

Locating Temporality and Finding Hope in South African Fiction

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The Cry of Winnie Mandela and *The Reactive* both provide a narrative in which we can explore how temporality registers through different mediums: denied intimacy, defamiliarisation, and the fragility of the home. Both novels portray the routine nature of being ‘stuck’ which manifests as a temporality. This impedes the social, political and emotional progression of the protagonists. They live precariously within these fragile boundaries revealing their inescapable states, but it also allows them to create hope and new meanings for themselves. Thus, *The Reactive* and *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* become texts that are less about the impossibility of liminal positions and more of an attempt to reimagine new and ordinary worlds. We witness both the devastating impact of being stuck but not without a remodelling of these fears, and a journey out of this waiting room.

The Cry of Winnie Mandela presents a complex paradigm of waiting and temporality, forcing us to reconsider the meaning of homes, patriarchal norms and intimacy. Ndebele offers a narrative ‘that breaks with the stance of “protest” [...] advocating a conscious “rediscovery of the ordinary”’.¹ We are presented with four women who are forced into a liminal zone where

¹ Graham Pechey, ‘Post-apartheid narratives’, in *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory*, ed. by F. Baker and others (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 167.

they await the return of their men. These women are descendants of Penelope, the wife of the hero Odysseus in Greek mythology. The social polarities of the male and female, public and private, home and the world, all become fundamental thematic trajectories for these women as they navigate the ‘social positioning [...] as waiting widows’.² We see this in the story of the second descendent, Delisiwe Dulcie S’Khosana. Her husband obtains a scholarship to study overseas to become a doctor. In the tenth year of his absence, his wife, ‘having yielded to a moment’s weakness’, falls pregnant. Upon his return, the husband is furious, accuses her of infidelity and abandons her.³ A few months later he divorces her and marries a nurse. ‘Double-qualified. They settle down to a successful medical career. A doctor with his nurse [...] When things open up in the country, they leave to live among whites. The earliest wave of blacks to move into the white suburbs. They have finally escaped’ (Ndebele, p. 18). Here we witness the inequalities of the social dichotomies mentioned above.

Her job as a domestic science teacher allows for her to fund her husband’s study, but when he fails and loses his scholarship, she ‘borrows money from wherever she can find it [...] sells off furniture to help pay for his fees’ (Ndebele, p. 18). She funds his education in the hope that her husband will become the first black doctor in the township. However, whilst she waits in a state of limbo, her husband is able to move forward and progress academically and later financially. Despite also sharing her husband’s dream, he remains the sole beneficiary of her efforts. Delisiwe does not gain financially from her husband’s education as he remarries. The promise of her husband becoming the first black medical doctor in the East Rand township never materialises, denying her a sense of pride and happiness. Her waiting becomes more permanent as the world around her does not let her forget her mistake, ‘the world will always know the mother of the child, for a woman can never escape the messages of her body’

² Meg Samuelson, ‘(Un)homely Women: “Political Widowhood”, in *A Life and The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, in *Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women?* (Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2007), pp. 195–228 (p. 196). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

³ Njabulo Ndebele, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (Cape Town: David Philip Publisher, 2004), p. 20. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

(Ndebele, p. 22). It is suggested that her own gender and body have betrayed her. This positioning also reveals how women are ‘incorporated into a sphere that both is, and is not, in civil society. The private sphere is part of the civil society but is separated from the “civic” sphere’ (Samuelson, p. 199). Despite occupying a space both in the private [home] and public [work] sphere, the wife is forced into a doubly oppressive sphere where ‘there would be no departure for her now’ (Samuelson, p. 206). Her inability to move forward also denies her intimacy, not only in sexual terms, but also through vulnerability, touch, intimate conversations, a sense of closeness and being unable to remarry. She can no longer access these privileges. Furthermore, the husbands escape to the white suburbs reveals the broader workings of gender and race politics as his move signifies wealth, success and an ‘escape’ (Samuelson, p. 206).

