



Romance and Freedom: Nelson and Winnie Mandela's Politics of Gender in Three Post-Apartheid Novels

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FROM ZUMA BACK TO MANDELA

The contemporary politics of gender in post-apartheid South Africa appears to be deeply entangled with social, political and economic discourses. In the case of the 2005 Zuma rape trial,¹ for example, the internal political struggle between the two ANC factions which were led, respectively, by Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma, was mainly coded in terms of sexual politics: on the one hand, Mbeki, who represented the interests of a black bourgeois elite, suggested that the next ANC candidate would be a woman; on the other hand, Zuma, who ideologically embraced a left-wing position, presented

¹ Jacob Zuma was charged with rape in the Johannesburg High Court on 6 December 2005. He was accused by the daughter of an ANC member, nicknamed "Kwhezi". On 8 May 2006 the Court dismissed all charges, agreeing that the sexual act was consensual.



his own candidacy while professing his innocence in the trial, since he had acted like an “authentic Zulu man” (Robins 2010: 155).

This case, however, was not isolated, nor was it exclusively related to political contingency: the historical roots of the embedding of gender within class and race discourses in South Africa should be traced in the ideological foundations of European colonialism and the apartheid regime. If this cultural history has been widely explored (McClintock 1995, Morrell 2001, Magubane 2004 *et al.*), a careful examination of the gendered figures of the South African presidents preceding Zuma, as well as the politics of gender that they contributed to enact, is still needed.

In particular, it is the construction of the hegemonic politics of gender surrounding the figure of Nelson Mandela which needs to be fully assessed, as the cult of his personality (Legassick 1998) increased the individualization of the anti-apartheid struggle and, later, post-apartheid politics, calling also for an analysis of the implications of this process in terms of gender. In addition to this, Nelson Mandela’s relationship with Winnie Madikizela-Mandela² represented an “unusual founding-family romance” (Munro 2014: 92) for the post-apartheid nation, laying foundations for the subsequent entanglement of the hegemonic politics of gender with the most pressing social, political and economic discourses in the post-apartheid society.

Their relationship was one of the first challenges to the South African colonial and apartheid sexual economy, coinciding, historically, with the rise of the anti-apartheid struggle led by the ANC. Though historically disrupted, the idealization of this couple’s love as the “founding-family romance” of the post-apartheid nation has a decisive influence in terms of politics of gender also today, as post-apartheid gender discourses still bear the influence of the gendered figures embodied by Nelson and Winnie Mandela.

The present paper will trace this influence in three post-apartheid novels – Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001), Njabulo Ndebele’s *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (2003) and Lewis Nkosi’s *Mandela’s Ego* (2006) – where Nelson and Winnie Mandela’s gendered characters are both staged and challenged. In these novels, written by intellectuals who have widely written about South African literature and culture,³ the deconstruction of the politics of gender enacted by the couple is always combined with the historical reconstruction of their relationship as a foundational stage in the constitution of post-apartheid society.

A LOVING FATHER, AN ABHORRENT MOTHER?

One of the most compelling reasons for Munro to argue that the “founding-family romance” of Nelson and Winnie Mandela was “unusual” was its double disruption, due, in the first place, to Nelson Mandela’s imprisonment in 1963 (only five years after their

² Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, born Nomzamo Winifred Zanyiwe Madikizela, will be called hereafter “Winnie Mandela” for the sake of brevity.

³ Lewis Nkosi and Njabulo Ndebele’s major contributions to the cultural and political debate during the apartheid and post-apartheid era are linked to their non-fictional production: Nkosi’s collection of essays *Home and Exile* (1965) and Ndebele’s essay *Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (1991). Phaswane Mpe, researcher at the University of the Witwatersrand, would have probably followed their path, but he prematurely died of an AIDS-related disease in 2004.



marriage) and, later, to their divorce in 1992 (two years after his release). A combination of historical and individual factors contributed, thus, to break up a relationship which had actually had a good start. As Munro aptly recalls, in fact,

[t]heir marriage coincided with the apex of a form of black urban South African public culture known as “Sophiatown Renaissance”, in reference to a lively township in which blacks owned property, racial boundaries were crossed, and sexual mores were often more bohemian than respectable. (Munro 2014: 93)

It might be fairly argued, then, that at the time of their marriage Nelson and Winnie Mandela were already “doing gender” (Munro 2014: 94) as representatives of the social and cultural movements of the time:

Decades before “black is beautiful,” the two of them were a visible celebration of black African glamour and desirability, and enacted a model of companionate heterosexual marriage that signified as both respectable and modern. (Munro 2014: 94)

The characterization of Nelson Mandela’s masculinity as “glamorous”, “modern” and “respectable” was in line with his own idealization of the Anglo-Saxon culture and model of upbringing (Lodge 2003: 6). It was also shared by Winnie Mandela, who “was in many ways the perfect prop for Nelson Mandela’s production of a debonair masculinity” (Munro 2014: 94). In time, Nelson Mandela would keep his ability to refashion his masculinity, becoming a loving and compassionate “Father of the Nation” (Munro 2014: 99), while Winnie Mandela, once divorced, publicly fell from grace and was stuck to the patriarchal stereotype of the “abhorrent mother” (Kristeva 1982, Ussher 2006, Creed 2007).

