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Re-(W)righting the Nation: Will the Real Winnie Mandela and Robert McBride Please Stand Up?

This paper attempts to reveal the very real woman and the equally real man behind the multiple myths in which these two prominent South Africans have become embedded. In so doing, the grand narratives of struggle come under deconstructive scrutiny. *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (Ndebele, 2004), fictional as it may well be and *Robert McBride: a coloured life* (Mokae, 2004) are part of a new South African literature in which people are portrayed as individuals, as fully human with a range of human emotions and are, as such, made by their own choices in life as much as by the actions of others and through interaction with others. A literary and social space has opened in which new narratives of freedom can emerge. This re-writing of the personal ought also to open the door to a corrective re-writing or righting of the political, 'to set afoot a new man' which is also 'for ourselves and for humanity' as Frantz Fanon suggests at the end of *The Wretched of the Earth*.

South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy has been colourful to say the least. Yet the grey areas of this transition, the shades, the subtleties and the textures have until recently been kept in the background, while grand narratives of struggle and of the 'successful' peaceful change-over have been fore grounded.

It may well have been necessary during the decades of anti-apartheid struggle to cultivate a grand national narrative and even to 'invent' real-life stories with exemplary characters fighting heroic battles against terrible oppressors, to subsume the articulation of differences and personalities so that they conformed to the narrow dictates of struggle. In his essay 'Redefining relevance', Njabulo Ndebele refers to this as 'the predictable drama between ruthless oppressor and their pitiful victims,' (Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*: 68), but this space of 'pure' protest is diminished and the Age of Innocence is over. Time and distance have revealed that even this Age of Innocence was not that innocent after all; and the naiveties of struggle are being shown to be more complicated and more sophisticated than some would imagine, involving real debates and choices, and are not inevitable outcomes of a particular time and space.

Yet post 1994, in the national performance space, there has been the carefully woven promotion and projection of unity and reconciliation (read: managing of public opinion and steering of popular aspirations away from direct confrontation both through the media and political interest groups). The myth of a rainbow nation united and collectively hard at work for a better life has taken centre-stage. In the Chairperson's Foreword in Volume One of *The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, for example, Desmond Tutu states: 'my

appeal is ultimately directed to us all, black and white together, to close the chapter of our past and to strive together for this beautiful and blessed land as the rainbow people of God' (Tutu: 23). Yet in Volume Five, Chapter 9 of the report, after a visit to Rwanda, he recognizes the political expediency of the national positions taken on reconciliation when he is quoted as saying, 'Confession, forgiveness and reconciliation in the lives of nations are not just airy-fairy religious and spiritual things, nebulous and unrealistic. They are the stuff of practical politics' (Tutu: 33). Those who through their actions do not conform to the foundational rainbow-and-reconciliation myth (thus rejecting the reification of reality, the glorification of the myth and possibly the deification of its creators and its praise singers) and who refuse to speak as if in a chorus with others, who are waxing lyrical about how far we have come, have been ostracized and, in some cases, demonized. They have not conformed to the rather passive myth of a South African miracle, nor have they succumbed to the pleasing and seductive project(ion) of a 'rainbow' nation in which all South Africa's people in a seemingly undifferentiated mass work together for a better life. Yet their refusal to be written off and edited out of political and social (and thus literary) existence has meant that the performance space remains a rich and vibrant living space where new counter-narratives emerge and are in the process of being made and unmade.

The phrase 'counter-narrative' is taken from Neil Lazarus's *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World.* Borrowing from Henry Louis Gates Junior, Lazarus argues that 'in the context of the contemporary capitalist world system, the need to construct a "counter-narrative … of liberation" is especially pressing' (Lazarus: 43). He argues that such a counter-narrative would derive from the 'narratives of bourgeois humanism and metropolitan nationalism with their resonant but unfounded claims to universality' (*ibid.*), suggesting that a genuinely postcolonial strategy might be to move towards a new humanism. In these re-making processes in which new narratives of nation and freedom are constructed, both the political domain and the related literary realm are changed as new voices and texts emerge contesting and enacting new power. In his introduction to *Speaking Truth to Power*, Sipho Seepe speaks of the connections between intellectual and democratic life and argues that 'the essays must be seen as a protest against the view that posits black intellectual life as uncomplicated if not homogen[e]ous; a view that suggests that black intellectual life does not warrant any sophisticated and thoughtful treatment' (Seepe, *Speaking Truth*: 25).