The role of motherhood and domesticity in *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* creates a gendered trope of the nation, where ‘women’ and ‘waiting’ becomes synonymous: ‘women-in-waiting’ (Samuelson, p. 210). The four descendants are unsure of their husband’s return. They are forced to wait in a temporal state where their lives are unable to progress as they cannot have children, be intimate with their husbands or work to become financially independent. Their symbolic value is no longer exercised through a family unit or married life. Instead, we witness their roles, both as women and as human, become entirely sacrificial; The descendants are left to look after the family home, their children or caring for their husband’s elderly parents. This discourse presents women as inadequate and incomplete as they cannot progress without a male companion. The shame of remarriage, infidelity and divorce reveals a deeper level of structural violence that binds these women to patriarchal norms. Ndebele’s critique of this social inequality is evident in his decision to not include Winnie’s maiden name, Madikizela, in the title. *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* is then, as Antjie Krog argues, ‘about

having [...] to live a life, to forge a life, within that famous, yet confined, name'.⁴ Furthermore, the association between 'cry' and 'Mandela' in the title is a significant comment on Winnie's married life as well as a shared commonality between the four descendants in the novel (Krog, p. 56). It is once these women leave their confined homes and names that they find hope. This suggests that the married life for the women in waiting was a major source of unhappiness. It is only within themselves and other women that they will be able to find 'eternal companionship' (Ndebele, p. 146).

Freud's psychoanalytical concept of the uncanny allows us to examine the domestic sphere as a defamiliarised zone (Samuelson, p. 234). The familiar, *heimlich*, is 'native, belonging to the home', and therefore that which is not known becomes frightening.⁵ For the men, the private sphere becomes unfamiliar, as they no longer occupy it, and the public sphere becomes their home into which they are 'granted entry [...] as representatives [...] and political activists' (Samuelson, p. 234). The homes become a one-way passage whereby the wife guards 'the home left vacant by wandering men, their status thrown into relief by male mobility', as he is free to leave and return whenever he wishes (Samuelson, p. 234). The instability of these gendered boundaries also shows motherhood and intimacy to be another site of conflict:

In those moments, a woman feels so vitally in the presence of her body. Feeling clean without the promise of joy. This is it. One of the many definitive moments of waiting. Moments of intimacy defined by cravings without definition. Where is he? What is he doing? When will it end? This waiting. This unending sensation of uncertainty. This love increasingly without object. If a woman in this situation has children, they really are no company. They are an obligation of love, objects of the continuance of effort. They cannot stand in for an absent man.

(Ndebele, p. 7)

⁴ Antjie Krog, 'What the Hell is Penelope Doing in Winnie's Story?', *English in Africa*, 36 (2009), 55–60 (p. 56). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁵ Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1955), p. 222.

The women are forced to endure this temporality ‘without consolation’ or reassurance about the husband’s return (Ndebele, p. 14). Here intimacy manifests in complex ways, ‘its meaning not always positive nor separate from the broader workings of power and politics.’⁶ While her solitude increases her intimacy with herself, it also confines her to a domestic sphere, which excludes her from the political sphere. This void of intimacy cannot be filled with anyone else, the love for children here is presented as an ‘obligation’, suggesting that the love for their men is voluntary and thus the woman’s position in waiting is also voluntary (Buxbaum, p. 7). Both forms of intimacy, a child and a husband, are presented as burdens, rendering the women into a passive state. This vulnerability is a direct result of the gendered politics that have left these women ‘at the mercy of those in power’, the men (Buxbaum, p. 525). The belief that the domestic and political cannot exist synonymously is the inherent flaw in the patriarchal paradigm. It is only by risking intimacy and embracing vulnerability ‘in the sphere of relationships (and) encounters with others’ that can allow the protagonists to seek refuge from these attachments (Buxbaum, p. 525).

In South Africa Nelson Mandela had been presented as the ‘father of the nation’.⁷ Both his public and personal life became strategically performative. He wore the same borrowed suit for five years whilst working in Johannesburg. The political dynamic of their married life was also defined by gender. Winnie’s outspokenness in the public sphere ‘was authorised by the very conventionality of her position as the loyal wife. Paradoxically, being her husband’s spokesperson enabled her to become a leader in her own right’ (Munro, p. 92). This allowed her to change her position from ‘mother of the nation’ into ‘an active revolutionary role’, a place that was previously reserved for men (Munro, p. 92). Her initial role implies a domesticity that ‘removes her from the sphere of public engagement’ (Munro, p. 92). This domesticity is

