



# MOTHER OF THE NATION: Love in a time of revolution

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**1961**  
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Nomzamo

*“Apartheid was not a friendly system to fight against. You had to be tough and sometimes get militant in order to fight decisively. I don’t think you can charge David for picking up a stone and throwing it at Goliath. She fought the best way she knew how.”*

- Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka

When Thabo Mbeki was asked to eulogise Winnie Madikizela-Mandela following her passing on April 2, 2018, the former South African president revisited his first memories of her back in 1961 at the Mandela home, House Number 8115, Orlando West, Soweto. Speaking at the Thabo Mbeki Foundation in Johannesburg, he recalled how Nelson Mandela, then a leading figure in his country’s banned liberation movement, the African National Congress (ANC), would ask Madikizela-Mandela to invite Mbeki over to the Mandela home for lunch. Mbeki - who was barely 20-years-old but was already actively involved in the ANC Youth League - was staying with the family of ANC secretary general Duma Nokwe, who didn’t live too far away from the Mandelas.

According to Mbeki - who only figured out years later what these lunch invitations were all about -

Nelson Mandela and top ANC leaders met secretly and deliberated on matters affecting the movement, after which Mandela asked his wife Winnie to call in the youthful Mbeki to act as Mandela's sounding board for whatever the ANC elders had discussed. Mandela never explicitly told Mbeki what the meetings were about, but on returning from exile decades later, it was Madikizela-Mandela who confided in Mbeki what those lunches - which she sat through - were all about. Mandela had tactically settled on using Mbeki as a political guinea pig for gauging how the ANC youth would react to propositions the apex leadership was toying with.

It was during these lunch-cum-sounding-board meetings at the Mandela home that Mbeki got to know Madikizela-Mandela, not as a front row comrade in the struggle, but as Nelson Mandela's wife. The revelation that the then politically active Mbeki - whose father Govan Mbeki was similarly deeply involved in the ANC dealings and who would be jailed alongside Nelson Mandela - considered Madikizela-Mandela more as his leader's wife than as a comrade-in-arms indicates how much work the future "Mother of the Nation" had to put in so as to earn her place on the high table of revolutionaries. In Mbeki's recollection, Madikizela-Mandela became politically active during the Rivonia treason trial, where she was photographed carrying a placard that said, "We stand by our leaders." Madikizela-Mandela had in fact been politically active before that trial, much as that might have been her coming out moment as the public face of the struggle.

Madikizela-Mandela's radical upward trajectory - of finding her own political practice within the ANC away from the shadow of Nelson Mandela and his comrades, some of whom he was facing trial with and who got jailed alongside him not too long after he married Winnie - is readily corroborated in a new documentary film, *Winnie (2017)*, produced by celebrated French filmmaker Pascale Lamche.

The film, which Madikizela-Mandela endorsed as easily the most accurate representation of her life story ever done by anyone, comprises both old and new footage. There are interviews of her unflinching young self: the militant revolutionary saying she's ready to take up a gun at that moment and kill for the sake of securing her people's freedom. Such interviews are interspersed by those of the already greying Mother of the Nation who speaks with heavy introspection, questioning how the former Archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu, tried to overtly persuade her into making a public apology during the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 1997, something she says she found difficult to forgive and forget, feeling unfairly judged by Tutu.

"My husband was never there when both children were born," a young Madikizela-Mandela says in the film, her unmistakable voice trembling with conviction as she revisited life with Mandela. "He was either in prison or out gathering information about their treason trial. I never even heard him address a single meeting. He never discussed anything political with me. I am not his political product, actually. I have never been. I never had the opportunity to be one...."

Madikizela-Mandela had always spoken of how dominating Nelson Mandela was; she made fun of how, instead of asking her hand in marriage, Mandela instructed her to "take the car and go and tell your parents I want to marry you." When she was once asked whether she took offence with Mandela's bland proposal, the ageing Madikizela-Mandela giggled, saying she was a young girl who was beholden to the man she had grown to love, and that she believed in the cause he was fighting for. Mandela handled everything, including ordering her wedding dress - which she fondly remembered as a beautiful number - leaving Madikizela-Mandela a bewildered spectator.