While new histories now recollect the past with more accuracy and historical understanding, filling in the missing gaps, literature in the form of creative writing offers further possibilities for truth-telling and for extending a democratic space, such that it is richly peopled with an array of interesting characters and experiences speaking in different voices. Stories through their very existence can break down borders, question and constantly re-define what constitutes the national space, and work towards a greater overall freedom of a society. In this way, literature is indeed em*power*ing and literary works, through their very presence, are also acts of (political) consciousness.

This opens the way for the powerless, for ordinary people to make their presence felt in stories and for the ordinariness of people's lives to become the subject of literature, so that new and little truths (not white lies, nor blackouts) begin to have popular appeal, to speak truth to power and, most importantly, to themselves. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o suggests:

> The performance space of the artist stands for openness, that of the state, for confinement. Art breaks down barriers between people; the state erects them. Art arose out of human struggle to break free of confinement. These confinements could be natural. But they are also economic, political, social, and spiritual. Art yearns for maximum physical, social and spiritual space for human action…. the human hand and mind have the entire limitless space and time for their performance of the struggle for human freedom and self-realization. (Ngugi: 68-69)

In his essay on South African literature already referred to, entitled 'Redefining Relevance', and written more than a decade ago, Njabulo Ndebele prophetically pointed to the need for ordinary stories to be told:

> [T]he greatest challenge of the South African revolution is in the search for ways of thinking, ways of perception, that will help to break down the closed epistemological structures of South African oppression…. The challenge is to free the entire social imagination of the oppressed from the laws of perception that have characterised apartheid society… It means extending the writer's perception of what can be written about, and the means and methods of writing. (Ndebele, *Rediscovery*: 65)

And he adds,

> The operative principle of composition in post-protest literature is that it should probe beyond the observable facts, to reveal new worlds where it was previously thought they did not exist, and to reveal process and movement where they were hidden… to deal with the demands of a complex future. The aim is to extend the range of personal and social experience as far as possible in order to contribute to bringing about a highly conscious, sensitive new person in a new society. This, it seems to me, is the function of art in, and its contribution to, the ongoing revolution in South Africa. (Ndebele, *Rediscovery*: 72)

The transitional period has been peopled with colourful characters from among the leadership of the liberation struggle, such as Winnie Mandela, and from the underground, such as Robert McBride. Their mere presence, which has been to loom larger than life, questions the ease with which some would want a simple and uncomplicated history of South Africa (and exposes as wishful thinking the idea that there has been an easy manufacture of consent of the South African people). Their views and deeds sophisticate and complicate the South African transition. They are both survivors – demonized by some, but also celebrated by others.

In *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, the character of Winnie Mandela is simultaneously reduced and elevated ('elevated' because the novel gives her a certain reality and personality) to the level of the ordinary – instead of that great

and mythical figure of the Mother-of-the-Nation (Ndebele, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*: 78), she is shown to be so like other women – placed and equated on the level of four other women, all of them black South Africans who waited for their men for long periods of time and yet who also lost their loved ones through struggle or during transition. They are seen to be the South(ern) African descendents of the Penelope of Homer's epic tale, who waited nearly twenty years for the return of Odysseus. The women speak to their lives and write letters to Winnie Mandela, critiquing her; and she eventually also responds with her own story.

The book begins by describing and analysing the longing of women for the men they love, the high standards of fidelity by which they are judged by the world, the hardships that are the lot of these women whose men have been taken away from them or who have chosen to abandon them for one reason or another. Ndebele looks at each woman's plight in dealing with what he calls 'the inescapable condition of living in the zone of absence without duration' (Ndebele, *The Cry*: 6-7). Within the individuality of each one's pain, he finds a story that needs to be told, something redeeming that can be extracted, that 'partakes of the essence of beauty' (Ndebele, *The Cry*: 7). As he says, 'they all make up that gaze that captures the condition of life through time measured in states of waiting. That gaze is the enduring, eternal solidity of being. It is a condition of beauty that balances doom with triumph. The look of coming and going' (*ibid.*).

