

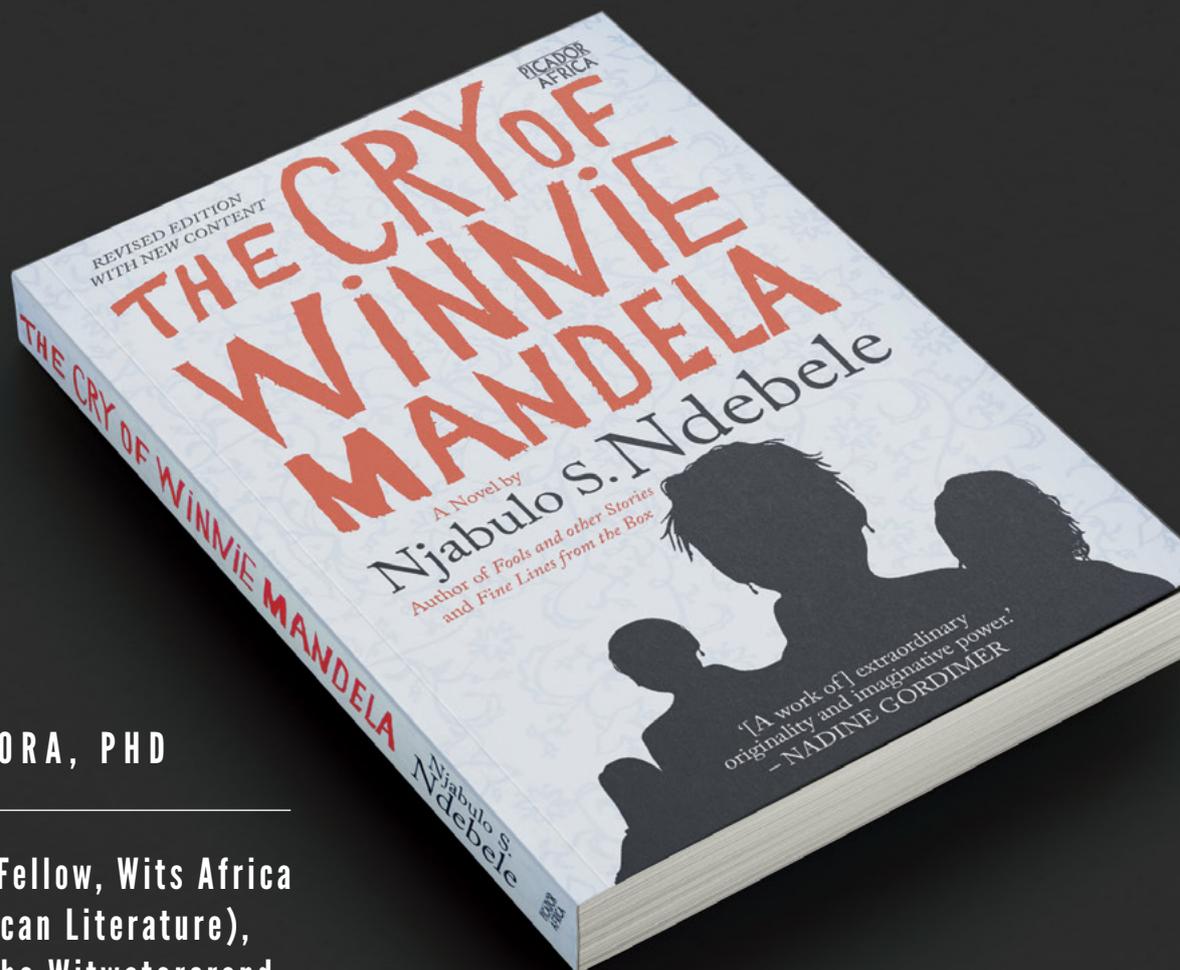


“THE OTHER SIDE OF APARTHEID MEMORIES”: THE ‘WAITING’ MOTIF¹ IN NJABULO S. NDEBELE’S *THE CRY OF WINNIE MANDELA*



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INTRODUCTION

In one uniquely reflective moment, Lewis Nkosi, one of the finest and perceptive scholars of African literary modernity, made a statement that captures the South African mind following the collapse of official apartheid. Nkosi's proclamation attends to the inquest on the responsibility of the artist, particularly for an "emergent nation" whose cultural past was inundated with narratives attuned to utilitarian ideals. In the context of the liberal order where there are persistent calls for the rediscovery of the ordinary² and the imperative of historical and cultural retrievals of the people's past and recent shared experiences, narratives of sensibilities must not be neutralised as a consequence of the prevailing docility inspired by the people's new sense of freedom. Although Nkosi's position is not entirely a fresh call in the discourse of postcolonial African literary imagination, his careful localisation of the statement within the context of South Africa's racially defined literary traditions incites a challenge to the Black literati to invest on self. His voice:

The novelists, dramatists and poets remind the public constantly what the public wishes to forget. Black writers in particular, feel an urgent sense of obligation to expose the wounds and to make the 'knowledge' public; but such an attempt by black writers only creates for the other side huge anxieties and discomfort (Quoted in Stiebel, 2005: 169).

The effort to "remind the public constantly what the public wishes to forget", and the "urgent sense of obligation to expose the wounds" seem inevitable. Interestingly, however, the exposition seen in the narratives of South Africa after apartheid is not limited to writings by Black South Africans. Nearly all the writers across racial divide seem fascinated with the mission of narrating past and current "wounds". Pamela Jooste, Imraam Coovadia, Sindiwe Magona, Zakes Mda, André Brink, and even the new entrants such as Fred Khumalo, Zukiswa Wanner, Nthikeng Mohlele, Niq Mhlongo, and so on, have all continued to explore the past in varying degree of interest as a site worthy of narrative commemorations. Many of the most established writers such as

Nadine Gordimer, Brink, Coetzee, and Mda have done excellent jobs in this respect. But there is something very fascinating about Nkosi and Njabulo S. Ndebele. Where both scholars have made very influential statements that help to build the theorising of African literary scholarship, their adventure into creative writing seems tailored toward impugning the old assumption of black writing as one overwhelmed by the journalistic imperative³. Their trained choices of deploying psychology in the creative process⁴ present a narrative rhythm that is at once as lyrical as it is cerebral. In three successive novels, for instance, Nkosi writes stories that take the reader beyond the every day events. We find instances in his *Mating Birds*, *Underground People* and, especially in *Mandela's Ego*. But, in all of these, memories are directed to different kinds of repression and their consequential subversions.

One novelist and scholar who takes us through an entirely different planetary rendition of apartheid memories is Ndebele. Like Nkosi, Ndebele's scholarship enjoys a global reach particularly when he writes about South African life and culture. As an academic administrator, Ndebele's impact cuts across universities that range from Lesotho, Witwatersrand, the University of the Western Cape, University of the North, and the urbane University of Cape Town where he eventually took up a position as Vice Chancellor. Some of his most celebrated essays are contained in *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture*. His story for children, *Bonolo and the Peach Tree*, and the short story collection *Fools & Other Stories* appeared before his beautifully crafted *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, a novel that takes us, quite persuasively, to a different kind of memory recovery that hardly ever resonates in the struggle discourse of Black liberation in South Africa. *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* stands out among the corpus of post-apartheid narratives that address the sordid South Africa's past. The novel picks on a seemingly simple narrative motif: "Waiting". Ndebele creatively challenges us into basic questions about matters that are often taken for granted, and one is left with questions that demand difficult responses.

¹ The concept of motif is deployed, here, in its general sense as "a conspicuous element, such as a type of incident, device, reference, or formula, which occurs frequently in works of literature". See, for instance, M. H. Abrams' elaboration in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7th ed. Boston (Massachusetts): Heinle & Heinle, 1999: 169 – 170.

² See Njabulo S. Ndebele's seminal essay of the same title in his collection of essays, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture*. Johannesburg: COSAW and Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press, 2006: 31 - 54.

³ Nkosi's statement to this effect remains immortal. Luckily, there has been a resurgence of technical innovations in black South African writing, especially since the collapse of official apartheid. Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, Nkosi's *Mandela's Ego*, as well as Zakes Mda's masterful rendition of Africa's colonial encounter and the religious catastrophes emanating from Christian missionary evangelism in *The Hearts of Redness* remain some of the best imaginative writings in this respect. David Attwell has observed this development in what he calls "The Experimental Turn in Black South African Fiction". See David Attwell's essay in Leon de Kock, Loise Bethlehem & Sonja Laden, *South Africa in the Global Imaginary*, Pretoria: Univ. of South Africa Press & Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2004: 154 - 179. See also David Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History*. Pietermaritzburg: Univ. of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005.



