

The media vs mother of the nation

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Although the establishment media has consistently produced a biased white interpretation of Black power and political activity in its historical sense, it has become especially noteworthy during the passing of the Mother of the Nation, whose very existence was an assault to both white safety and apartheid masculinities...



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The blatant insistence to foster misinterpretations and the demonization of Nomzamo Winifred Nobandla Madikizela-Mandela, even in death, shows that these views are not isolated anomalies. Since the breaking of the news of her passing, the primary narrative anchoring her passing, has not been her experience as the first Black social worker in South Africa. It has not been her experience as a mother not to just her own, but to the community as a whole, who fought continuously children against the brutally exploitative and segregationist Nationalist regime.

And perhaps most importantly, it has not been her experience as a defiant spitfire who insisted on voicing her ideals and beliefs, and fearlessly resisted the patronising hierarchies of both racism and patriarchy. The narrative has instead been the racialised and gendered demonisation, that has consistently undermined her power to transcend the identity as a “former wife of” or “overshadowed by scandal”, and does nothing to dismantle the negative perceptions audiences may have about historical Black political activity and leadership.

Surviving countless arrests, bannings, interrogation and torture, Madikizela-Mandela was convicted of kidnapping and being an accessory to assault of 14 year-old activist, Moeketsi “Stompie” Seipei, and while the courts had subsequently overturned the latter conviction, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was unable “to establish conclusively the veracity of any of the versions” of Stompie’s murder that were brought before it. Despite these findings, establishment media’s suspicious insistence on pinning her as a lawless Black revolutionary who thrived on her potential for violence, raises questions about impartiality as central to journalistic practice, and brings to light the role media plays in exacerbating dominant racial and patriarchal attitudes.



Remembering Winnie Mandela, mother of a nation

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In the wake of the death of Madikizela-Mandela, the New York Times ran with the headline before amending it; "*Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, a tarnished leader of South Africa's liberation, dies at 81*" and makes mention of the "adulterous implosion of her fabled marriage" in the article. BBC published and later edited an editorial under the headline; "*Winnie Mandela: a former wife of South Africa's first black President Nelson Mandela, has died at age 81*", while Reuters titled their report; "*Winnie Mandela, 'mother', then 'mugger', of new South Africa*".

Like many representations of Black women that are propagated both in present and past media society, the recurring choice of words in the aforementioned headlines dangerously confine Madikizela-Mandela to a particular racial and gendered identity. We see her being unjustly reduced to: 1) a tarnished leader whose fight against apartheid was overshadowed by scandal and 2) a mere former wife who is seen as an attack upon the hegemony of the nuclear family.

While these headlines and editorials appear to present a somewhat balanced critique of Madikizela-Mandela's political life, they are in fact grossly sexist impositions of dominant patriarchal ideologies embedded in journalistic discourse and society at large. In presenting to us this 'criminalised' version that distinctly opposes her life work, dishonest establishment media decontextualizes Madikizela-Mandela's identity as an icon of liberation and isolates her completely from the revolutionary community.

In writing his understanding of the politicisation of the reburial of Nat Nakasa, Grant Farred points out that: "The remains of the dead finds itself newly, unimaginably and yet predictably vulnerable to the crude impulses of nationalist reinscription". In life, Madikizela-Mandela had to fight against the dilution and erasure of her contributions from historical memory, and while the trend of racially gendered reporting shows little sign of abating after her death, the telling of a sensationalist and wilfully distorted history of her unwavering belief in the struggle, even in the face of violent injustice does not go unchecked – because we know that her actions were, in reality, a result of protesting a brutally repressive and deeply hateful system of racial intolerance, which she had no choice but to participate in.

This growing consciousness, however, against establishment media's insistence to write Madikizela-Mandela out of the very history that shaped her politics, even in the contemporary media environment, is indicative of a kind of resistance that she embodied. Since establishment media has dismissed rethinking their approach to the telling of history, we owe it to Nomzamo Winifred Nobandla Madikizela-Mandela, to radically and relentlessly refute her identity as merely a woman replete with danger, by writing and reflecting thoughtfully on how incredibly courageous she was when courage had to make a difference.

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