Each story suggests both longing and loss. The first woman, Mannete Mofolo, sees her husband leaving her to look for work in the cities. He returns periodically and eventually stops coming home. Unknown to his wife, he settles with another woman in the city and starts another family. She spends her life emotionally and physically searching for her husband and caring for their children. She becomes a woman of detachment, one who 'finally realizes that what she really missed about her man was no longer himself, but the idea of him' (Ndebele, *The Cry*: 81), a realization itself prefigured by a deadening of emotion and a growing automatization of existence, a depersonalization or what Ndebele terms calls 'a thing-person without agency' (Ndebele, *The Cry*: 4): 'Saved from memories, she remembers only the floating feeling, the medium of forgetfulness and shelter' (Ndebele, *The Cry*: 13). The second woman, Delisiwe, sees her husband going overseas on a scholarship. Over a number of years, she helps to support him. She waits for years for his return, which is always being postponed, but eventually she has an affair from which she bears a child. After fourteen years, her husband returns and divorces her, because of the child. Years later she learns that he had not been faithful either: '"He never told me, until I learnt about it some years into his second marriage, of abortions of his foetuses by Scottish and French girls"' (Ndebele, *The Cry*: 52). She says, '"We could have shared with each other the travails of our separation. We could have achieved our mellowness together"' (*ibid.*).

The third woman, Mamello, waits for a husband who is an activist who has been imprisoned. But after his release, he sends her a letter ending the relationship and a few weeks after their divorce he marries a white woman 'comrade'. Mamello experiences a number of breakdowns as a result. The fourth, Marara, experiences the 'loss' of a husband who lives with her, but constantly has affairs. For her, it is like 'a slow process of departure' in which 'he ceases to be there' (Ndebele, *The Cry*: 20). '"At first, his absences are barely noticeable, until increasingly absence signifies departure"' (*ibid.*). She resists doing the same, thinking that for her husband it has become a habit, which 'spells the death of conscience. "Before thought and conscience disappear into habit, they are your hurdles, your redemption. When you lose them, that's when you may become a mere thing to have another thing put into you"'(Ndebele, *The Cry*: 30).

One is struck by the ordinariness of these characters, their strength and their insights into their own lives. South Africa is peopled with such women who have endured and continue to endure great suffering, yet up until now their stories have not been heard, have been reduced to mere gossip. These little narratives, however, make up a whole and they have the capacity to change the way one thinks about women's relations with men in the new country. Through literature, these micro-narratives speak to the silences that exist in a national history that has elevated the role of men over women; and they point to the oppressive relations women endure and the real divisions between black men and black women. This vision is opposed to one in which black life in general is seen as that of a monolithic mass of mere people at one in struggle and in despair.

All the women, after telling their stories, finally meet and plan a conversation with Winnie Mandela. For them, 'Only Winnie was history in the making. There was no stability for her, only the inexorable unfolding of events; the constant tempting of experience. The flight of Winnie's life promised no foreknown destinations. It was an ongoing public conversation, perhaps too public to be understood' (Ndebele, *The Cry*: 40). Towards the end of this novel, the women who have waited in vain come together and celebrate their freedom by going on a holiday to the coast. This physical journey that they undertake is again symbolic of the freedom they have won. In all the cases mentioned, while the year 1994 meant freedom from oppression, it was the departure of their husbands that brought about their liberation from male domination and their emergence as 'fully-fledged beings'. The women are opening the way for even greater possibilities for living their own lives and realizing their own dreams, unedited by men. They are beginning to leave behind their painful pasts and have begun to articulate what it is that a woman in present-day South Africa wants.