For instance, how is the notion and motif of “Waiting” novelistically universalised in the narrative? How does the author’s polemic evocation of Greek mythology, particularly his foregrounding of the novel with the invocation of Penelope in Homer’s *The Odyssey* inhere a sense of globality to *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*? Why should Ndebele’s novel be useful in a discussion of “World Literatures”? Does the feminised notion or motif of “Waiting”, here, draw any support from J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*? Does it draw upon Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*? How does the novelists’ motif of “Waiting” lean upon the Christian belief in waiting for the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ? What is the artistic intentionality invoked in the novelist’s allusion to the Indian narrative of Shamanic necromancy as exemplified in the analogy of Quesalid and Winnie Mandela? What, indeed, does it mean to “Wait” as a cardinal motif in classical and contemporary mythologies?

Evidently, for Ndebele, the subject of “Waiting” seems to inspire a profound sense of both philosophical and psychological fascination. Ndebele is not a mundane narrator of unilinear realist stories. There is a consistent predilection in his narratives of a seasoned contemplation of abstractions in the course of narrativity. For instance, in the very beautifully written novella, *Fools*, the subject of “Waiting” appears intermittently as a caesural or pause element in the narrative process. In this fascinating narrative of agony, which scorns the collective foolishness of a repressed people who are too lazy and complacent in confronting their common oppressor, “Waiting” is the abstract action of docility witnessed in strategic zones where it is only momentary and almost, always, attended to in anticipated interludes. In *Fools*, the Boer emerges as the primary culprit who exploits the privileges of whiteness as a racial category in their abrasive display of economic, political, and other inexhaustible powers that control the agencies of violence to intimidate the Blacks. But, even here, the narrator manages to foreground the narrative incidents within waiting centres: the terminus, the taxi ranks, the home, the classroom, the picnic arena, and the cornfield. At such moments, it is only coincidental that “the train arrived”, or “the friend arrived”, just when the driver got tired of “waiting”. In *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, however, “waiting” becomes a subject of obsession; it emerges so ubiquitously as the central focus of narrativity that it readily assumes an elemental motif.

The motif of “Waiting”, here, evokes a number of mythological narratives that extend to the Christian theological faith system that urges adherents to “hope and pray” for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, a “waiting” that, in literature, is immediately reminiscent of William Butler Yeats’ “The Second Coming”⁵. It also lures an understanding of the modernist theatrical tradition that yearns to comprehend the meaning and meaninglessness of life as exemplified in Samuel Beckett’s 1952 absurdist play, *Waiting for Godot*⁶, just like J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*, takes the phenomenon and idea to the challenges incited by all imperialist regimes anywhere and everywhere in the world. Where Christians derive their strength for the interminable moment of “Waiting” from their faith that promises a destination to the immortal realms of a paradise after a tortuous spiritual peregrination that involves moral purification, Beckett’s “Waiting” creates a complex interplay of confusions that wean humanity of its invincibility and evanescent pretensions. Coetzee’s “Waiting”, however, takes the narrative to a postcolonial realm where the idiom of ‘waiting’ for the troublesome barbarians ends in an endless, fruitless exercise. The novel examines “the imperialism and moral flaws of political powers”, and we watch the magistrate with awe as the narrator portrays his “thoughts as he experiences the events of torture and power by the Empire”. In Coetzee’s novel, the barbarians emerge as “the imaginary dangers which are preparing to attack the town”. Empire, personified by the brutal and paranoid Colonel Joll, mobilises all the arsenals of violation at his disposal and **waits** for the imaginary enemy who never arrives; instead, every “foreigner” or non-members of the town who come visiting for whatever purposes, gets categorised as the enemy and is thus humiliated and subjected to the most tortuous, agonising traumas. At the end, however, it becomes obvious that the real barbarian is, indeed, the Empire, since “under the name of self-defence, they are making a self-destruction”⁷.

In poetry, no one captures the rhythm and typology of “Waiting” associated with South Africa of the separatist era better than the poet Arthur Nortje. In an eloquent poetry of incarceration and solitude that compels “Waiting” as a defining state of anxiety and vulnerability, Nortje constructs a poetic moment that presents the experience of apartheid brutality as an “imagination of disaster”.