As mentioned, it was Mandela’s imprisonment in 1963 that radically changed their lives, by separating them for twenty-seven years. Whereas Nelson Mandela gained international attention during his prison years, becoming the recognized leader of the anti-apartheid struggle, Winnie Mandela’s life attracted very scarce attention, often as a derivative consequence of her husband’s detention. Paradoxically, her reaction was to increase her political activity, which had been limited until that moment, with a massive participation in the clandestine political activities of the ANC. Following the Soweto uprising on 16 June 1976, she was arrested by the Security Police, being released from “preventive detention” only four months later, after psychological and physical vexations, probably including torture (Harrison 1985). Immediately after her liberation, she was banished to a house in the township of Brandfort, a desolated town in the Free State, where she lived from 1977 to 1985.

It was after her second release that Winnie Mandela’s activity became incredibly controversial, due also to the changing political status of her husband. In the mid-Eighties, in fact, Nelson Mandela distanced himself from the armed struggle by



choosing the path of negotiations with the regime. This decision could not be merely explained through Nelson Mandela's individual position as a prisoner, nor was it only a reflection of the general "swing from black consciousness to 'ANC politics'" (Legassick 1998: 451) that had characterized the anti-apartheid struggle since the late Seventies. It was also a powerful symbolic tool in the construction of Mandela's cult of personality, which was later to be enhanced by his autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994). As remarked by Legassick,

[s]truggles by working-class people (in factories and in the townships, old and young, women and men, rural and urban, employed and unemployed), starting from 1973, led to the change of course by the regime and the release of Mandela in 1990. In prison as he was, his autobiography barely remarks on these struggles (though there are brief references to the Soweto uprising, p. 470, the formation of the UDF, p. 507, and the 1984-1986 insurrection, p. 518). This is a pity, as this book has acquired best-seller proportions. For many, internationally and inside South Africa, it will be their introduction not only to Mandela, but to the history of resistance. One could come away with the impression – also created by Allister Sparks' *Tomorrow is Another Country*⁴ – that the changes of 1990 resulted purely from the secret talks that took place between Mandela and the government in the 1980s. This would be historical amnesia of the worst kind. (Legassick 1998: 450)

In the meantime, a negative myth about Winnie Mandela was created. The clearest example of it came with the speech she held in Munsieville on 13 April 1986, where she reportedly said: "We have no guns – we have only stones, boxes of matches and [...] with our boxes of matches and our necklaces we shall liberate this country" (Sampson 2000: 349).

The representation of Winnie Mandela as a symbol of political violence had also clear gendered connotations. The "necklace" quoted in her declaration refers to a practice of torture and murder which was common in South Africa during the apartheid: it involved placing a tyre soaked in petrol around the victim's neck and setting it alight. Apart from the double meaning of the word "necklace", which also refers to an ornament usually worn by women, the practice of murdering through necklacing was generally associated with the punishment of traitors to the community (Ball 1994), including in this category many women accused of witchcraft (Ritchken 1989).

This reference leads to a paradoxical result in the case of Winnie Mandela's gendered figure, which might be fully appreciated by considering the following events. At the end of the Eighties, indeed, Winnie Mandela held strong relationships with the so-called "Mandela United Football Club": officially considered as her own security service, this military group was actually implicated in many crimes committed during the last period of the anti-apartheid struggle. The most renowned episode was the kidnapping and murder of the 14-year old Stompie Moeketsi on the 1st of January 1989. As established by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), where Winnie

⁴ Allister Spark, *Tomorrow is Another Country: The Inside Story of South Africa's Road to Change*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.



Mandela was accused of complicity in the murder, Stompie was sentenced to death because he was considered an informer and, thus, a traitor. Although Winnie Mandela was cleared of any allegation, Stompie's case definitively consecrated the negative myth surrounding her figure: if only verbally, Winnie Mandela had given her consent to "necklacing" and/or murdering innocent people. For her wrongdoings, then, Winnie Mandela could be considered as much closer to the status of "witch" than her victims.

Whereas Nelson and Winnie Mandela divorced in 1992, following Nelson Mandela's request upon the alleged unfaithfulness of his wife during his imprisonment, the TRC hearings sanctioned their separation also from a political and symbolic point of view. The TRC, in fact, had been promoted by the first government led by Nelson Mandela as a foundational step in the nation (re-)building of South African post-apartheid society: the disparity between Nelson Mandela as *instituting* the TRC and Winnie Mandela as *facing* TRC hearings showed that the "unusual founding-family romance" of Nelson and Winnie Mandela as a model for the South African post-apartheid society had definitively failed.

