



WINNIE: From Oppression Towards A Fuller Humanity

By Kerubo Abuya



“Not until you have discovered what is worth dying for is life really worth living.”

Nomzamo Winifred Zanyiwe Madikizela-Mandela

Reminiscent of Freire’s analogy of liberation as a painful childbirth and while the evocation of ‘Mother’ can be suspect as witnessed in disempowering narratives of women who must carry the weight of the world on their shoulders, it interests me that people in South Africa as well as continental Africa and the Diaspora referred to departed Elder, Nomzamo Winifred Zanyiwe Madikizela-Mandela as Mother of the Nation, Mam’Winnie, uMam’Winnie, Mama Winnie or Mama Africa.

I hold ‘Mama’ in esteem and context as an embodiment of the ‘Source’ and ‘Force’ that brings forth life. The life of a person, a people or a nation. The life in the ‘Fruit’ of the struggle for freedom and human dignity - liberation.

I first heard of Winnie Mandela during my teenage years. I simply knew of her then as the late South African Freedom Fighter, Nelson Mandela’s wife. It wasn’t until my young adult years that I started developing a deeper understanding of her role as a Freedom Fighter and Liberation Leader in her own right.

Everything I knew about Madikizela-Mandela was based on numerous stories told by local, regional and international media over the years, often portraying her as a highly contentious leader on a personal and professional level.

Deeply polarizing perceptions of Madikizela-Mandela continue to emerge following the news of her death on Monday, April 02, 2018 at age 81. People in South Africa and across the globe have eulogized this revolutionary leader in a variety of ways creating what feels like an emotionally charged, 'love-you-hate-you-shut-up' mosaic of 'raw-ripe', 'bitter-sweet-sour' and in-between, powerful depictions - as if in competition for voice, space, light and life.

The concept of the cycle or continuity of life unfolds as the world mourns this revolutionary. She continues to inspire global narratives that are forcing many to 'look' at her life's trajectory as a liberation leader - in life and death! A dynamic reflecting a duo-extreme and of shades in-between depending on what we 'see' when we 'look'. A symbolic, 'narratives tag-of-war' strives to cement what Sisonke Msimang and others have called Madikizela-Mandela's [legacy](#).

Based on what I have read, watched and conversations with people on and off social media, I have been struck by the varying descriptions of Madikizela-Mandela. Some of the words and phrases I have come across describe her as defiant, resilient, fierce, fearless, spirited, strong, brave, unbreakable, courageous, out-spoken, bold, passionate, [resilient fortitude](#), flawed, militant, charismatic, radical, firebrand, despicable, complex, violent, murderous, corrupt, terrorist, tarnished, bully, kidnapper, Mandela's ex-wife, among others.

Read also: [Winnie and Wambui, a Tribute to Sisters in the Struggle](#)

In some cases, these words hinge on a one-sided view of a wonderful, loving and beloved liberation leader or a cold-blooded, corrupt politician and adulterous murderer. Some have drawn their perceptions of Madikizela-Mandela from both ends of the spectrum while others remain conspicuously silent. Silence is a form of communication.

Zukiswa Wanner called out what she termed, "pseudo-intellectual attacks" some people are "writing about this complex woman" noting in a one of her Facebook posts, "On Mam'Winnie: If the black man is always suspect, the black woman is always guilty. And I ain't got time for those who push the latter narrative, thank you".

Rasna Warah called out "[white-media vilification](#)" of Madikizela-Mandela and the hypocrisy of a global patriarchal double-standard which ignores prominent male political leaders' real or perceived transgressions yet takes "all gloves off when it comes to Winnie". Warah also noted, "Winnie Mandela was no doubt a deeply flawed human being. But which South African can claim to have remained completely untouched or undamaged by the extreme violence and blatant racism of the apartheid era? If anything, we should admire Winnie Mandela for refusing to allow the apartheid regime to crush her fearless spirit - a spirit that could be bent but which could not be broken."

Zukiswa Wanner [reminded](#) her fellow citizens in South Africa, "There is no historical record of men in the ANC or Pan Africanist Congress who raped their comrades, who stole resources donated by our anti-apartheid allies for those in camps in Angola, Tanzania, Zambia and Mozambique, and suffering the consequences for doing so".

Wanner continued, "Instead, our collective vilification has been towards the one person who suffered more than most in the last 30 years of apartheid because she was a woman who did not behave as we expected. What we have is a record of Madikizela-Mandela being asked at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to apologise for her involvement in Stompie Seipei's murder. Jerry

Richardson, the “coach” of the Mandela United Football Club, was sentenced to life for the teenager’s murder. Madikizela-Mandela was convicted of kidnapping and being an accessory in the assault of Stompie. Her sentence was reduced to a fine and a suspended two-year sentence on appeal”.

