation, perhaps to public to be understood."

Ndebele's choice of Winnie Mandela as the centrepiece of his text is thoroughly appropriate, since above everything else, Winnie has been a survivor, one who bounces back ("the woman with nine lives" is how she is described) and whom masses of people still identify with and still regard as a hero(ine) no matter what she is said to have done. She has succeed in retaining a sense of self and has asserted her

own way of doing things in a political world dominated by South African men and a country still in the grips of patriarchy despite cosmetic and real changes that have taken place and that have to some extent sought to empower South Africa's women. Wittingly and unwittingly, she had made inroads into the world of men not to belong in that world as woman, but in order to challenge its assumptions and to continue to project herself, despite years of suffering and isolation, as one who is equal to them and thus equally worthy of adulation and of being taken seriously. Thus the cry of Winnie Mandela is the cry of endurance and the capacity to overcome suffering and to transform it into something bigger and more noble than themselves.

The Winnie Mandela of Ndebele's book looks back at her past and says that the time she was forced to spend away from her home during her period of banishment gave her a sense of power: "Brandfort was my first taste of power, something close to absolute power. It came from my sense of having the ability to change things in a place that had no notion of change." She is seen to be a woman who has managed to defy those who wanted to destroy her and who has managed to flout the unwritten rules meant to keep women subjugated. When she engages in a conversation with herself in this book, she describes the harassment she suffered at the hands of the authorities as "part of a long act of war." The freeing of Nelson Mandela becomes the end of the war: "when the heroine triumphantly walks into prison, the entire world watching, to fetch her man. Winnie does not wait. She goes and gets what she wants. And there she was coming out of the prison with her price: Nelson."

In Winnie Mandela's earlier attempts to free herself from the miserable act of waiting, she journeys across the country, she becomes the "queen of the highways" and finds part of her freedom in motion, as she moves from one place to another. As Carole Boyce Davies explains in her critical book, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, "one's location may therefore be a site of creativity and re-memory; exploration, challenge, instability. It is Winnie's understanding that politics has created South African lives, made them what they are. People have not been allowed to invent themselves or to make what they want of their lives. Whereas, here the politics of location perhaps creates a free space, a liberated zone, in which Winnie can travel, rather than the location of politics that traps her even as it grants her a certain power. She enjoys "the possibilities of infinite travel to an infinite number of destinations, in the land of infinite possibility." When one of other women narrates her story as if in an imaginary correspondence with Winnie, she also refers to travelling as an act of liberation, where home is not a building with rooms, but "a country full of people, trees, mountains, rivers". In this way the traditional trappings of women's oppression – the confines of a house and enforced domesticity - are replaced by a national stage in which women can act in the main roles of their own making and take centre-stage. And the rebuilding of homes in ways that do not entrap, but as creative living spaces, becomes crucial in nurturing a new nationhood.

Towards the end of this novel, the women who have waited in vain come together and celebrate their freedom by going on a holiday to the coast. This physical journey that they undertake is again symbolic of the freedom they have won. In all the cases mentioned, while the year 1994 meant freedom from oppression, it was the departure of their husbands that brought about their liberation from male domination and their emergence as "fully-fledged beings". The women are opening the way for even greater possibilities for living their own lives and realising their own dreams, unedited

Ndebele's book is well-written and flows from page to page as though we were really hearing the voices of women speaking, arguing, revealing intimacies about their lives. The words are neither forced nor are the women too familiar with the reader, but they reveal more and more about themselves and their insights about the lives of others as the novel proceeds and as layer after layer is peeled off neatly. Ndebele writes not only to rename women and re-fashion their role in the new South Africa, but his words are addressed at anyone who has had to endure the act of waiting for a loved one. He extends our cultural and literary imagination of who we are and what we want. In the new South Africa, in this age of rapid and rampant globalisation, many more women wait as their men travel the country and the world on business or in seek of work. And some men wait for their women too. All of them deserve to be part of a new national narrative of what it means to be woman, what it means to be South African in these new times.

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