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“He sent me to my parents and retreated to his liberation work,” a retrospective Madikizela-Mandela had said. “We didn’t even have much time to ourselves on our wedding day because we immediately got back into struggle work. The ANC was like a drug to us. It was our opium.”

On one occasion, Madikizela-Mandela wrote in one of her better-known love letters to Mandela – at the time a prisoner in Robben Island – of how “history had denied her of him,” wondering whether he had the picture of his wife as her young self, still in her early 20s at the time of his imprisonment. It was a love akin to that of Martin Luther King Jr. and his wife and comrade Coretta Scott King, who aside from deeply loving each other, shared a set of political beliefs.

Like Coretta Scott King, who led a protest in Memphis four days after her husband’s assassination in the city and before he was buried – Madikizela-Mandela similarly took up Mandela’s cause following his imprisonment. Unlike Coretta Scott King who was already a public figure, Madikizela-Mandela, who had been a backroom operative, was now thrust into the limelight.

As if describing the young Madikizela-Mandela, journalist Barbara Reynolds, who wrote *My Love, My Life, My Legacy* – Coretta Scott King’s posthumous memoir – *speaks of Coretta Scott King’s commitment to the cause she and her husband had jointly believed in for years, but which Martin Luther King Jr. – just like Nelson Mandela – was seen as a leading frontline mobiliser.*

“As much as it hurt her to lose the man of her life, the man that she loved, the movement was bigger than a person,” Reynolds says of Coretta Scott King on the passing of her husband, only that in Madikizela-Mandela’s case Mandela was not dead but imprisoned. “She had to be the persona that would symbolize the movement so that people would not quit in despair.”

Madikizela-Mandela married Nelson Mandela in 1958, and in 1962, when she was 26, Mandela was arrested, getting sentenced to life in 1964, leaving her to raise their two daughters alone for the next 27 years. She herself was arrested and detained for her defiance a number of times, serving her longest prison stint in 1969, when she was placed for 491 days at Pretoria Central Prison, .mostly in solitary confinement. She was heavily tortured during this period, including being interrogated for seven consecutive days at one point, which Madikizela-Mandela says drove her to urinate blood in what she considered her body’s coping mechanism with the inhumanity meted on her. As part of her punishment, she would not be supplied with sanitary pads, an unfortunate state of affairs that left her desperate and swathed in her menstrual blood inside her cell, where she was at times left naked. Madikizela-Mandela was later on in 1977 banished to Brandfort, a little town in the then Orange Free State, where she was domiciled in a hugely unkempt house. To Madikizela-Mandela, banishment was akin to solitary confinement.

It was while in solitary confinement that Madikizela-Mandela contemplated suicide, making a calculated attempt to kill herself in slow motion so that no one would know that she taken her own life. The slow death was intended to not embarrass Mandela and her two daughters, since suicide was taboo. Asked what her most painful memory throughout the struggle period was, Madikizela-Mandela pointed to the night she was being taken for her longest detention when apartheid police smashed the windows in her house and broke the door, shouting for her to come out. They then barged in, dragging her out of the house. Her two little daughters, Zindzi and Zenani, were terrorised and traumatised by how the police manhandled their mother. They grabbed onto her dress, screaming, “Mummy don’t go!”

The sights and sounds of her daughters holding onto her and screaming stayed with Madikizela-Mandela for a long time. She was pained by the fact that her daughters were being compelled to be first-hand witnesses to the state's violence against the only parent they had around them.