The history of Nelson and Winnie's broken relationship had decisive effects also in terms of gender politics. On the one hand, Nelson Mandela emerged from his prison years as the undisputed "Father of the Nation". This definition was linked to his role in the victory over the apartheid system, but it was enforced also through the cult of his personality, created during his negotiations with the regime. As a matter of fact, Mandela's rejection of violence in the struggle came to be defined as close to saintliness, although he himself eschewed the term on several occasions.⁵ Whereas Munro correctly argues that "[s]aintliness is not necessarily gendered" (Munro 2014: 99), Nelson Mandela's saint-like heroism was consistent with the construction of the new masculinity that he fashioned upon his release:

When Mandela walked out of Victor Verster Prison into the awaiting crowds with his wife by his side in 1990, [...] the fact that he was now a white-haired old man was a shock to the global audience, who had seen almost no new images of him in nearly thirty years. The unique masculine persona that subsequently emerged seems deeply bound up with his particular vision of nation building. Although Mandela had initiated the armed struggle, he was not a military leader coming out of a war of national liberation, like the patriarchal and homophobic Robert Mugabe in neighboring Zimbabwe. He stood for a negotiated peace, for forgiveness and reconciliation [...]. As Ndebele puts it into his novel, "When we gave up the AK-47 for negotiation, we opted for intimacy. In the choice we had between negotiation and revolutionary violence we opted for feelings and the intellect." (Munro 2014: 98)

Nelson Mandela presented himself to the new post-apartheid nation as a white-haired and fragile man whose enduring strength had been seriously affected by the long-term imprisonment; at the same time, however, he still claimed to be the father of the new

⁵ One of Nelson Mandela's most famous quotations reads: "I am not a saint, unless you think of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying".



nation. His promotion of intimacy, as suggested by Ndebele's quotation (2003: 85), was therefore only a small corrective to his longstanding, Anglo-Saxon ideal of the "Victorian paterfamilias" (Sampson 2000: 243)

On the other hand, Winnie Mandela never fully acquired the status of "Mother of the nation", due to her coterminous characterization as "abhorrent mother". In fact, although she was cleared of any allegation in relation to Stompie Moeketsi's murder, her implication in the case was generally taken as a proof both of her moral corruption and her criminal attitudes: in Julia Kristeva's classical analysis of monstrous femininity, both elements are considered as typical "socialized appearances" (Kristeva 1982: 16) of female abjection.

It would be incorrect, however, to totally disconnect Winnie Mandela from her role as "Mother of the Nation". The relevance of her public figure as a political point of reference during the first two decades of Nelson Mandela's imprisonment and her political commitment gained her this did provide her with this designation. As Mufson reports about the Soweto uprising:

[O]n June 16 1976, when fighting broke out between police and students, Winnie reportedly ferried injured students to the hospital in her Volkswagen Beetle. "She was very much of a mother to us" recalled Seth Mazibuko, then a student. (Mufson 1990: 205)

This part of Winnie Mandela's history is partially recovered by the three novels that will be analyzed hereafter, together with a deconstructive take on Nelson Mandela's protective and compassionate masculinity and fatherhood, as well as on Winnie Mandela's monstrous femininity and motherhood. Their deconstruction of fixed gender roles does not work only towards the redefinition of a post-apartheid politics of gender; they also help to reinstate the "unusual founding-family romance" of the post-apartheid nation, exploring its subtleties and its complexity and recovering its hidden or least appreciated elements.

MANDELA'S EGO AND MANDELA'S RESPONSIBILITIES

The most striking example of the entanglement of the hegemonic politics of gender with social, political and economic discourses might be provided by Lewis Nkosi's third and last novel *Mandela's Ego* (2006). The novel presents the "uneasy and tragic commerce between black male sexuality, politics and psychoanalysis" (Mngadi 2008: 406) which had characterized some of Nkosi's previous novels, *Mating Birds* (1986) and *Underground People* (2002), and the play *The Black Psychiatrist* (1994). Differently from the previous texts, however, *Mandela's Ego* is based on a clearly allegorical structure,



calling for a reading which is consistent with the critical tradition of Nkosi's oeuvre⁶ and, at the same time, peculiar to this text and its construction.

The allegorical intentions of the author are reflected by the relatively simple plot of the novel. *Mandela's Ego* is based on the individual story of Dumisani Gumede, a young man nicknamed "the Bull of Mondli" (Nkosi 2006: 125), who grows up in a Zulu village in awe of the legendary figure of Nelson Mandela. When Mandela is arrested, in 1962, Dumisani finds himself to be sexually impotent; he will recover sexual power only at the end of the story, together with Mandela's liberation, in 1990. In allegorical terms, this conclusion clearly corresponds with the liberation of the political and sexual power which were repressed by the apartheid regime. As noticed by David Attwell in his review of the book, the identification of Dumisani with Mandela reverses the ideological grounds of the sexual economy of European colonialism in Africa, showing that the politics of gender enacted by Nelson and Winnie Mandela was a radical transformation of the previous discursive formations: "In the work of male writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o,⁷ it is the woman's body that is associated with the nation.⁸ In linking the nation with the phallus, Nkosi reverses and unsettles the gender stereotypes" (Attwell 2006).