⁶ Lara Buxbaum, ‘Risking intimacy in contemporary South African fiction’, *Fiction in the Age of Risk*, 31 (2017), 523–36 (p. 524). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁷ Brenna Munro, ‘Nelson, Winnie, and the Politics of Gender’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Nelson Mandela*, ed. by Rita Barnard (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014), pp. 92–112 (p. 92). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

not only about nurturing a maternal role. Instead, it is defined by waiting silently for the husbands return. During Mandela's imprisonment, Winnie fought against police harassment and arrests. She became a 'global feminist icon' in a postcolonial nation that was historically 'a male-centred space, narrated into modern self-consciousness by male leaders, activists, and writers, in which women are more often than not cast as symbols or totems, as the bearers of tradition' (Munro, p. 92). The lives of the four descendants are, at first, presented as real. Part One of the novel gives personal accounts of how the four descendants waited. In Part Two, this narrative shifts into an unrealistic fictional narration where the women are in the company of Winnie and Penelope. This change complicates the narrative as it risks changing their real stories into symbolic ones, making it harder for the women to escape their liminality. However, this unrealistic narrative also allows Ndebele to create a new sense of home and hope. We see this in the character transformation of the fourth decedent Marara Joyce Baloy. Despite her husband's infidelity, she remained loyal until he died and even buried him in an expensive casket because she feared the humiliation of an unfaithful wife. The rediscovery of hope for Marara lies in redefining what home and intimacy mean for her:

I have become uncomfortably aware that I may no longer have the keen and vital sense of feeling for home as a specific place and a house with so many rooms, so many brothers and sisters and relatives, with family and community experiences [...] This kind of home for now has been a mere convenience for me to live in from one day to the next. This thought has frightened me as I have begun to wonder about the fate of intimacy. Can there be any society without private lives – without homes wherein individuals can flourish through histories of intimacy?

(Ndebele, p. 85)

Marara provides a complete restructure of what home and intimacy means. It is no longer a physical space associated with family or waiting. Her redefinition provides a way out of traditional values and her self-awareness ensures she is no longer cast as a symbol of waiting. In Part One of the novel, the 'realistic' stories of the women come under the headings 'The First Descendent', 'The Second Descendent', 'The Third Descendent' and 'The Fourth Descendent'. However, in Part Two, where the stories are more symbolic than realistic, Ndebele uses the real names of the women. This suggests that these stories can become a reality for these women, providing a new sense of hope to the narrative. In his lecture 'Leadership Challenges: Truth and Integrity in an Act of Salesmanship', Ndebele argued that when 're-imagining whole societies [...] the very likely outcome (was) not a solution but a compounding of the problem' (Krog, p. 58). Therefore, the seemingly unrealistic narratives of the four descendants provides a more constructive way out of temporality than Part One of the novel. It is 'in the apparent improbability of the unlikely outcome that its power lies. The improbable scenario is soon found to evolve its own complex solutions' (Krog, p. 58).

This temporality also creates an unstable discourse, whereby the women must either choose to wait for the return of their husband or move on, and by picking neither they become more 'stuck', unconsciously contributing to their own liminal positions. The decisions that the women ponder over reveal how a patriarchal script constrains them:

Our fourth descendent did not know whether what kept her from having an affair was the fear of such terrible consequences, or whether she really believed in the sanctity of marriage [...] After he was buried, she could feel on her shoulders the eyes of the neighbourhood, the eyes of men and women. What would this proud woman now do [...] They will be looking to see how soon I remarry in order to confirm that I've been having affairs anyway [...] If they cannot find the proof, they'll invent it.

(Ndebele, p. 26)

Her liminal position denies her of intimacy and does not allow her to move forward, despite her husband's death. No matter what decision she chooses to make, it will be used as a force to keep her in a position of limbo, unable to find a way out. Ironically, the perpetrators of this gendered violence are both 'men and women', who could either be potential husbands or share the feeling of being 'stuck'. This emphasises her state of loneliness as well the expectations of her society. The loss of the husband entails the 'loss of an entire world and therefore a loss of confidence about how to live on, even at the microlevel of bodily comportment'.⁸ The temporality of the women in *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* makes the reader question the social pressures that force these women to 'maintain their binding to modes of life that threaten their well-being' (Berlant, p. 16). The narrative 'recasts the object of desire [male/husband] not as a thing (or even a relation) but as a cluster of promises magnetised by a thing that appears as an object but is really a scene in the psychoanalytical sense' (Berlant, p. 16). *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* does what historical narratives cannot: 'turn missed appointments and bad feelings into new appointments with the unfolding experience of alternative lives and possible futures'.⁹