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Nelson Mandela's longtime friend and struggle comrade Ahmed Kathrada, who was jailed for 26 years alongside Mandela at Robben Island, understood Madikizela-Mandela's predicament better than most. Kathrada - better known as Uncle Kathy, especially to the Mandela children back in the day who wondered how come they had an Indian uncle - had offered his Johannesburg home, the infamous Flat 13, Kholvad House, to serve as a safe house for anyone who needed a place to work from or stay, a space which became a regular refuge for the Mandela children whenever their parents got arrested. It was a tradition for the flat to have an open-door policy for comrades in the struggle, a practice set in motion by its previous owner, the anti-apartheid lawyer and journalist Ismail Chota Meer, from whom Kathrada inherited the flat. These were the high levels of comradeship the Mandelas experienced within the anti-apartheid movement, where class, race and religion were secondary.

In the Foreword to Madikizela-Mandela's prison memoir *491 Days*, which chronicles her painful detention from May 1969 to September 1970, Kathrada wrote of Madikizela-Mandela's unenviable situation in his reflection of what life must have been for those who stayed in the frontlines of the anti-apartheid struggle upon his and Mandela's imprisonment. He appreciates the unmitigated risks faced by those outside prison:

*"Yes we were suffering, but after taking every hardship and every deprivation into account, it could not be disputed that we were protected. No policeman could barge into Robben Island or into Pollsmoor Prison and start shooting. This was not the case with comrades outside prison. They were the very cold faces of the struggle. They had no protection. Comrades such as Winnie Mandela, the 600 unarmed, defenceless school children who were slaughtered in the Soweto uprising, leaders and members of the United Democratic Front and the Congress of South African Students (COSAS). In the face of adversity and danger, they kept the flag flying."*

Madikizela-Mandela came from an outward-looking family, both her parents having acquired Western education not limited by the offerings of their immediate environment. Her father, Columbus Madikizela, was a history teacher who later rose to become a head teacher and minister for Forestry and Agriculture in the Transkei government. Her mother, Gertrude Madikizela, the first domestic science teacher in the Bizana locality, passed on when Madikizela-Mandela was nine, leaving her to mother her siblings, her being the oldest daughter in the family following her elder sister's demise. Born into traditional royalty, Madikizela-Mandela's grandfather was Chief Mazingi, a wealthy trader married to 28 more wives after Madikizela-Mandela's grandmother.

Madikizela-Mandela attended the John Hofmeyr School of Social Work, earning a degree and becoming South Africa's first qualified black social worker. On leaving school and before getting her first job, she became an understudy to the mother of jazz musician Hugh Masekela, who was a social worker and health inspector at the Alexandra Township in Johannesburg. By then, Nelson Mandela

was already courting Madikizela-Mandela, who was covertly getting involved in political work. Mandela would come around to the Masekela's home from time to time, becoming acquainted with the legendary musician. This resulted in Mandela writing Masekela a moving personal letter - smuggled out of Pollsmoor Prison - as the latter marked his 45<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1984. The letter inspired Masekela's popular song *Bring Back Nelson Mandela*.

As they nurtured their young love before his imprisonment, Mandela fondly referred to his wife - who was almost half his age - as Zami, short for her first name Nomzamo, meaning "she who never stops trying" in Xhosa. Theirs was a fairy tale of love in a time of revolution that was brutally interrupted by Mandela's 27-year imprisonment.

The unforgiving effects of fighting apartheid from the frontline took a toll on Madikizela-Mandela. She was deliberately smeared, projected as reckless, angry and murderous. Post-1990, upon Mandela's release and election as president, internal rifts within the ANC further materialised. Her growing influence became a threat to a certain clique's grip on power.

Others, beholden to the patriarchal ANC power structure, considered her to be too unruly. Then allegations of infidelity surfaced - specifically her rumoured affair with Dali Mpofu, who later became chairperson of the militant opposition party, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). Madikizela-Mandela was sacked as deputy minister - having been a vocal critic of the ANC, which she felt was reneging on its radical liberationist politics - and her marriage to Mandela ended in divorce in 1996. The struggle, it seemed, had contaminated a great love story.