An excerpt from one of Stella Nyanzi’s Facebook posts on Madikizela-Mandela, “Her beauty, strength, courage, resilience, out-spokenness, defiance, militant charisma and radical fire often inspired me to stand tall in difficult times” ... and... “yet her reported human failings also shook me to the core because they were outright vile”. Nyanzi resolved her multiple and conflicting perceptions of Madikizela-Mandela noting, “the greatest attribute was her beautiful complexity as a human being” who was “full of contradictions that make her life a grand enigma for inquiring minds. She was neither perfect nor pure evil. She was a huge paradox comprising several smaller paradoxical puzzles. Her tenacity and resilience astound me.”

Some people have praised and acknowledged Madikizela-Mandela’s contributions and position as a frontline leader in the liberation struggle in South Africa. Swift rebuttals and ‘clap-backs’ to local, regional and global media outlets emerged citing deliberate attempts to erase and minimize her role and stature as a liberation leader by referring to her as “anti-apartheid [campaigner](#)”, “anti-apartheid [crusader](#)”, “anti-apartheid [stalwart](#)”, Nelson Mandela’s ex-wife and anti-apartheid [activist](#)”, “[flawed heroine](#)”, among others.

One cannot help but wonder why Madikizela-Mandela was loved by many but also detested, by some, perhaps in equal measure. As I reflect upon the myriad ways Madikizela-Mandela has been portrayed by different people, the Social Psychology concept of ‘person perception’ that explores how we form impressions of one another comes to mind.

Social Psychologists believe that ‘person perception’ attributes various “mental processes” to how we form impressions of one another and how these, influence subsequent conclusions, judgements we make about people, and the way we interact with them. [iresearchnet.com](#) indicates that forming impressions of other people can “occur indirectly and requires inferring information about a person based on observations of behaviors or based on second-hand information.” It also explains that we can form impressions of other people “more directly and require little more than seeing another person.” The website concludes that direct and indirect types of person perception “provide a foundation from which subsequent judgments are formed and subsequent interactions are shaped”.

When we form our impressions of others through “indirect person perception” our “general perception of a person is the product of inference”. This means that “many of the personal attributes” that “we may want to know about another person (e.g., whether the person is loyal, honest, or contemptible) are not directly observable”.

These “attributes or traits must be discerned—either from observing the person’s actions (actually watching the person behave in a loyal or honest manner) or from interpreting information provided by a third party (what a roommate conveys about a person or what the experimenter reveals)”.

According to [iresearchnet.com](#), “personal attributes that observers notice about another person need not be inferred because they are directly observable and are therefore noted immediately”. These personal attributes include categorical judgments about other people such as their sex, race, and age. This process prompts the questions; “What sex? What race? and How old?” are “likely to be among the first impressions that observers form of others”.

Perceptions: A Journey

Reflection on what informs my personal impressions, perceptions and conclusions about Madikizela-Mandela find root in a journey that started during my teenage years where my initial knowledge of her was simply, Nelson Mandela's wife, based on what I read in the media.

As I matured into young adulthood and developed interests in social justice, my evolving consciousness enabled me to grow my understanding beyond my teenage view of her as Nelson Mandela's wife. Since I did not know Madikizela-Mandela, personally, to form personal impressions of her through observation, to for instance infer whether she was loyal or honest, I therefore utilized "indirect person perception" to form impressions of her based on "information proved by a third party" - the media.

It is therefore important that I continue reflecting upon the validity of the third-party information that has influenced some of my perceptions of her therefore broadening the scope of sources that corroborate or challenge the ones I have relied on in the past. As an outsider to South Africa it is also important that I listen to voices from within on this matter, but I cannot make assumptions that every voice that I hear from South Africa will be accurate.

Most importantly, I must also seek to learn what Madikizela-Mandela says about her life and contributions to the liberation struggle, in her own words. Her book [491 Days: Prisoner Number 1323/69](#), a diary of her days in solitary confinement for 18 months, the documentary film [Winnie](#) as well as Alf Kumalo and Sukiswa Wanner's book [8115: A Prisoner's Home](#) are great sources to add to your reading/viewing list.

My reflections have helped me pay attention to how stereotypes and cultural assumptions we hold related to the "direct person perception" dimensions of race, sex and gender can influence our impressions of one another. These intertwine within an interplay of culture and the dynamics of power.

