



Books Page edited by
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On Tuesday, Njabulo Ndebele, the vice-chancellor of the University of Cape Town, met Winnie Madikizela-Mandela for the first time. She turned up, unexpectedly, at the launch in Hyde Park, Johannesburg, of *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, Ndebele's novel. Although she had just been cheered by the crowds at the Cosatu national congress, her appearance at the launch of the book that holds a light to a complex combination of flaws, foibles and strengths, but makes no judgment was an act of bravery. In an interview with *The Sunday Independent*, Ndebele said she was clearly vulnerable.

"What a beautiful woman. It was the first time I saw her so closely."

By taking on Madikizela-Mandela, Ndebele too has shown that he is no coward.

It is 20 years since the publication of *Fools and Other Stories*, a collection about township life under apartheid, established Ndebele firmly in the South African literary scene as a writer of great sensibility and humour, alongside his trenchant literary criticism.

In November 1984, in Rediscovery of the Ordinary, a keynote address at a conference on New Writing in Africa: Continuity and Change at the Commonwealth Institute in London, he denounced "the social focus on the heroic, the posturing [in a culture controlled by whites] that denies the subtlety of thought and feeling, of close analysis and the mature acceptance of failure, weakness and limitations". The address was published in 1991 in *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture*.

In *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* he has tried to resolve the literary problems he highlighted in 1984 by taking a long, hard look at Winnie. But this does not mean that he does not love her absolutely. He seems in fact to be confounded by this fact. He makes no attempt to explain her. He says: "I think I understand her, I make that position from the book wherein she is neither glorified nor condemned. She is more than the sum total of contradictions that play out in her life. The end of her game reveals this



Literary muse: Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, before the launch, at the Cosatu congress
PHOTOGRAPH: MUJAHID SAFODIEN



Winnie as a symbol of the burden of waiting

Maureen Isaacson speaks to Njabulo Ndebele about his 'brave' new novel that explores the life of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela

understanding of herself."

By allowing Winnie hindsight and self-reflection in the novel he has provided a chance for her reconciliation. In the universe he creates, self-knowledge is a key to the growth of consciousness he has long been calling for in literature.

He insists that this novel is an exploration not an examination of the woman who once symbolised the plight of South African women who were forced into waiting. "I came to realise this was a typically South African psychological phenomenon, literally hundreds of thousands of women have been left by their husbands and forced to wait due to migrant labour laws, politics and exile."

The burden of this waiting is the theme of the novel.

Cry, which Ndebele embarked upon during the 1980s, examines the phenomenon of absence, the longing and sexual desire experienced by women controlled by rules made by men. These lonely women are prey for men who use them as "sexual merchandise" but bizarrely require absolute fidelity and purity. Many women colluded with this hypocrisy.

Ndebele used the story of Penelope who waited for Odysseus for 18 years before she forsook her fidelity

as "a metaphorical frame within which to examine this phenomenon". There is no literal short-cut here. Ndebele claims there are no absolute congruities between Winnie and Penelope. He says that he is playing a literary game in what he calls "our imaginary book" in order to distance himself from the task he has taken on. He borrows from Homer's *The Odyssey*. He adds four women who serve as a chorus representing both the conscience of Winnie and the audience. From Milan Kundera he borrows the idea that the women represent thoughts, and he uses these thoughts in a dialogue with Winnie that is both torturous and liberating.

Ndebele has used biographical accounts: Emma Gilbey's *The Lady*, *The Life and Times of Winnie Mandela*, Nancy Harrison's *Winnie Mandela, the Mother of the Nation*, Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*, Luli Callinicos's *The World that Made Mandela*. He has read a lesser-known autobiographical account by Winnie, *Part of My Soul Went With Him*, as well as media reports.

Ndebele's articulation of Winnie is unique and unstinting. "Winnie says 'I am not a politician, I am what politics made me.' Winnie was

equipped with the personality but perhaps not the right character for the public waiting she did on behalf of South African women." Her "bravado ... became a ritual act symbolising selfless commitment to a public cause."

Ndebele finds her overblown gestures amusing. Recalling her childhood in Bizana in the Eastern Cape, where she kept the company of boys and softened only when forced to take care of her siblings following her mother's death, she said: "I miss my childhood. I realise the effect it had on me; the love of my country, running through those bare fields barefooted."

In the novel he takes Winnie to task for her insincerity, her descent into banality and for the way she came to believe she owned the struggle. During her confrontation with a lawyer at the truth commission hearings into the murder of Stompie Seipei by the Mandela Football Club, which she headed, she achieved "a victory of image and posture, which had become fused into a compelling reality of their own". Ndebele does not fail to note that she refused to take responsibility for her actions.

But he manages to separate the raw vulnerability of Winnie Man-

del from the grand gesture of her own political rhetoric. "She says it is dangerous if the mask and the wearer of the mask become one thing. It is self-consciousness that brings intimacy into the clash between the external and the personal."

No mean force to be reckoned with, with her many gifts, Winnie is also a victim. In the desolation of Brandfort, where she served a succession of banning orders between 1963 and 1975, she said: "I was powerless before my own loneliness." Ndebele says the Brandfort experience was excruciating to write. By describing "the maddening desire of a woman wracked by an indescribable love without an object", Ndebele risks unknown territory. How else was he to tackle the time in Winnie's life when her affair with Dali Mpofu came to an embarrassing, public end?

This exploration of Madikizela-Mandela touches all of us because we are all carrying Nelson and Winnie and their drama within us, says Ndebele. At the launch of *Cry* in Cape Town last week, he said that at some point the public figures who reside within us cease to have control over their self-definition. So that public morality is the extent to which we bring all of these inter-

pretations of such figures to the public domain. Ndebele stresses emphatically the responsibility of journalists, politicians, writers and artists in this regard.