Thandi Modise, the chairperson of South Africa's National Council of Provinces (NCOP), who became the first woman to be arrested in connection with Umkhonto we Sizwe (ANC's military wing) activities in 1979, having risen to become one of the handful female commanders in the fighting force, considered Madikizela-Mandela a mother, a friend and a comrade. In eulogising Madikizela-Mandela, Modise revisited the words of a female prison warder during her own detention at John Vorster Square Police Station, now renamed Johannesburg Central Police Station. "If you think you are being humiliated, wait until I tell you the story of Winnie Mandela," the warder said. The tale, which Modise heard from a weeping male comrade, was about how during Madikizela-Mandela's detention, she was made to wear a fake crown of thorns and paraded naked in the male section of the prison. It was this sort of humiliation that made ex-prisoners fight even harder upon their release.

Upon her release in 1988 after serving an eight year prison term - after being arrested in 1979 while four-months pregnant - Modise's first port of call was Madikizela-Mandela's Soweto home, where she was sneaked in by Peter Mokaba, the future combative president of the ANC Youth League. She couldn't get inside the house for security reasons since Madikizela-Mandela was under heavy surveillance, so she settled for a quick chat across the fence to pledge her loyalty and to reassure Madikizela-Mandela that the struggle continues. "As a young girl I joined the struggle because there was a Winnie Mandela somewhere, because there was someone who had gone through worse than I had gone through," Modise said. "She was a woman of strength, a woman who fought for her people, a woman who was human and made mistakes."

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From that brief 1988 across-the-fence encounter, Modise and Madikizela-Mandela went on to work closely together, including in the ANC Women's League where they served alongside each other for a decade starting in 1993 to 2003, with Madikizela-Mandela as president and Modise as deputy president, both elected twice to serve a five-year mandate. As such, aside from their comradeship in the struggle - having been political prisoners, a predicament suffered by many frontline anti-apartheid freedom fighters - Modise and Madikizela-Mandela built both a personal and official working relationship, allowing them to nurture trust and confide in each other.

Modise remembers what she calls her two most difficult weekends spent in the company of Madikizela-Mandela. "The first was when Tata (Mandela) was removing her as deputy minister in 1995...We tried speaking to her. We asked her to back down and apologise. She said she hadn't done anything wrong. She got removed." The reason for Madikizela-Mandela's removal - according to Mbeki during a recent interview - was that she allegedly travelled out of South Africa without the president's (Mandela's) required authorisation.

"The weekend before her divorce I received a call from Tata," Modise said, recalling the second thorny weekend. "He said to me, 'Tell your mother she must accept the divorce.' I spoke to her and she said, 'You are my daughter's age mate... you do not understand Abatembu [Mandela's clan]. My in-laws have not told me I am divorced. I am not divorcing this man.'" To Modise, it was a difficult and sad weekend because Madikizela-Mandela "truly loved this man". Revisiting Madikizela-Mandela's presence at Mandela's bedside at the time of his passing in 2013, Modise said, "It didn't matter whether there was a divorce or not. These people loved each other."

According to Modise, Madikizela-Mandela had always dreamt of having a large family, but on Mandela's imprisonment, she knew she would only have two children. "She was a very loving person. Those arms would just open up and envelope people," Modise said, fondly remembering Madikizela-Mandela's warmth towards those who came to her. "She had the courage to weep about things. She fought but deep down she was a softie, she cried over things, and that's what endeared her to all of us."

The person who Madikizela-Mandela grew to be - from a mother of two left behind by Mandela to Mother of the Nation - was as the result of a mixture of many factors, but in Modise's eyes, Madikizela-Mandela never lived under her husband's shadow even though she shared his commitment for South Africa's liberation. "She was never anyone's shadow," Modise said. "She charted her own path, and sometimes when you chart a path you trample on toes and make mistakes. The thing about Winnie was her ability to find her footing again and always be on the side of the oppressed."

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"I don't think Winnie has been given enough credit. I think we love her but we have not credited her for the work she has done," Modise said. "She produced a lot of intellectuals and women activists within the ANC. But it is not just about Winnie. The history of strong women in the South African liberation struggle is being eroded. South Africa, like other countries, is a place where after liberation, the true story of women is pushed aside because women must now go back to where they belong. That is what Winnie Mandela was fighting against. Patriarchy."

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