The way power is expressed and experienced from a race, culture and gender perspective can influence our perceptions of one another. Afua Hirsch [explored](#) some aspects of how racial bias and sexism have shown up in some obituaries, "The death of Madikizela-Mandela is another opportunity to choose between a narrative of white supremacy and the one that overthrew it. If the media coverage of her death is anything to go by, this is, apparently, a deeply controversial choice".

Patricia Hill Collins' "[domains-of-power heuristic](#)" offers a compelling framework for analyzing power that considers the complexity of intersectionality. Collins posited, "power relations can be analyzed both via their mutual construction, for example, of racism and sexism as intersecting oppressions, as well as across domains of power, namely structural, disciplinary, cultural and interpersonal".

According to Collins, the structural domain of power consists of "public policies that organize and regulate the social institutions such as "banks, insurance companies, police departments, the real estate industry, schools, stores, restaurants, hospitals and governmental agencies". Madikizela-Mandela's struggle for justice touched on all these areas of power that discriminated against Black and Brown South Africans. The questions become; do I believe that all people regardless of race or gender have a right to equal access and opportunity to these critical resources, social services and facilities that help foster basic human dignity, nourishment, wellbeing and development? How do my beliefs and assumptions on this matter influence my perception of Madikizela-Mandela as a Black woman and leader who defended these rights?

Collins argued that "when people use the rules and regulations of everyday life and public policy to uphold social hierarchy or challenge it, their agency and actions shape the disciplinary domain of

power". Madikizela-Mandela resisted the apartheid system's rules, regulations and public policies that discriminated against Black and Brown South Africans. The questions become; do I believe in or challenge the idea that all people, regardless of race or gender have a right to be protected from rules, regulations and public policies that uphold social hierarchy? How do my beliefs and assumptions on this matter influence my perception of Madikizela-Mandela as a Black woman and leader who championed this cause?

Collins further explained, "the cultural domain of power refers to social institutions and practices that produce the hegemonic ideas that justify social inequalities as well as counter-hegemonic ideas criticize unjust social relations. Through traditional and social media, journalism, and school curriculums, the cultural domain constructs representations, ideas and ideologies about social inequality".

*"Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one.
The man or woman who emerges is a new person,
viable only as the oppressor-oppressed contradiction
is superseded by the humanization of all people.
...the solution of this contradiction
is born in the labor which brings into the world this new being:
no longer oppressor nor longer oppressed,
but human in the process of achieving freedom".*

Paulo Freire

Madikizela-Mandela challenged systems of domination that propagated social inequalities through an apartheid-inspired educational system, media, ideas and ideologies that include [patriarchy](#) which positioned women as less than, less deserving of opportunities, resources, being treated with dignity and respect and judged on a different and higher set of standards than men. Zukiswa Wanner reminded us, "Our patriarchal and puritanical brains, as men and women, relegated her to an ex-wife who cheated on our revered Saint Nelson while he was in prison."

[South African women](#) have come out in large numbers to defend Madikizela-Mandela's legacy in what they perceive as attempts to erase her contributions to the liberation struggle. As a Black woman and liberation leader who opposed the apartheid system and all it stood for, relentlessly, she suffered at the hands a sophisticated and vicious Security Branch [smear campaign](#) that as Shannon Ehbrahim reported, was designed to "discredit and isolate her".

The questions become; do I believe in or challenge the social institutions and practices that produce ideas and ideologies of domination "that justify social inequalities"? How do my beliefs and assumptions on this matter influence my perceptions of Madikizela-Mandela as a Black woman and leader who criticized "social institutions and practices which produced hegemonic ideas that justified social inequalities?

Collins argued that the "interpersonal domain of power encompasses the myriad experiences that individuals have within intersecting oppressions". Madikizela-Mandela and others in South African suffered the indignities of apartheid. Many of them lost their lives in the struggle for freedom and justice. While my goal isn't to portray Madikizela-Mandela as a helpless victim of apartheid power transgressions because she was a powerful force to contend with, along with others, she was jailed, banned, harassed, detained, held incommunicado in solitary confinement, often denied food, basic feminine sanitary items and at times denied access to the medical attention and legal counsel she needed.

The questions become; do I believe in or challenge the dehumanizing acts of brutality that were

unleashed upon Madikizela-Mandela and others by the apartheid regime's power excesses? How do my beliefs and assumptions on this matter influence my perceptions of Madikizela-Mandela as a Black woman and leader who along with others, suffered the apartheid regime's power excesses?

"A new world will be born not by those who stand at a distance with their arms folded, but by those who are in the arena, whose garments are torn by storms and whose bodies are maimed in the course of contest. Honour belongs to those who never forsake the truth even when things seem dark and grim, who try over and over again, who are never discouraged by insults, humiliation and even defeat".