He provides an atmosphere in which Winnie can unburden herself, but she will also later complain of the improprieties of freedom.

He has wrested Winnie from what he referred to in Rediscovery of the Ordinary as "the spectacular political wrestling match of the South African social formation".

Then he took aim at the obviousness that distorted South African fiction. He acknowledges that in *Cry* he has achieved the depth that comes with exploring the interiority of character - a notion he was once forced to defend. In 1984 he was adamant that literature provides not lessons but a compelling context for in-depth examination.

Ndebele's success lies in his ability to penetrate the essence of the issues he explores.

He says several women have approached him and asked: "How do you understand this experience? It is my experience." He is adamant that *Cry* is not a feminist treatise. "I was trying to explore the limits and possibilities through female experi-

ence. Feminism becomes one interpretation but it is not the only one."

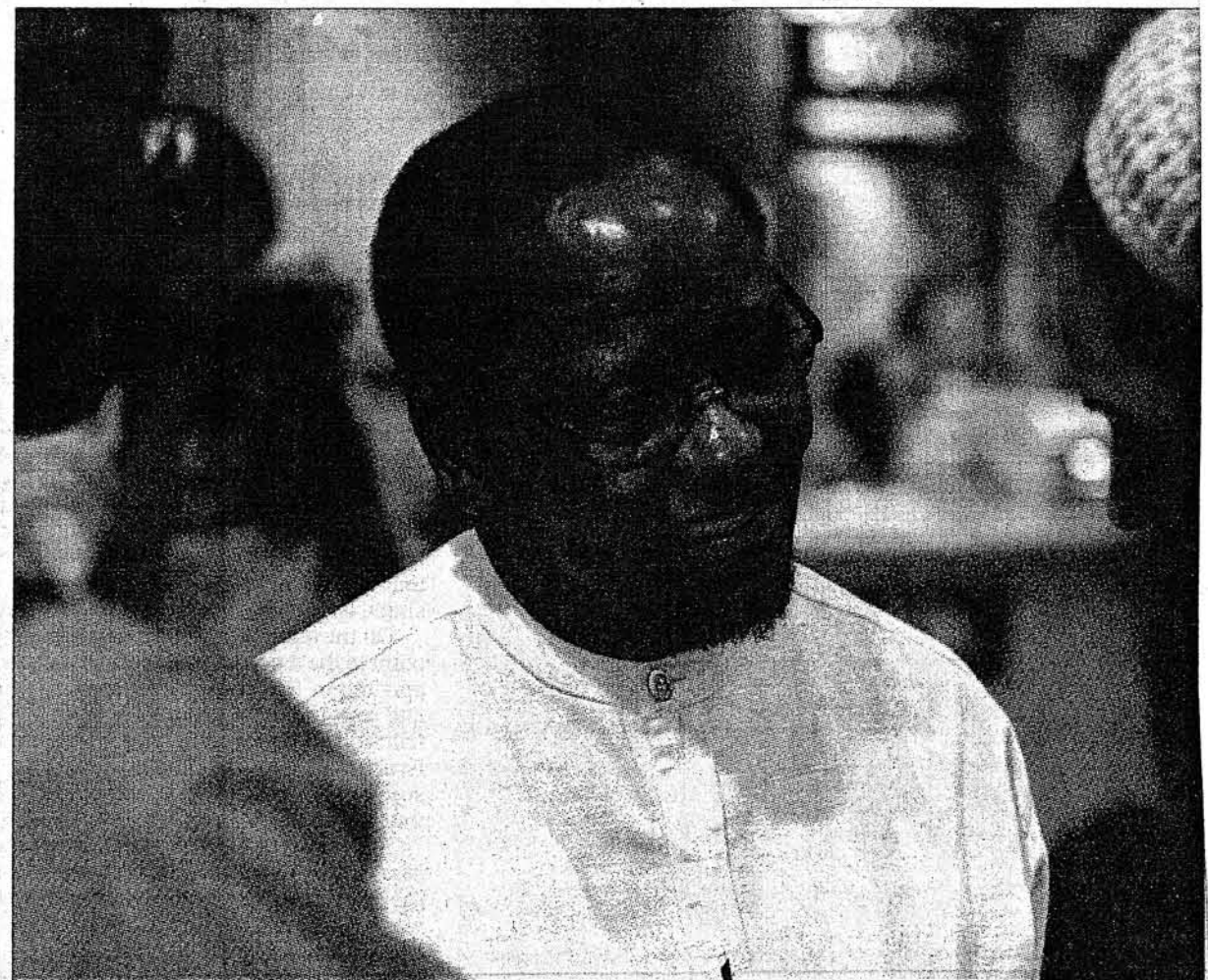
It was demanded of Winnie that she resemble the famous husband who left her behind. Blessed with extraordinary charisma and beauty she became, as she describes in *Cry* "a character ... in my own story, certain in the knowledge that I could never be entirely my own creation, even less yours".

With Winnie, Ndebele rages against whiteness, against "the imposed notions of order" into which the country had been socialised under "the long scream of apartheid".

Like Winnie he rages against the "order sought by disorder" caused by the predawn raids, the brutality of which was internalised by so many victims. Nelson Mandela provided a home for all and we still carry this home within us. But still, says Ndebele, we are displaced. "We still have to find the homes that have been shattered."

"How does somebody rape a three-year-old? What place does such a person come from?"

● *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* by Njabulo Ndebele is published by New Africa Books and costs R123.



Njabulo Ndebele at the launch of his new book *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, which takes a long, hard look at a woman who is regarded as a South African icon
PHOTOGRAPH: TJ LEMON