According to Mngadi, however, the process of unsettling gender stereotypes is in contradiction with Nkosi's conventional and sometimes benevolent portrayal of "male sexual egoism" (Mngadi 2008: 412). The conventionality of Nkosi's approach emerges in his construction of Dumisani's character as "the Bull of Mondli": such a characterization reinforces "Zooluology" (Davis 1996: 124), that is, the colonial stereotypical description of Zulu masculinity as unmediated and aggressive, reaching its apex, in the colonial era, with the animalization of Zulu men. The lost confrontation with this hypersexualized figure constitutes the core of Dumisani's individual tragedy and calls readers to an ambivalently sympathetic response. The abundance of "gender and sexual stereotypes" (Mngadi 2008: 415) is even more evident when it comes to the "failure to acknowledge the agency of Nobuhle" (Mngadi 2008: 413), the girl with whom Dumisani has his first and unsuccessful love affair, which is paralleled, in the text, by the complete absence of any explicit reference to Winnie Mandela.

These contradictions, however, may be deemed to be only superficial, as the relationship established by the text with the "unusual founding-family romance" (Munro 2014: 92) of Nelson and Winnie Mandela is, in terms of the politics of gender, much more elaborated. The focus on the individual story of Dumisani, in fact, should not allow unilateral interpretations such as the ones suggested by Attwell: "Despite the provocations of its title, the novel says little about Mandela himself" (Attwell 2006); and Mngadi: "The social scene, which forms the backdrop of Dumisa's sexual activities, is portrayed in stereotypical ways and [...] the potentially rich narrative of masculinity and nationalism is sacrificed for the simplistic one of the tragic consequences of hero-

⁶ Interestingly, one of the most complete collections of essays about Lewis Nkosi, *Still Beating the Drum: Critical Perspectives on Lewis Nkosi*, was published in 2005, one year before *Mandela's Ego*.

⁷ An interesting analysis of the representation of the "woman/nation" trope in the literary production of Ngugi wa Thiong'o can be retrieved in James Ogude's *Ngugi's Novels and African History: Narrating the Nation* (1999).

⁸ There is a huge bibliography about the association of women's body with the postcolonial nation, including, for instance, Sara Suleri's *The Rhetoric of English India* (1992) or Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather* (1995).



worshipping or Mandela mania” (Mngadi 2008: 412). If the historical figure of Nelson Mandela is nearly absent from the plot – Mandela is mostly evoked through the media coverage of his actions and speeches and other reported narrations⁹ – this does not mean that Nelson Mandela’s portrayal does not go beyond the provocative title.

On the contrary, it is precisely through the process of identification of Dumisani with Nelson Mandela that the text enables a constant confrontation between the fictional character’s and the South African leader’s masculinities. Whereas Dumisani’s impotence might be read as a radical interruption and crisis of his masculinity, the gendered figure of Nelson Mandela is eventually reinstated, confirmed and even enhanced by his prison years, suggesting his near saintliness alongside the refashioning of his masculinity (Munro 2014: 98).

Evidently, Dumisani loses the confrontation with Nelson Mandela: the celebration of “male sexual egoism” over the possibility of a founding family romance between Dumisani and Nobuhle is only apparent, as it contributes to Dumisani’s crisis and his particular tragedy. In addition to this, there is also one implicit reference to the historical figure of Winnie Mandela which manages to evoke her figure and reassess, even though by negation, the importance of her family romance with Nelson as a symbolic possibility underlying the building of the post-apartheid nation.

It takes place when Dumisani, driven by his obsessive identification with Mandela, creates an association, called “Mandela Football Club”. As Dumisani explains to his father, the football club is a legal form of association which allows its members to pursue their political activities in favor of the ANC and of Nelson Mandela without being sued for that:

‘It’s true, baba, we’ve started a football club, which we named after him as a sign of respect,’ Dumisa admitted. ‘That’s no secret.’
Mziwakhe remained profoundly silent. His father’s silences always met Dumisa’s teeth on edge. ‘It’s not against the law to start a football club, baba,’ he said. (Nkosi 2006: 79)

The choice of the name “Mandela Football Club” is clearly reminiscent of the historically controversial “Mandela United Football Club” linked to Winnie Mandela. The implication of this attribution to Nelson, rather than to Winnie, of the existence of the Mandela (United) Football Club is relevant, in that it breaks the moral dichotomy between him and his wife. On the contrary, this reference manages to recall the joint political participation of Nelson and Winnie Mandela in the anti-apartheid struggle. Also from a linguistic point of view, in fact, the elision of the “United” part stands for the elision of the affective and political unity of Nelson and Winnie during his prison years, which, as might be fairly argued starting from this textual evidence, could have become a symbolic basis for the nation rebuilding of South Africa after apartheid.