Nelson Mandela in a letter to Winnie Mandela, June 23, 1969

We know that Madikizela-Mandela endured the yoke and brunt of the dehumanizing whip of apartheid, stoutly, and in all her humanness as an act of unapologetic resistance, a site of undying hope bringing forth a new world from the abyss of a protracted and odious struggle to uphold human dignity.

Leading social change requires leaders who show up. Showing up is a critical first task and test for leaders of change. A leader who shows up can recruit and inspire others to also show up in support of the desired change. The social change process requires people who show up and are not afraid to stand up to be counted. The social change process is messy and unpredictable. While it requires planning, strategies, structure, resources and action, the leader and the people must understand that it is emergent. Madikizela-Mandela's commitment to the cause of social justice was undeniable because she showed up and did so, authentically.

I use the term authenticity here to mean she was committed to showing up as herself. She was not afraid to be herself even in the face and risk of physical and emotional injury to her person. She led change through action and unwavering courage while acknowledging her full humanness as she suffered the pain of the struggle. Her passion to serve her people while showing up, authentically and unapologetically, defined her leadership.

We were uncomfortable with a person who lived by her own rules and refused to reconcile and join the mythical rainbow nation that we wanted to believe in. She continued to live in her Orlando West home. She continued to attend functions, when she wanted to at a time it suited her, and she continued being unapologetic about who she was because she knew — though we chose to ignore it — she suffered to get South Africa to its present state.

Zukiswa Wanner

Leading social change through action means navigating outside the comforts and context of 'armchair revolution' but within largely invisible peripheries, trenches and valleys that know the pain and suffering of the oppressed. Madikizela-Mandela did this and for the long haul, despite the heavy hand of a dehumanizing apartheid machinery.

*We were all caught up in that war of liberation
Self no longer mattered, country came first.*

*When they were incarcerated, on hindsight, they looked after our
leaders because from then on, the violence in the country was untold.*

We were the cannon fodder.

We were the foot soldiers

We were vulnerable

We were exposed to the viciousness of apartheid.

Winnie Madikizela-Mandela

One may wonder, what inspired Madikizela-Mandela, a young mother in her twenties to join the liberation struggle?

“To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity”.

Paulo Freire

Through her leadership, Madikizela-Mandela drew the world’s attention to the situation in South Africa and this could not have been achieved through lip service. The passion and courage she embodied were grounded in the values that she held dear. Her personal conviction and commitment to the values of racial, socioeconomic, political justice and equality, fairness and democracy were the path that illuminated possibilities and action for liberation, dignity and a “fuller humanity” (Freire) for all people in South Africa.

“My flesh is nothing more than sea shells washed up to the coast by heavy waves of stormy political seas, my soul like the sea will always be there. I would have been filled with shame if I was unable to get up and defend those ideals (that) my heroes and our patriots have sacrificed their lives for”.

Winnie Mandela in a Letter to Nelson Mandela, March 08, 1970

I end my reflections noting that paying tribute to Madikizela-Mandela by acknowledging her great contributions to humanity through her leadership for social justice does not mean that we chose to ignore her humanness and humanity. She was as human as each one of us. She did what she did, when she did and with what she had. We are grateful.

Only she, walked in the shoes she wore and those of us who have no idea what it was like to live and stay alive in what Madikizela-Mandela called a “war of liberation”, can only imagine.

I choose to pay more attention and listen to the voices of my South African sisters who have a deeper grasp of who Madikizela-Mandela was. I hold them in care. Deeply grateful to ‘Dada’ Zukiswa Wanner who has been kind and generous by sharing her insights on Mama #Winnie.

In attacking Madikizela-Mandela, MondliMakhanya in an article this past Sunday attacks all of us who love our people and our country unstintingly. He attacks all of us who are human and fallible because humanity is about the possibility of fallibility.

He attacks all those of us who hold other black people with respect, whatever our disagreements with them.

Makhanya attacks us all because #WeAreAllWinnieMandela.

And to uMam’Winnie, as the children would say, we did you dirty.

May we be kinder to you in death and may we learn to protect each other and our country to ensure that all South Africans are treated with the dignity that they deserve. With the dignity we did not afford you.

Hamba kahle, mkhonto.

Zukiswa Wanner

['No love lost: What Winnie hate says about us'](#)

Rest in Power Departed Elder
Nomzamo Winifred ZanyiweMadikizela-Mandela

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Ref

Freire, P. (2000). [Pedagogy of the oppressed](#). Bloomsbury Academic; 30th Anniversary Edition

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