It is significant that Nortje appropriates the title, “Waiting”, even though the trauma of solitary confinement, loneliness, and hard labour emerge as the envisioned strands that punctuate every rhythm of pain in “Waiting”. Nortje’s “Waiting” is funereal: the racialised Other is a living dead whose one option is to either escape to exile from the claustrophobic apartheid society, be imprisoned, or killed.

Notje’s “Waiting” is beyond the apocalyptic; it is somewhat purgatorial. Notje, Kumalo, and the “crowd” of “stone breakers” emerge collectively as victims who wait in this purgatorial zone of “Waiting”. If poetry is the soulful chronicler of honesty, which must demystify modernist technological inventions that tend to diminish humane essences, then it must be deployed to record the “faces of pain”, especially “now that the computer, the mechanical notion/obliterates sincerities”. Like all the racialised Others who got killed, imprisoned, or exiled, “Waiting” seems to be the only uniting idiom.

Whether the victim is in exile in Europe, or imprisoned somewhere in apartheid South Africa, the pains and sorrows associated with displacement are essentially the same: loneliness and solitude should be for the dead, not for the living. It is solitude, the terrifying sense of loneliness instigated by the brutal regime which many a South African man or woman experienced in the course of “Waiting” that would then trigger the interest of South African mythologists, poets and novelists into exploring the many facets of the psychology of “Waiting” and its debilitating consequences. In fiction, Ndebele’s *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* is an important statement in this mission of mythologising solitude as we find in the next segment of this discussion.

The Cry of Winnie Mandela, Njabulo Ndebele’s masterful rendition of the psychological traumas and burdens associated with the phenomenon of “Waiting”, is not just a story. It is, in fact, a robust cerebral narrative that immediately evokes memories of William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, Isidore Okpewho’s *The Last Duty*, and K. Sello Duiker’s *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, at least, at the levels of style and narrative idiom. Art and psychology are, here, manifestly deployed to explore humanity’s dispositions and predilections

when faced with extreme difficult choices. Human vulnerabilities emerge as subjects that are placed on trial and, at the end, it seems reasonable to conclude that humanity is constituted of mortal beings with emotions and needs that only tell of their vulnerabilities and unflattering capitulations to their biological desires. In a way, art and psychology connive in the aesthetic investigations of the dynamics and philosophy of life.

Here is an excellent example of a transnational aesthetic whose claims to a global mythology does not necessarily draw upon topographical placements of actions and incidents. Instead, the primary voices are all women who reside in South Africa during the long and tortuous years of racial separatism. While four cardinal voices are presented to convey their experiences in the traumatising moments of “waiting” for their loved ones, however, we observe that many of these “loved ones” were displaced by the ordeals created by the hostile political system. Husbands had to literally “disappear” from their wives; some went for “studies abroad”, some fought as “guerrilla fighters”, some were “inmates” in the many notorious incarceration facilities, while others were forced into “exile” or even “got killed” by the murder squad of the separatist regime. “Waiting”, for these women, then, transcends the mere physical absence of their husbands who journeyed through various parts of the world in search of personal development and elusive freedom; “waiting” was more than the desire and hope for a “return” from their “departures” to, most times, “unknown destinations”, and the women were just there, resigned to faith as they awaited such returns that, most times, never materialised.

“Waiting” becomes the summative idiom for the many women who, given their experiences, gradually submit to stoic resignations as the journeys of their husbands totalise the physical and spiritual peregrinations of a nation’s soul desperately in need of justice and social redemption. Yet, in spite of all these, the globality of *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* takes its nurture and luxuriance from the structures of memory provided as much by South Africa’s narratives of commemorations as it draws from other global mythologies.