⁹ Dumisani, as well as the other villagers from Mondli, get news about Nelson Mandela through the local newspaper, wittingly called “I-Qiniso” (“The Truth”), in analogy with the meaning of “Pravda”, the newspaper associated with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.



AN IBANDLA FOR WINNIE MANDELA

Njabulo Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (2003) builds an ideal chiasm with Nkosi's novel, as it focuses on Winnie Mandela, leaving her husband in the background of the story. Also Ndebele's novel, however, eventually manages to recover the symbolic unity of Nelson and Winnie Mandela as the "unusual founding-family romance" for the South African post-apartheid nation.

Interestingly enough, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, like *Mandela's Ego*, is based on a relatively simple plot: four South African women, who are all waiting for their absent husbands, gather and form an *ibandla*, a community where people ritually meet in order to talk and share their life experiences. After briefly recounting their own lives, they invite Winnie Mandela, who represents for them the paradigmatic example of the "waiting woman", to join the group. Each of the four women addresses Winnie, enabling a confrontation between their lives and a general reflection about South African recent history. Winnie Mandela's own testimony is followed by a short epilogue titled "A stranger" (2003: 139-146), in which the five women embark on a road trip together.

Differently from Nkosi, however, Ndebele chooses to frame the simple plot of his novel within a rather complicated and polyphonic structure, based on shifting perspective and narrative standpoints. Such a stylistic choice does not allow easy textual interpretations, nor easy judgments. As suggested by Ralph Goodman (2006), the deconstructive take on the binary political, ethical and legal judgments about the apartheid regime and the anti-apartheid struggle could be considered as a radical enforcement of the reconciliation processes enabled by the TRC. By questioning a wide variety of meanings associated to that historical period, however, Ndebele's novel also stresses the importance of a critical reassessment of Winnie Mandela's figure in terms of gender, describing it as the paradigmatic case of the "South African waiting woman".

The Cry of Winnie Mandela clearly aims at a broad reassessment of gender-based inequality in South Africa, showing how many South African men, across social classes, abandoned their female partners, leaving them in a condition of long, or even perpetual, waiting. This condition is shared by all the four women who call Winnie Mandela to join their *ibandla*. Mannete Mofolo's husband left his wife to go and work in the South African mines; he took up a new wife and never came back. Delisiwe Dulcie S'khososana was abandoned by her husband, who wanted to become the first black doctor in their township and went to study in the UK; on his return he found her with a little child, born of a temporary extramarital relationship, and decided to leave his wife again. Mamello Molete was cheated by her partner, who fled into exile for his anti-apartheid activism; when he came back, he left her, saying that she didn't believe in the cause, and married a white woman. Marara Joyce Baloyi remains forever loyal to a husband who might have betrayed her on several occasions. The different material conditions shaping the decision of each man to leave his partner are not so relevant,



from Ndebele's perspective, as the gendered imbalance of power which men could generally take advantage of in these circumstances.

Winnie Mandela's position is similar and at the same time slightly different, as she was also a public figure, sharing status, if not political power, with Nelson Mandela. The ambivalence of Winnie's position is clearly spelled out in the letter that Mamello addresses to Winnie Mandela:

Here's what you record yourself as having said to yourself when Nelson was arrested: 'I knew at that time that this was the end of any kind of family life, as was the case with millions of my people – I was no exception.' Of course, you were no exception. That is why you are the ultimate public symbol of women-in-waiting. But the proclamation of your non-exceptionalism became at the same time a ritual of entitlement to exceptionalism. Being like everyone, you were not like everyone. In the absence of your husband, you were the absolute value of struggle. In time, you believed you owned the struggle. (Ndebele 2003: 72-73)

While the emphasis on Winnie's abusive appropriation of the struggle echoes Nkosi's criticism of individual-based actions, as depicted in *Mandela's Ego*, there is another point made by Winnie which deserves equal attention. When Winnie says that Nelson's detention "was the end of family life, as was the case with millions of people", she does not only state that her story is paradigmatic of the millions of South African "waiting women". She also suggests that Nelson's detention disrupted her family life – as all "waiting women" experienced, according to her, "the systematic invasion of whatever dreams we had of family life" (Ndebele 2003: 106) – and, by doing so, put a historical end to Nelson and Winnie's romance.

The importance of Nelson and Winnie's family story is redoubled by the final encounter of the five women with Penelope, who represents both the mythical example of a waiting woman in European culture and Ulysses' companion. Penelope and Ulysses' joint rule was legitimized by the victory in the Trojan war, which might be compared to Mandela's triumph in the anti-apartheid struggle. Therefore, the reference to Penelope appears to be charged with meanings which go well beyond the archetypal example of Penelope as a waiting woman. As Penelope herself says on the very final page of the novel: "I, the daughter of Greece, am made for adventure. *I too claim Greece now for the message of freedom I bear*" (Ndebele 2003: 146, emphasis added). Also Winnie claimed South Africa "by virtue of a message of freedom", but her symbolic status was threatened and eventually damaged by the events immediately following Nelson Mandela's liberation.