Overall, Winnie, the centrepiece of Ndebele's text, is described as 'the woman with nine lives' (Ndebele, *The Cry*: 86). She looks back at her past and says that the time she was forced to spend away from her home during her period of banishment gave her a sense of power: '"Brandfort was my first taste of power, something close to absolute power. It came from my sense of having the ability to change things in a place that had no notion of change"' (Ndebele, *The Cry*:

102). In her earlier attempts to free herself from the miserable act of waiting, she journeys across the country, she becomes the 'queen of the highways' and finds part of her freedom in motion, as she moves from one place to another. As Carole Boyce Davies explains in her critical book, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, a location may be a site of creativity and re-memory as well as instability. It is the fictive as well as the real Winnie's understanding that politics has created South African lives, made them what they are. People have not been allowed to invent themselves or to make what they want of their lives. Here, the politics of location perhaps creates a free space, a liberated zone, in which Winnie can travel, rather than the location of politics that traps her even as it grants her a certain power. She enjoys 'the possibilities of infinite travel to an infinite number of destinations, in the land of infinite possibility' (Ndebele, *The Cry*: 101). When one of the other women narrates her story as if in an imaginary correspondence with Winnie, she also refers to travelling as an act of liberation, where home is not a building with rooms, but a country full of people and mountains. In this way, the traditional trappings of women's oppression – the confines of a house and enforced domesticity – are replaced by a national stage in which women can act in the main roles of their own making and take centre-stage. And the rebuilding of homes in ways that do not entrap, but as creative living spaces, becomes crucial in nurturing a new nationhood.

Winnie is seen to be a woman who has managed to defy those who wanted to destroy her and who has managed to flout the unwritten rules meant to keep women subjugated. When she engages in a conversation with herself and the other women in this book, she describes the harassment she suffered at the hands of the authorities as '"part of a long act of war"' (Ndebele, *The Cry*: 87). The freeing of Nelson Mandela becomes the end of the war: 'when the heroine triumphantly walks into prison, the entire world watching, to fetch her man. Winnie does not wait. She goes and gets what she wants. And there she was, coming out of the prison with her price: her Nelson' (*ibid.*). She is given the capacity to reinvent herself: '"I'm beginning to fear that the Winnie of my creation is becoming all too real. She's taking on too much of the responsibility of reflection"' (Ndebele, *The Cry*: 105). After Mandela's release, she says: '"I can move on now, having narrated you through two degrees of distance. First, I narrated you from the outside, and then from the inside: two stages of a journey towards myself… I acknowledge your existence, but take the liberty of leaving you to your own devices"' (Ndebele, *The Cry*: 107).

Yet, elsewhere in the book Winnie says: '"I am not a politician. I am what politics made me. What politics made me, is not me. But what politics made me has become a part of me, a part of what I am. Let me let you in on a secret."/ "I'm not the only one. There are many out there who are not what they are but what politics has made them"' (Ndebele, *The Cry*: 112-113). Above all, she is presented as forward-looking so that: '"All that has gone before and all that is yet to come are the burdens and joys of our responsibility…. As the world carries us, so do we carry it too"' (Ndebele, *The Cry*: 113-114). In this way, the reader is

also taken to a different consciousness, the understanding that each one can make a life, is no longer a victim as in protest literature, but a fully-fledged human being shaping a destiny to come.

Winnie's appearance before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is seen by Ndebele through Winnie's eyes to be a failure, because of her refusal to accept responsibility for certain actions and her distrust in reconciliation. Embedded in this text is possibly Ndebele's own critique of Winnie. Here, the author possibly intrudes with his own moral preference. Despite his overall feminist approach in this book, it seems he has not also considered the possibility that in her response or lack thereof at the TRC hearings, she refused to respond with the kind of compassionate apology expected of a woman in South Africa. Instead, she took her place on the political stage with the kind of coldness and objectivity expected more of men and what society would accept in a man. In this refusal, Winnie managed momentarily not only to support those who disagreed with the TRC's attempt to place the actions of the apartheid dispensation and the liberation movement in the same light, but also to defy and transcend that which is expected of a woman despite the manly pleadings of Archbishop Desmond Tutu; and she refused to conform to what the political patriarchy expected of her.

