

Indulgent Violence: The Legacy of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela

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There was nothing of the Siddhartha about her. Modest and sombre middle ways are not the stuff of revolutionary ardour. Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's mark on history was always going to render the violent normal, the blood stain a perceived, even psychopathic necessity. If society itself was prone to sanguinary realisations, she would oblige and flourish within its confines.

Everyone has [their take](#) on the Madikizela-Mandela legacy, and a few are compiled in the publication *The Penguin Dictionary of South African Quotations* (1999). These observations point to a terrifyingly colourful variety, a figure part saint and part gargoyle. She was “a political figure of almost Shakespearean tragic proportions,” opined Judge Dennis Davis. Her hands dripped with the blood of South Africa's people, went a reflective Xoliswa Falati, who formerly knew her and claimed to have gone to prison for her.

As for those defenders of the apartheid state? “Whenever her name was mentioned in security circles,” came that rueful assassin and former commander of the Vlakpaas counterinsurgency unit, Eugene de Kock, “a shudder went through the ranks.”

The problem with such assessments of ecstatic violence, if it be a problem, is its circular hopelessness. Is the circle ever broken to enable an escape to be forged for the peace makers? To place her in dramatic pose and see her as Shakespearean leaves the mistaken sense that she is more dramatic than volitional, bound by destiny and text rather than consciousness and will. It ignores another point she could be charged with: indulgence.

The [biography](#) by Anne Marie du Preez Bezdrob focuses on that staple view of “women's ability to face difficulties and misfortune with grace, tenacity and humour, and still embrace life with delight”. Du Preez Bezdrob engages in a tendency typical in one strand of Madikizela-Mandela hagiography. Her politics are considered secondary, even if her status is not. Her claim, made in 2003, was that “her community involvement was not an extension of her role as a politician, but a result of the fact that she still saw herself primarily as a social worker and mother.” Winnie, suggests du Preez Bezdrob, can be counted among “the millions of nameless women who chose to confront oppression and injustice when it is safer to turn and look the other way.”

With her passing, various South African figures insisted that she be remembered as a monumental female role model. Consider [the words](#) of South African Airways CEO Vuyani Jarana:

“She would have loved to see young women being at the forefront of that

struggle for development, building the country, building the economy.”

In the ethical spring cleaning and catharsis that was the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, Madikizela-Mandela did not fare well. Members concluded in 1998 that she was “politically and morally responsible” for various “gross violations of human rights” committed by her fashioned weapons in the form of the Mandela United Football Club. These youthful, often brutal supporters were not averse to inflicting appalling cruelties. In the words of the TRC, she was “implicated directly in a range of incidents – including assaults, abduction and the murder and attempted murder of at least a dozen individuals.”

Activists and campaigners against the apartheid regime also found her methods hard to stomach. [Paul Trewhela](#), a veteran underground journalist, communist and former political prisoner in Pretoria and the Johannesburg Fort, acknowledged the crushing difficulties she faced, even as her husband of growing legend remained confined on Robben Island.

She worked with activists in Soweto prior to the school student uprising of June 16, 1976. For eighteen months, she was a resident of Pretoria Central Prison, where she suffered spells of torture. Then came those eight years of exile in the “little Siberia” of Brandfort.

“There is no question,” he writes sympathetically, “that she provided inspiration across those decades under the apartheid regime. All praise to Winnie Mandela for her outstanding, exceptional courage and daring, her unrelenting defiance.”

All that said, prison, confinement and surveillance transformed her. In Trewhela’s words, courage and defiance are never enough – even those inclined to brutality can have them. On her return to Soweto in 1985, she busied herself with terrorising “an already terrorised people. She returned as a psychopath.”

Her exploits came back to haunt her, though she proved dismissive of them. The child figure of Stompie Moeketsi Seipei, kidnapped along with three other youths from the Soweto Methodist Manse, featured in all its gore in the Rand Supreme Court in 1991.

Winnie’s vicious charges certainly loved their work, though some would suggest that part of their dedication was inspired by raw fear. Stompie was murdered; Katiza Cebukhulu, another victim of abduction, was scalded by boiling water and rendered to Zambia three days prior to the trial and held for two years in Lusaka. Cebukhulu suggested that Stompie was finished “off with a sharp, tiny object”, the coup de grace administered by Madikizela-Mandela herself. Jerry Richardson, the “coach” of the Mandela United Football Club, supplied a different account, claiming in 1997 [before the TRC](#) that he had “slaughtered [Seipei] like a goat” under the instructions of “Mami” with shears.

Her reading of post-apartheid South Africa was a repudiation of Nelson Mandela’s softly-softly approach. Much of this was evident in her London [Evening Standard](#) interview in 2010. The Truth and Reconciliation Committee, designed to neutralise vengefulness in the post-apartheid trauma, was a “charade”; Mandela erred in going to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993 with his “jailer” De Klerk. “He agreed to a bad deal for the blacks. Economically, we are still on the outside. The economy is very much ‘white’.”

To remember Madikizela-Mandela, then, is to remember the blight of cruelty in South Africa, the hideous distortions of a system marked by race, the barbarism of an order that feeds trauma rather than abates it. It is also to note those jottings of courage and defiance. It will be a difficult reckoning, for with her came a vision less of reconciliation than revenge, the spirit of which still persists with tenacity.

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