By analysing South Africa's postcolonial condition with the aim of locating hope in temporality, it gives us a glimpse into a future free from the 'residue' of colonial and apartheid constraints (van der Vlies, p. 19). It allows us to read South Africa's temporal state as a sign of hope. In Masande Ntshanga's *The Reactive*, temporality manifests as denied intimacy. However, it is caused by chemical abuse. The narrative follows Lindanathi who purposefully injects himself with HIV before leaving his job: 'That's how I became a reactive. I never had the reactions I needed for myself, and I couldn't react to you when you called me for help, so

⁸ Lauren Berlant, 'Introduction: Affect in the Present', in *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 1–22 (p. 16). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁹ Andrew van der Vlies, 'Stasis Anxiety: On Contemporary Waithood', in *Present Imperfect: Contemporary South African Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 150–72 (p. 20). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

I gave my own body something it couldn't flee from.'¹⁰ His medical compensation allows him to purchase anti-retroviral, which he then sells to buy various intoxicants. Lindanathi and his friends, Ruan and Cecelia, spend most of their time intoxicated 'sniffing Industrial strength glue, popping Ibuprofens, or scoring dagga. Days pass in a haze, and the reader is offered engaging descriptions of Nathi's experience of disjunctive temporality' (van der Vlies, p. 158). Lindanathi's life becomes defined through waiting: 'Then night came. Then daytime. Then night-time again. Then daytime. It went on like this for a while' (Ntshanga, pp. 136–37). This blurred timeframe is also evident in Mannete Mofolo's wait for her husband as 'time and distance blur into oblivion,' revealing their inability to overcome this passive state (Ndebele, p. 15). Furthermore, the narrator explains that his full name, Lindanathi means 'wait for us' in isiXhosa and returns to this at the end of the novel when he addresses his brother: 'So in the end, I guess this is to you, Luthando. This is your older brother, Lindanathi, and I'm ready to react for us', suggesting that he is preordained to this temporality (Ntshanga, p. 184).

Lindanathi's injection also forces him into a state of vulnerability thus allowing him to purchase drugs as an escape. He is able to make his reality unfamiliar, *unheimlich*, as he continuously avoids his uncle Bhut' Vuyo's text message that reads: 'Lindanathi... you've come of age' (Ntshanga, p. 137). Nathi deletes the message, 'returning to the glue' but the relief he is searching for does not come and instead the anxiety remains (Ntshanga, p. 138). Ntshanga explain that *The Reactive* was about 'people living in the vicinity of great trauma, and about people who are waiting for something, but who aren't quite sure of what that thing is' (van der Vlies, p. 158). Nathi and his friends are in a state of suspension, unable to move forward. This stagnant situation is reflected in Cissie's aunt's death. She tells Nathi: 'My aunt died today [...] It happened just over an hour ago [...] My head is doing this thing where my aunt isn't dead yet' (Ntshanga, p. 79). Her inability to mentally process the death reveals the

¹⁰ Masande Ntshanga, *The Reactive* (London: Jacaranda, 2017), p. 161. Further references to this text are given after quotations in the text.

two different timeframes; one in reality and the other unable to keep up. This reaffirms the temporality in the narrative as well as Cissie's inability to process intimate emotions.

The trauma of waiting is also reflected in *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, when Mamello Molete's husband does not return home and marries a white woman, she becomes 'insane [...] Insanity is knowing that looking back at the past is looking for the impossible, and that you cannot escape from that impossibility, an impossibility that has been happening and building up all along, until it becomes a way of life' (Ndebele, p. 33). We see this numbness, and perhaps even insanity, when Nathi purposefully injecting himself with the HI virus to become reactive. It reveals his attempt to 'find a way out of inaction, a way of restaging a reaction in his body that he should have had in the world' (van der Vlies, p. 169). This further emphasises the two different timeframes in *The Reactive*. Lindanathi blames himself for his younger brother's death, admitting: 'I knew that, really, I was scared of being close to LT. The rumours about him had spread and he'd been set apart. I didn't want people to mix us up, to look at me the same way they did him' (Ntshanga, p. 160). His fear of contagion reflects the social suspicions and rumours that Luthando was gay. His guilty conscience compels him to self-infect, leading him to a state of vulnerability that denies him intimacy until he returns to his family at the end of the novel. However, there is a slight danger in Ntshanga's narration as Nathi's HIV injection becomes metaphorical for a journey into temporality.