Her success in retaining a sense of self and political independence in a political world dominated by South African men looms larger than the book itself. Her ability to be in the right place at the right time Ndebele suggests is almost orchestrated. Yet her background as a social worker even prior to her entering politics, that is, her own set of character traits, would explain why she shows solidarity with those in squatter camps, the poorest of the poor and the suffering. Politically, she is seen in association with those who have not benefited from the changes that have taken place. She has made inroads into the world of men as a rebel in revolt and therefore poses a threat since one who deems herself equal to them would thus be equally worthy of being taken seriously by other people. She is on everyone's lips and everyone has an opinion on her. Whatever she does makes headlines. Her presence on the political stage re-writes the history of the nation. Like the hero described by Mikhail Bakhtin in the writings of Dostoevsky, she cannot be finalized or turned into a voiceless object. As Bakhtin says: 'In a human being there is always something only he himself can reveal, in a free act of self-consciousness and discourse, something that does not submit to an externalising second-hand definition' (Bakhtin: 58).

In *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, the different voices of the different women add to the story, but remain conscious of 'their own unfinalizability and indeterminacy', such that, as Bakhtin again writes, 'the genuine life of the personality is made available only through a dialogic penetration, during which it freely and reciprocally reveals itself' (p. 58). Thus, the real Winnie Mandela cannot stand up, since she is still in the process of making herself and of being made. Similarly, in the biography, *Robert McBride: a coloured life*, the text speaks about McBride through many voices. It is these polyphonic colour(ful) voices that testify to the life and times of one who was regarded as an outcast, a

departure from the norm, yet whose story too reveals him as an ordinary person caught in the throes of an extraordinary situation and acting his way out of this narrative not of his own making.

This book, by Gomolemo Mokae, enables us to glimpse the man behind the myth of one whom the newspapers at the time called rather disparagingly, the 'Magoo Bomber'. As Sipho Seepe writes in his foreword: 'Two singular operations catapult Robert McBride to media prominence. One is the bombing of the "Magoo" and "Why not" bars frequented by members of the South African Police and the South African Defence Force. A number of civilians were injured and killed. McBride was to receive three death sentences as a result' (Mokae, *Robert McBride: a coloured life*: 3). The other operation involved Gordon Webster. In what ranks as one of the most daring rescue missions, Robert and his father Derrick were able to free Webster from the clutches of the security forces, even though a severely injured Gordon Webster lay at the Edendale Hospital under heavy police guard. As Rosemary Gray notes in her critique, published as part of the Annexure to the text:

> How this character comes to do what he does is explained and narrated by members of the McBride family as well as loved ones. In the biography, these are the communal voices, which "own" McBride and join in to provide a variety of perspectives on one life. This polyphony of voices within a relatively small community makes no attempt to immortalise or eulogise the subject, so that the reader gains a real and effectively unbiased sense of the subject himself. (*Mokae, Robert McBride*: 293)

McBride's teacher at Fairdale, Trevor Webster, projects Robert as rather nondescript and as a particularly ordinary person: '"I didn't teach his class. Robert was in the Natural Sciences. (A) Mr Ally took that class for Geography while I taught the Humanities. Robert played rugby. He was generally a well-behaved lad. Well, fighting used to be the norm then"' (Mokae, *Robert McBride*: 23). Yet the tyranny of place (to use Esk'ia Mphahlele's term) – the reality of living in a world in which apartheid had fuelled violence in the townships and left gangsters to terrorize whole communities meant that Robert grew up in a world in which violence prevailed.

Every time Derrick came across a situation where the police were assaulting a person they had arrested, he would come in. '"I would intervene and say, 'What's going on?'… 'If you are arresting him, take him to the police station. If you are not let him go, don't come and hit him'"' (Mokae, *Robert McBride*: 35). As a result, Robert had to learn to fight and spent hours practising on a punching bag. He became caught in a situation where in self-defence he had to shoot a gangster, an event which traumatised him. On seeing the picture of the eight year old, Candice van der Linde, whose mother had been killed in the bar blast, Robert recalls: '"I just felt sorry. I was very emotional seeing the child's face and thinking its mother was dead because of my actions. It was quite a problem to deal with. …. Of course you can't sort of get weak because of your conscience or feelings or whatever. The child's face did have an effect on me"' (Mokae, *Robert McBride*: 107).