⁵ Yeats’ poem is particularly interesting, here, as it generously problematizes the uncertainties that come with the idea and practice of “waiting”. In this instance, the “waiting” could, like any other “waiting”, end up in disappointments and confusions. The messiah may never arrive and, instead, the waiter may be confronted with confusions arising from the arrival of a destroyer rather than a messiah in the same way that “the rough beast, its hour come round at last, Stouches towards Bethlehem to be born”. (See, A. Norman Jeffares (Ed.), W. B. Yeats: Selected Poetry. London & Sydney: Pan Books & Macmillan, 1974: 99 – 100.)
⁶ An existentialist play which premiered on 5 January 1953 at the Théâtre de Babylone in Paris. The English-language version premiered in London in 1955. Wikipedia. <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>. Accessed: 29 October, 2019.
⁷ See Pelin Aytemiz (2016). “Victims of the Empire: An Analysis on Coetzee’s Waiting for the Barbarians”. IRES Conference Proceedings: 113th International Conference on Economics and Social Sciences (ICESS), 28-29.12.2016, Florence, Italy. <https://www.academia.edu/899043/victims>, p. 5. Accessed: 31 August, 2019.



Perhaps, the two most resounding instances of such classical universalism are the novelist's analogical evocation of the Homeric story of Penelope and the Indian story of Quesalid. In Greek mythology as recorded in Homer's *The Odyssey*, Penelope was that quintessential woman of all women who totalised the ideals of the chaste wife as shown in the narrator's exploration of the phenomenon of "Waiting"⁸. Penelope's husband, Odysseus, a gallant military general had embarked on a mission of military adventurism, demonstrating an untrammelled sense of patriotism as nations after nations capitulated to his military prowess. The fact that Odysseus "lived" at a time in history when nations survived and were built on booties and taxes from their conquests and military exploits meant that the dominance of Greece as a global power depended on the successes of her military. This boosted the drive of the Greek soldiers who went to war, almost always, with the mission to conquer other territories.

But this embrace of civic responsibility also meant an abdication of personal responsibilities. Odysseus spent nineteen years at war fronts without taking a pause to attend to the demands of the home-front. His wife, Penelope, was, given the circumstances, left in a wilderness of prolonged loneliness that made her vulnerable to the amorous demands of other men at "home". She lives through the nineteen years, maintaining her fidelity to Odysseus who returns unannounced and consequently slaughters all the men who made advances to his lonely wife. The matter, of course, would have ended here. But just after a night of passionate intimacy with his wife, Penelope, he "disappears" again the next morning, without informing his wife. His reason, this time, was to search for atonement in order to avert any possible strife that could result from his killing of the men who sought the hand of his wife in marriage while he was away for nineteen years. This time, however, Penelope could not bear to wait any longer. She, too, decides to leave on a personal adventure in search of women who suffered the ordeals and torments of "Waiting" for their husbands across the planet. Penelope's adventure, however, is an imaginary construct by the novelist of *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* to capture the phenomenon of "Waiting" as a psychological condition, a torment that transcends all geographical, historical and racial boundaries. The pains and anxieties of Penelope, some two thousand years ago, the narrator seems to be affirming, are not different from the anxieties and torments suffered by **many** South African women or women of whatever clime who had had

the unpleasant experiences of "waiting" for their husbands in political seasons of the anomalous and other indefinable conditions.

A second analogy that inheres a breath of the transnational to Ndebele's narrative is the Indian mythology of the Shamanic necromancer, Quesalid. Here, we encounter a patriot who was determined to expose the hideous activities of fraudsters who use the art of magic to deceive members of the public. Seeing the impossibility of engaging these clever men openly, he decides to get closer to them so as to learn the art of magic. Soon, he perfects the art, surpassing in every respect all those from whom he served as an apprentice. He then displaces them by taking over their jobs and thus renders them incompetent and invisible. It is interesting that Ndebele mobilises these mythologies in his mission to explore and thematise the subject of "Waiting" as it affects South Africa during the long years of racial segregation. That the novelist confines the narrative eye to the unique experiences of women makes this work particularly exhilarating. *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* is definitely not a feminist narrative; it is simply a blend of stories exploring a specific subject from the perspectives of "those left at home" to piece together whatever was recoverable from the broken memories of families and communities oppressed by the notorious forces of apartheid. The ingenuity of Quesalid, a skill acquired patiently through a rigorous tutelage from several "masters", as well as Penelope's mythical exemplification of marital fidelity then provide the pivots through which the narrator of *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* would want the reader to view the experiences of global women, placed in a similar circumambient universe: in this instance, South African women in the "Waiting" zone of their troubled society.

