Women who wait

A thread of longing, suffering, patience and guilt looms large in Njabulo Ndebele's latest novel, writes Khadija Magardie.

The Cry of Winnie Mandela

The Cry of Winnie Mandela — a novel, as the author makes plain on the cover, fest we mistakenly believe she's finally spilled the beans about the nineteen years without Nelson, is not the transcript of months of heart-to-heart interviews with Winnie Mandela (as one of her biographies is titled).

Rather, it is the mind's eye of four black South African women who have spent most of their lives waiting for a husband or lover to return to them.

Husbands who never do return. Husbands who desert them for younger, prettier, (interestingly) whiter rivals. Husbands who eventually do return, but the waiting was too long for that woman. "When a woman is caught in waiting no longer requires the return of a companion who departed so long ago he has become a memory that no longer evokes passion."

That woman asks herself terrible questions about her waiting. About why she waits, about whether or not he will ever return. She asks herself why she shouldn't go ahead and make plans for her life without that man.

Of the four women have names, others don't. The author calls them "descendants", Of Penelope, a heroine in Homer's Odyssey, who waited faithfully, ignoring all advances from other men, for 18 years, for the return of a husband. Through their eyes, Njabulo Ndebele tells the story, as he puts it on the very first page, of South Africa's most famous woman, who waited.

Mannette Moleo, the first descendant, is a woman from a Lesotho village, who waits for a husband who disappeared into the bowels of the gold mines of Johannesburg. The second descendant is betrayed by infidelity, not so much her man's, as her own. Her husband has gone overseas to study medicine. She sends him money and keeps her home afloat by doing extra work, brings up her children, and waits. Between the silence of waiting, are the whispers of temptation. Her husband returns home after 14 years, and finds a four-year-old child. He leaves and marries another woman. The author tells us her husband has been unfaithful to his wife during his travels in foreign lands. Yet he is unforgiving of his young wife who waited, and through whose sacrifices he had become what he had become.

Mamello Molets, the third descendant, waits for a husband who disappears without word one ordinary day. She later finds he has gone into exile, and spends decades waiting lovingly for his return. He eventually does come back, and becomes a high-profile politician. His wife does not fit into the trappings of power, he sends a letter saying will not be coming back to her. No explanations.

Then he marries a white woman. Heartbroken, she calls him, begging him to return. She goes to a sangoma for help. "Once the novelty was over, he would miss the ways of a black woman. I was sure of myself, once more. He would come back. He would miss the way a woman in the township does things." He never does.

The vulnerability of these two icons, the Mandelas, are laid bare in the novel.

The fourth descendant's life is told only in two pages. The woman is thinking about her husband who has just died. A philanderer and drinker who never supported her or his family, he died bereft of dignity and status in the community. Yet she buried him in an expensive casket and went with the decorum expected of a woman who lost a loved one. She asks herself why she still treated him with respect, even in death. "What keeps a woman from throwing away such a man?"

Through a combination of the imagined and what has actually happened, the four women's lives weave a thread of questions.

Questions that any woman who has ever waited for a man, would ask Winnie Madikizela-Mandela. About what it has been like waiting so long. About why she waited. About her loneliness, her vulnerability. About whether she longed for his return, or whether her return eventually turned to dread.

Fact is interwoven into the storyline in the second part of the book where an imaginary meeting takes place between the four descendants, and Winnie Madikizela-Mandela herself. It is there that she answers their questions, and at this point where the common thread of longing, suffering, patience and guilt brings the women together. Excerpts from the Mandela divorce court proceedings are used as a device through which the women bolster their questions to the country's most famous "unmarried married man" as she called herself.

The book does begin to lose focus at this point, where Winnie the married woman becomes the side issue, and questions around the TRC, the Stompie Seipei case and the like are raised. "So much ugliness was ascribed to that. One cannot help but that the eyes roll back in the familiar "we knew this would come up eventually" sense.

Perhaps this part of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's life did not really need to be in a book that attempts to unpack her as a woman in love.

The vulnerability of the two icons — which the Mandelas essentially are in their own respective roles — are laid bare in these transcripts, which were reported on extensively at the time. Testimony from Nelson Mandela about how his former wife would not spend time alone with him in the room the night he returned home. The letters, of calling each other "Comrade", instead of by each other's first names. Whilst not wishing to stray into cliché of its own, "I was fascinated by the theme of departure, of the waiting, and of the return."

Interestingly, he made repeated mention of how he had not interacted much with the subject of the book, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, who attended the launch and that his book was only an interpretation of her life, "a work of imagination. I don't know when she reads this book if she will recognise herself," he joked.