Mokae allows Greta Apelgren to explain Robert's reluctance to carry out instructions:

> "It was like psychological – emotionally beyond him. Robert is an intellectual, essentially. He was becoming a teacher, and those things were very important to him. He could read for hours on end. He was a person who could rationalise things intellectually." …
>
> (*Mokae*, *Robert McBride*: 100-101)

The gunning down of trapped MK cadres following the attempted sabotage of an oil refinery on 13 May 1984 is seen to be a key incident in Robert's joining the military underground, MK. Mokae points out that: 'When Doris commended the cadres for dying fighting, she was not aware that she was actually telling Robert to follow their example and join the MK. At least Robert understands that to be her subconscious message' (Mokae, *Robert McBride*: 40). For Robert McBride the political reality necessitated a need for him to remake himself. It was his earliest memories of violence and of racism that spurred him on to action.

In reading this story, the reader comes closer to unmasking the real Robert McBride. His memories and those of families and friends are absorbed in this text as if they have become the collective consciousness of the community at large. In the case of the young Robert McBride, he entered a predominantly black liberation struggle with the added dilemma of being 'coloured' in a world that would prefer the simplicity of the binary of being black or white. He is also seen to have been betrayed by others in the political movement who, despite giving him instructions, later distanced themselves from his actions.

Like the Winnie Mandela of Ndebele's book and of real life, he waited for his time to come and he also refused to be finalized, but appears in this book to be in the constant process of making, unmaking and re-making himself. As Sipho Seepe writes in the foreword to the biography:

> The book is also a story of a commander, a leader, a disciplined cadre, a political activist, and an organizer…. At another level, the biography is a love story. It is a story of the women who touched Robert McBride's heart - Greta Apelgren and Paula Leyden. (*Mokae*, *Robert McBride*: 4-5)

Robert McBride remains a villain to some, and a hero to many. He inhabits a racially polarized world in which the words: fame and notoriety, champion and desperado, icon and criminal, sit uncomfortably alongside each other to describe the same subject. Yet it will require a leap of faith to suggest that Robert has finally found an accommodation with either side. He refuses to be pigeonholed; he defies undemanding description; his character is reluctant to step forward, to be essentialized.

The Cry of Winnie Mandela, fictional as it may well be and the biography, *Robert McBride: a coloured life*, are part of a new South African literature in which people are portrayed as individuals, as fully human with a range of human emotions and are as such made by their own choices in life as much as by the actions of others and through interaction with others. A literary and social space

has opened in which new narratives of freedom can emerge. This re-writing of the personal ought also to open the door to a re-writing of the political, 'to set afoot a new man' which is also 'for ourselves and for humanity' (Fanon: 255) as Frantz Fanon suggests at the end of *The Wretched of the Earth.*

The challenge is that the extension of the democratic space through literature should also feed back into political life. The unpacking of personal lives – their failures and strengths – should lead to an assessment of how the personal also shapes the political. In this way, these little counter-narratives can add up or contribute to a new whole, beyond the politics of 'rainbowism' or renaissance: something wholly new, more liberating and unfinalizable. This becomes an important direction to take in the present since some, as Ndebele notes in an essay titled 'An approach to viable futures,' argue that the national space is 'internalized' and 'uncontested' (Meintjies and Pietersen: 15). South Africa is not a mass of people who all think and act in the same way and there is a danger if there are those who see it as such. He argues that 'the reality of new and contesting positionalities should be accepted and, following that, the reality of mutual vulnerabilities be recognized, accepted and declared' (Meintjies and Pietersen: 17). Perhaps the world of literature is showing the way courageously to a nation in which dialogues of all kinds become more desirable, more forward-looking, where there is an acknowledgement that words, ideas and actions (political and otherwise) remain, as Bakhtin notes: 'in the continuing dialogue, where [they] will be heard, answered and reinterpreted' (Bakhtin: 300).

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