Ndebele foregrounds the narrative with the story of Penelope, but moves almost immediately to construct four female characters that converge in imaginary sisterly conversations to narrate their memories of "Waiting" to each other. Each, as if programmed, tells their stories with the mission of taking their challenge to the most visible public person at the time, Winnie, the domineering but controversial wife of the iconic, legendary South African hero and political activist, Nelson Mandela. Through the four women – Delisiwe Dulcie S'khosana, Mamello Molete, Marara Joyce Baloyi, and 'Mannete Mofolo – we listen to "voices whose stories resonate not with identical experience, but with affirming familiarity" (*Cry of Winnie*, 117).

The Cry of Winnie Mandela is a very tricky narrative where the authorial recourse to the deployment of the first-person narrative voice and the deliberate but careful fictionalisation of the actual and the imaginary create a complexity of narration that slows, rather than hasten the readerly experience. Where narrative pathos should ordinarily be tracked within the personality of the weeping subject, the reader is both entertained and subjected to the task of decoding mentalised puzzles as he struggles to identify the primary heroine of the narrative. We are aware of a human personality known and venerated globally as Winnie Mandela.

In Ndebele's novel, we recognise this larger-than-life female figure in actual political activism toward the liberation of the oppressed in the selected quotations from correspondences from her incarcerated husband in Robben Island, as well as in reports in the public domain drawn from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's sittings, and other newspaper reports. Yet, as an art form, the novelist constructs two additional "Winnies": thus we have the real-life Winnie from whose real-life correspondences and pronouncements the author was able to refract relevant statements, the fictional Winnie who has been created to respond to questions from other South African women who suffered the "torments of waiting" with her, and yet a third Winnie who appears audaciously in the narrative as the alter ego of the fictional Winnie. Thus, the reader has the task of merging the three "Winnies" into a single fearless agency who is, at once, a mother, a fighter, a lover, a politician, a motivator, a dictator and, yet, an ordinary mortal with emotions and desires that yearn for biological cravings and fulfilment.

The Cry of Winnie Mandela, then, is a narrative of remembering. It is tailored to enable our collective apprehensions of the psychology of a humanity imprisoned in the unpleasant cell of freedom and its denial at the same time; it is a narrative of commemoration from the perspectives of women who endured their rights to being cuddled by their husbands and lovers by a system that considered their humanity as inconsequential. In the final analysis, it is from the voice of the fictional Winnie that we encounter the summative humanity of all women, but especially the women of South Africa who suffered the agony of "Waiting" during the years of segregation. It is from this *Winnie* that

we listen to, and feel the pleasures, the pains and pathos that go with her self-definition:

This is one thing I will not do. It is my only defence of the future. I will not be an instrument for validating the politics of reconciliation. For me, reconciliation demands my annihilation. No. You, all of you, have to reconcile not with me, but with the meaning of me. For my meaning is the endless human search for the right thing to do. I am your pleasure and your pain, your beauty and your ugliness. Your solution and your mistake. Your hell and your heaven. I am your squatter camp shack and your million rand mansion. I am all of you who maim and rape. I am all of you who give love and succour. I am your pride and your shame. Your honour and your humiliation...." (*Cry of Winnie*, 113).

In rejecting the elites demand to be used as an agent for "validating the politics of reconciliation", it could be submitted that our "Winnie" equally rejected a fundamental principle of the "negotiated settlement" that ushered in the new democratic ethos that surrendered political power without an economic foundation to the new black leadership. Like Quesalid, Winnie is the new champion who refuses to surrender. Instead, she goes to defeat her fellow competitors in the public domain and, like Penelope, she rebels against a returnee husband who shows more commitment to his civic responsibility without demonstrating a similar commitment to the demands of his family.

Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* is impressively a narrative of commemorations told from the purviews of "waiting women". Its beauty lies as much in its lush idiom as its narrative complexity; it is as strongly the narrative of many African women as it is attuned to locating its narrative semantics within a transcendent, transnational mythology of "Waiting".



8 Richmond Lattimore beautifully captures the personality of Penelope in his modern translation of *The Odyssey* of Homer: "Penelope, in particular, is done with great subtlety. Desperately pressed, with no power but her wits, charm, and heart, she plays a waiting game and never commits herself" (my emphasis). Note that Ndebele constructed the four female characters that anticipate both motherly and activist response from "Winnie Mandela" on the subject of "waiting". Thus the entire narrative design is built on the women's decided mission to "play the waiting game" (*The Cry of Winnie*, p. 38 - 39).



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