Ndebele rapidly sketches all these events throughout his novel. At first, when Winnie publicly embraces Nelson upon his release, she seems to have won her own battle: "When [Nelson Mandela] stormed out of the car, he gave you the victory. And you, queen of the highways, drove around the streets of the township" (Ndebele 2003: 116). Winnie Mandela, however, is not only "queen of the highways": she is repeatedly and by no means uncritically defined as "Mother of the Nation". In this reflection by Mamello, for instance, the epithet "Mother of the Nation" is clearly ironic:



Mother of the Nation!

So much ugliness was ascribed to you: kidnapping children; gruesome beatings and torture of children; disappearances and deaths; assassinations; defamations and denunciations; intimidation and terror. [...] [Y]ou may have crossed the line, and begun to wish for his perpetual absence. He should not return; I'm queen of the roost! (Ndebele 2003: 74)

Mamello's bitter irony is clearly due to the political and moral uncertainty about Winnie's actions after the divorce. However, this uncertainty is partially fed by Nelson Mandela himself, as the disavowal of their relationship and Winnie's TRC hearing cast a "shadow" (Ndebele 2003: 116) on her which was, ultimately, "Nelson's shadow!" (Ndebele 2003: 117).

Besides, Winnie Mandela is presented as responsible for her own actions, but a partial responsibility can be also ascribed to the apartheid regime, as Winnie herself suffered from detention and torture. Winnie Mandela's hypothetical participation in the violence committed by the Mandela United Football Club, thus, finds explanation in her own suffering, as victims may well become perpetrators (Herman 1992, Du Preez Bezdrob 2003, Goodman 2006). This chain of violence also explains the fictional description of Winnie Mandela as "the child of Major Theunis Swanepoel" (Ndebele 2003: 134), who, according to the text, was her torturer. It might be fairly argued, then, that it was such a disturbing affiliation, rather than Winnie's own actions, that might have disrupted her symbolic relationship with the foundations of South African post-apartheid society

In addition to this, the conclusion of Winnie Mandela's own fictional account suggests that the uncertainty in the judgment of her actions cannot be understood exclusively within the theoretical framework of reconciliation. It is, once again, the interruption of her family romance with Nelson Mandela which comes up:

There is one thing that I will not do. It is only my defense of the future. I will not be an instrument for validating the politics of reconciliation. For me, reconciliation demands my annihilation. No. [...] The journey to your future goes through the dot of loving me, despite myself, on the world map that lays out journeys towards all kinds of human fulfillment. Maybe you and I are the future of a new world on that journey. You and I, located in the delicate point of convergence between dream and desolation, are fellow travelers in history, no longer its orphans. (Ndebele 2003: 137-138)

This is part of Winnie Mandela's speech and it might be well considered as an unreliable account. However, the tension to go beyond the small talk of reconciliation seems to be consistent with the rest of the novel. It also allows to show that the new gendered fellowship of Winnie Mandela with the other women could help her, as well as the whole



nation, to get beyond their condition of symbolic orphanage after the end of Winnie and Nelson Mandela's family romance, envisioning also some kind of future.

NELSON AND WINNIE MANDELA IN POST-APARTHEID HILLBROW

Although published before Nkosi's and Ndebele's novels, Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001) appears to be firmly rooted in that "future" which is only pointed at in Ndebele's novel. *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* presents some political and social phenomena in rapid expansion in the post-apartheid society, such as the xenophobic riots against African migrants to South Africa – who are derogatively called *Makwerekwere*¹⁰ – and the epidemic diffusion of the HIV/AIDS. Both historical and social phenomena have been triggering significant changes in the South African politics of gender (Hoad 2007); the novel, however, sets links between these social transformations and the gendered figures of Nelson and Winnie. Both are thoroughly recalled through the main characters of the novel, Refentše and Lerato, and their story, which goes as follows.

As Refentše is a lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand, he and Lerato have moved near the university: they live in Johannesburg, in the Hillbrow area, which, in the post-apartheid era, has become "the sanctuary in which *Makwerekwere* basked" (Mpe 2001: 4). Refentše and Lerato love and trust each other, but she cannot bear the opposition of Refentše's mother to their relationship. Also Refentše's former girlfriend, Refilwe, has contributed to the hostility of his mother, by fuelling untrue gossip in Tiragalong (Refentše's birthplace, in the rural area of the Limpopo Province) about Lerato being a witch and a *Lekwerekwere*. Lerato's frustration ends up in betrayal: she has sexual intercourse with Sammy, Refentše's best friend. Being unaware of what happened between Lerato and Sammy, Refentše betrays her with Bohlale, Sammy's partner. When Refentše understands that Lerato has been cheating on him with Sammy, whereas he has done the same with Bohlale, he kills himself out of sorrow and desperation. After Refentše's burial in Tiragalong, his mother is accused of being a witch, too, and she is necklaced to death. Eventually, also Lerato kills herself. In the meantime, Refilwe has moved to Oxford to complete her academic career: there, she is victim of racist attacks and she starts to acknowledge her participation in the tragic chain of events leading to Refentše and Lerato's deaths. She also contracts HIV, but she eventually decides to go back to Tiragalong and face the same social stigma that she had earlier contributed to raising against Refentše and Lerato.