In *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, the sense of belonging and the 'home' are physical manifestations of temporality. They are no longer places of comfort and embrace and instead become gendered tropes for 'women-in-waiting.' However, in *The Reactive*, Lindanathi's kinship with Cissie and Ruan creates a stable home in which platonic and intimate relations can exist: 'the three of us sitting together in her flat in Newlands, the three of us knitting our fingers together [...] closing out eyes and becoming one big house' (Ntshanga, p. 116). This emotional refuge allows Nathi to create a 'home' within temporality and also encourages him to begin an honest relationship when he returns to live with his family. This sense of hope is

only ever made possible by Lindanathi ‘actively risking vulnerability and the intimacy that might follow with the bodies of others – a willingness to be open to difference without fear, to relinquish an attachment to embodied subjectivity’ (Buxbaum, p. 525). He discloses his ‘status to her just a day after (they) met and we’ve worshipped at the altar of her caution ever since’ (Buxbaum, p. 183). Nathi is able to depart from his ‘status anxiety’ and seek refuge in, rather than fleeing from, an Other (van der Vlies, p. 169). In doing so, he recommits to life and his promise to his younger brother Luthando. The ending of *The Reactive* highlights the new possibilities ‘opened up for inter-personal relations when vulnerability is embraced [...] intimacy is risked,’ and temporality escaped (Buxbaum, p. 532). There is a similar resolution in the ending of *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*. In the final chapter, the four descendants and Winnie rent a minibus and head east for Durban. They stop for a hitchhiker who turns out to be Penelope from Homer’s *Odyssey*, who is travelling ‘around the world to places where women have heard of me, attempting to free them from the burden of unconditional fidelity I placed on their shoulders’ (Ndebele, p. 145). By inviting otherness within to accompany them on their journey, ‘the women recognise themselves in the foreigner’ (Samuelson, p. 225). This journey allows the four descendants a ‘rediscovery of the ordinary’, the familiar, *heimlich*, as well as intimacy and emotional attachments (Samuelson, p. 214). Thus, not only does the minibus signify a new home, but it also works as a metaphorical journey out of temporality, on the road they will continuously be moving forward. The ‘home’ transforms into a space in which women are in power of both journey and destination, challenging the notion of ‘home’ as an entirely physical space. There is a clear change within the characters as they go from being ‘prisoners of the dream of romance’ with an ‘unending sensation of uncertainty’ to gaining a new sense of freedom and share this hope with ‘millions of other women (and men) who are on this journey’ (Ndebele, pp. 26, 7, 142). This is also a notion challenged in *The Alphabet of Birds*, where South Africa is not a place to call home, or ‘a historical place so much

as a condition to be escape from – or to come back to’.¹¹ In ‘A Master from Germany’, the feeling of home also manifests through intimacy. During sex, ‘Joshka is searching for a new destination, one inside another body’ (Naudé, p. 65). This re-imagining of new homes reveals that whilst lives are ‘stuck’, homes unstable and intimacy denied, there is always a place of refuge, which often manifests in unconventional ways. When the objects that initially impeded their progress are removed, the characters are able to embrace new possibilities. These texts reveal the dangers of temporality but also offer hope for the future. However, there remains a potential risk in their optimistic attachments:

Optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risk striving for; and, doubly, it is cruel insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming.

(Berland, p. 2)

As long as the characters continue their ‘pilgrimage to eternal companionship’, they will also continue to gain more hopeful moments (Ndebele, p. 146). Thus, the promise of happiness is not in a single place or person. It is found on the journey that requires constant movement and disconnection from previously oppressive histories and narratives.

In the afterword to *At Risk*, Ndebele claims that this self-exposure ‘allows for the public sharing of vulnerabilities as the basis for the restoration of public trust [...] and makes possible a world of new interpersonal solidarities that extend into broader, more affirming social solidarities’.¹² The endings of *The Reactive* and *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, offer a restorative

¹¹ S.J. Naudé, *The Alphabet of Birds* (Cape Town and Johannesburg: Penguin Random House, 2014), p. 11. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹² Liz McGregor, *At Risk: Writing on and Over the Edge of South Africa* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2007), p. 245.

narrative. The protagonists all have different tales of temporality, but they lead to similar experiences; they live in unstable homes, waiting in the unknown and they are denied intimacy and affection. These novels also reconstruct the temporality paradigm, providing the protagonists with a new meaning of home and intimacy. The four descendants, Winnie Mandela, Penelope and Lindanathi are not left waiting. This reimagining reveals the fragility of these boundaries, but more importantly, it shares the hope and possibilities of creating new ones.

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