Within such a deeply interwoven story of love and betrayal, neither Refentše nor Lerato can claim any moral superiority. Their moral status, however, is enhanced by a stylistic device which is pervasive throughout the novel: the constant use of the second-person narrative attracts the reader's sympathy towards the characters who are similarly

¹⁰ "Makwerekwere" is the plural form of "Lekwerekwere", which is a word of uncertain etymology. One of the most convincing hypothesis considers it as a Sesotho word, meaning "the one who do not speak well", in analogy with the Greek etymology of the word "barbarian".



addressed, that is, Refentše and Lerato (and, at the end of the novel, Refilwe). What is more, both Refentše and Lerato have negative doubles, whose presence throughout the novel reinforces Refentše's and Lerato's positive connotations.

Refentše finds his negative counterpart in a "womaniser of the worst kind" (Mpe 2001: 64), significantly nicknamed "Terror". Terror repeatedly stalks and assaults Lerato: this episode establishes a striking analogy between Lerato and Penelope, assaulted by her suitors during Ulysses' absence, according to the same comparison which would later be developed by Ndebele in connection with the figure of Winnie Mandela. Terror's sexuality is so aggressive that he explicitly wants to "eat" Lerato:

Terror wanted to take Lerato's thighs for a playing field, in which his penis would be player, referee and spectator simultaneously. He wanted to be able to say, later: But what can you tell me now! I have eaten her! She is just as cheap as they all are. (Mpe 2001: 65)

Terror's animalized hyper-masculinity, metonymically rendered through his "greedy ever-erect penis" (Mpe 2001: 69), is even more graphic than the Zulu masculinity hinted at in Nkosi's *Mandela's Ego*.

By contrast, Refentše seems to be much more sensitive, compassionate and respectful, going back, instead, to the new model of masculinity inaugurated by Nelson Mandela upon his release. However, as Crous has aptly noticed, Refentše never suspends his "judgmental attitude" (Crous 2007: 29), considering, for instance, the double betrayal as an incurable wound. If Lerato's "physical presence (and her bodily expressions of love) are sources of support to him" (Crous 2007: 30), this is not enough to restore his ideal of humanness, "a humanness that could be viewed as human only so long as it remained uncovered by prying eyes and unpublicized by enthusiastic tongues" (Mpe 2001: 50). Considering the other references which enable a strict comparison of Refentše with Nelson Mandela, the implicit reference in this passage to the complexity and maybe even the ambivalence of Mandela's otherwise well publicized humanness after his liberation seems to be quite clear.

As the comparison of Terror's and Refentše's masculinities does not produce a rigidly binary opposition, Crous argues that *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* presents "confusing or conflicting ideas about black urban maleness" (Crous 2007: 30), which may be linked to the crisis of post-apartheid urban masculinity earlier analyzed by Robert Morrell:

[We] acknowledge that the fortunes of some men have changed for the worse but note that their responses to changes are not uniform. Some have seemed able to respond positively to opportunities to live more harmoniously with women, children and themselves, while others have experienced crises of identity. (Morrell 2005: xi)



Refentše seems to embody both sides of this crisis of masculinity, looking for a harmonious and respectful coexistence with women, as well as being tragically unable to cope with his masculinity crisis. Equally complex, however, is the treatment of femininity and motherhood through the characters of Lerato, Refilwe and Refentše's mother.

Lerato's betrayal, first of all, can be reminiscent of Winnie's unfaithfulness while Nelson was in prison: whereas the latter episode led to their divorce, worsening the woman's moral status, Lerato/Winnie's betrayal is reciprocated by Refentše/Nelson's – thus dividing responsibilities for the act between man and woman – and leads to their double suicide.

Refilwe's participation in the gossip about Lerato being a witch and a *Lekwerekwere* can be deemed to be similar to Winnie Mandela's attitude towards the traitors of the anti-apartheid cause. Also Refilwe's act produces violence, in the same paradoxical way as Winnie's call to violence in the struggle: the victims of the gossip, in fact, include Refentše, Refilwe's former boyfriend (whom she still loves), Lerato and Refentše's mother, accused of being a witch and held responsible for Refentše's death.

In this regard, it might be fairly argued that Refentše's mother is an "abhorrent mother", leading to the suicide of her son, but she is also a victim of the gossip fuelled by Refilwe. The redoubling of this figure could be read as an emphasis on the wrongdoings of Winnie Mandela, but it might be interpreted also as a deconstructive take on her historical figure, as gossip and accusations of witchcraft are clearly represented throughout the novel as stereotypical and false. In addition to this, Lerato, who is frequently called Refentše's "Bone of [his] Heart" (Mpe 2001: 68), and Refilwe, who eventually redeems herself at the end of the novel, are to be considered as positive characters, countering any possible identification with evil and witchcraft.

The embodiment of the Mandelas' gendered figures in the characters of the novel is not the only way in which their historical lives are brought to the forefront. As Refentše and Lerato kill themselves, their union is tragically interrupted, much like the "unusual founding-family romance" of Nelson and Winnie Mandela upon which their relationship is modeled. The possibility of re-enacting that symbolic family romance in the newly rebuilt post-apartheid society, building on Refentše's Mandela-like masculinity and the reconsideration of Lerato/Winnie Mandela's role, cannot be fully exploited.

This allows one to build on Neville Hoad's reading of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* as "An Elegy for African Cosmopolitanism" (Hoad 2007: 113-127). By focusing on an "elegy for", rather than an "elegy of", Hoad emphasises the "doubled-edged" use of the preposition, "simultaneously suggesting that African cosmopolitanism is the dead subject of the elegy and that the elegy is a poetic gift or an argument for an African cosmopolitanism that is very much alive" (Hoad 2007: 114). While Hoad's definition of "African cosmopolitanism" refers to a different understanding of South African multicultural society – including, rather than excluding, the African migrants who are commonly victims of xenophobia – the elegiac tone in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* might also be interpreted in another way. As it rests on Refentše and Lerato's double suicide, the elegy might also refer to the "unusual founding-family romance" of the post-apartheid nation, embodied, in the novel, by Refentše/Nelson Mandela and Lerato/Winnie Mandela. *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* might be read, then, as "An Elegy For the Post-apartheid Nation", thus suggesting both the disruption of its founding-family



romance and the possibility of envisioning a different understanding of the South African present and future through its imaginative recovery.

RECONSIDERING NELSON AND WINNIE'S FOUNDING-FAMILY ROMANCE

The critical representation of Nelson and Winnie Mandela's family romance is not the only feature shared by Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* and Nkosi's *Mandela's Ego*. Their deconstructive takes on the representation of Nelson and Winnie's relationship have a similar structure and similar goals: the cult of personality created during and immediately after Nelson Mandela's prison years is criticized through the confrontation of Mandela's gendered image with the generalized crisis of masculinity in post-apartheid society (Morrell 2001, Morrell 2005, Crous 2007); in parallel, also Winnie's characterization as "abhorrent mother" is adequately challenged, recovering her participation in the history of the anti-apartheid struggle.

In the first case, the model of a compassionate and respectful masculinity and fatherhood promoted by Nelson Mandela after his liberation clashes with the stereotypes of the hypersexualized and prevaricating black masculinity produced during colonialism and still embodied, according to contemporary South African feminist critics (Hassim 2009), by Jacob Zuma during his rape trial. In the second case, the aim of the deconstruction of Winnie Mandela's historical and gendered figure is neither her rehabilitation nor the pursuit of a wider social and political reconciliation, but the reenactment of the "founding-family romance" which was interrupted by historical circumstances. As a consequence, it should be noticed that Winnie Mandela's character is not always thoroughly depicted, with Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* making no exception. This might be read as an indirect consequence of the fact that the three texts have all been written by male authors: paradoxically, Mpe, Ndebele and Nkosi might have ended up further silencing Winnie Mandela's own account instead of revitalizing the positive qualities of her historical figure.

This interpretation, however, seems to be rather stiff, especially if compared with an almost oxymoronic occurrence concerning Winnie Mandela in a text written by a South African woman writer, Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* (1998). Krog dedicates Chapter Twenty, "Mother Faces the Nation", to Winnie Mandela's TRC hearings: although the author nearly couples the two terms which cannot be paired after the interruption of Nelson and Winnie Mandela's "unusual founding-family romance", that is, Winnie as *Mother who faces the Nation*, she also completely disavows the possibility of such a romance when she describes Winnie's house as follows:

A house which had become the centrifugal force behind seemingly opposed attitudes. The house of the liberation movement's most revered political lineage and the house of lowly informers. The house where destabilized youngsters were both protected and killed. The house of famous, regal personalities and the house



of a particular kind of gangster personality – brutal, insecure, inclined to pathological lying. (Krog 2010: 378-379, emphasis added)

Mpe, Ndebele and Nkosi, on the other hand, insist on the possibility of envisioning Nelson and Winnie's Mandela as the "unusual founding-family romance" of South African post-apartheid society by retracing their influence in the politics of gender which has characterized the whole post-apartheid era. By focusing on the current crisis of masculinity, as well as challenging the representation of the "abhorrent mother", they also open paths for the discussion, in terms of gender, of the social and political developments which can be foreseen for the future.

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