Book Review

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(Subaltern Women Subvert Dominant Discourse in Njabulo Ndebele's Novel *Cry Of Winnie Mandela)*

In postcolonial Africa, women especially rural women, remain largely disempowered subalterns. This essay intends to foreground how African women in Njabulo Ndebele's *Cry of Winnie Mandela* subvert dominant discourse of foreign oppressors and African males. It disassembles the novel's evocative narrative of women's patient waiting and reassembles palimpsest texts of social, political, cultural discursive discourses. In the novel Ndebele deconstructs borders between history and fiction, realism and magic and reconstructs margins where wounded, mentally, psychologically broken postcolonials create ambiguous liminal existence. In the last chapter Ndebele deconstructs time and space and explores a site of women empowerment. Five African women repossess their land on a stage devoid of male presence but with an ambivalent sign of a white woman. The presence of the now dependent white woman subverts racial and colonial discourse at the moment it enunciates universal feminist discourse. This essay rereads Ndebele's universal femininity as signifier of (im)possible future. Postmodern pessimism that underwrites historical discourse of postcolonial and post-apartheid betrayal is rewritten in post-pessimistic imagination.

"Life is more than discourse" (Foucault). Ndebele rewrites Foucault and inscribes postcolonial discourse in the real lives of five women, or actually six, as I will show later. I do not deploy woman's body as signifying map, because Ndebele's discursive narrative unfolds in a landscape with signifiers both smaller and bigger than female

bodies. Ndebele never deploys simplifications in order to undercut the grand narrative of empire.

In this essay I examine Njabulo Ndebele's feminist discourse in the novel *Cry of Winnie Mandela*. I disassemble female protagonists to problematize postcolonial narrative and read palimpsest texts of social, political, cultural discursive discourses. Historical and biographical intertexts foreground postcolonial (in South Africa read post-apartheid) breakdown in relationships, interpersonal and inter-social, and postmodern psychic disorder. Five African interlocutors are tropes of Mother Africa, exploited, barren, betrayed. At the same time they subvert dominant discourse and inscribe their disempowered womanhood on the map of the world, reclaim their land and deconstruct patriarchy. Borders between history and fiction, realism and magic collapse in postmodern pessimism and postcolonial, postapartheid disillusion. Evocative narrative of women's waiting, patience, suffering revolts against itself in subversive discourse that is both political and psychic. In the final chapter subalterns write back and subvert European-colonial and African-male dominant discourse.

As an academic Ndebele has always insisted that simple political propaganda, even when socially justified, must not compromise literary quality. Times for slogans and pamphlets are limited and should not be exploited. His own fictive narrative adroitly analyses the postcolony in political and cultural metatexts that do not compromise the story line of living people in 21st century Africa. He has got an uncanny sense for the emotional and psychic life of his characters, notably women and children. Ndebele is a son of Africa's Imbongi and Griots.

Popular binaries, Africa-Europe, black-white, are broken down from the beginning. Ndebele rewrites Penelope, heroine of the *Odyssey*, as colonized subaltern and inscribes universal feminism as the only (im)possible future in global village. African interlocutors are identified as *Penelope's descendents*. Time and space, history and fiction, realism and magic are deconstructed. Although not enunciated as her descendent, Winnie Mandela acts as Penelope's first descendent in the novel, historically and magically. It is not surprising that in the final chapter of the book, with its unexpected modernist ending, it is Winnie who recognizes Penelope, and we reread Nelson as Odysseus.

"My journey follows the path of the unfolding spirit of the world as its consciousness increases; as the world learns to become more aware of me not as Odysseus's moral ornament on the mantelpiece, but as an essential ingredient in the definition of human freedom. I travel 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. I've come to join you briefly on your holiday trip, you women of South Africa, to affirm it for what it is: a signal gesture by five women

who are finally at peace with themselves and the world. I sought only to meet you and to honour you." (120)

Political discourse of freedom, justice and peace can only be written on the palimpsest on psychic discourse of personal freedom, mutual justice and peace, inscribed in landscapes of women empowerment.

Even if this is a feminist book, written with Ndebele's uncanny empathy with women's psyche, male figurations play their roles, as ambiguously victimizers and victims, in the postcolony. They write their discourses, ambivalently dominant and subjugated, dominant in remaining patriarchal society and subjugated in colonist and postcolonist socio-economic order. Close rereading of text and intertexts displaces males and females in margins with constantly fluctuating borders between tradition and modernity, family and politics, rural land and city. Female narrators perform in relation(ship)s with males in open bind.

The trajectories of four African women in postapartheid South Africa write nationalist discourse of postcolonial failure to provide a better life for people, politically and individually. Ndebele's narrative critique of postcolonial Africa is fictive companion to Mbembe's analytical foregrounding of political and economic collapse in *On the Postcolony*. At the same time the book closes on a carefully optimistic note as women empower themselves. Postmodern pessimism does not foreclose possible futures.

The first descendent, Mannete Mofolo, is a trope of millions of women in Southern Africa (and elsewhere) who are victims of the exploitive migrant labor system that breaks down traditional family life. Apartheid society legally enforced family separations (pass laws, influx control, etc.), with inevitable result of moral disorder and breakdown of ethical values. Mannete's husband, Lejone, leaves the highlands of Lesotho, his home, reluctantly, forced by the drought. "He cannot just sit back and watch the world collapse around him"(8). The drought of many years has killed the maize. The maize I read against the grain, to wit, as trope of the Mofolo family. External forces beyond control of the victims, for the maize absence of rain, for the Mofolos absence of food, destroy life. One de(con)struction is inscribed as intertext in the other, as maize, important stable food in Africa, is signifier of life. Signifier without signified, its non-referent is death. Intertexts read the trope as death of the Mofolo family, of traditional family life, of ethical values. Political metatext writes failed maize crops as figuration of agrarian, economic, cultural break-down of postcolony. "The King has called for prayers, but God, remaining as silent as the clear burning skies, has simply not responded"(8). Religious and monarchic patriarchy are disassembled and collapse in futile impotence.

That is when a man stares at the looming mountains of the country he loves, as if noticing them for the first time, looking for answers. They stare back in silence, like God and the skies. It is an unforgettable silence, for it bears on its shoulders the burden of loneliness. Silence becomes loneliness, and loneliness becomes silence. Then out of this world of silence and loneliness emerge inexplicable feelings of longing. For what? Whatever it is, it is something that gets a man unto his feet and urges him to move. Does it have anything to do with vague thoughts connecting the fate of young maize with that of his children? (8)

Mannete's and Lejone's last night together writes ecstatic sexual discourse. Ndebele *traces* (Derrida) eros into agape and collapses them into one ecstasy with religious overtones. "They soared to heights never reached before, whirling in a dizzying, floating feeling----they soared until they reached that moment when they should both have died."(9) But postcolonial life in Africa is not inscribed on the site of European romanticism. Ndebele's lyrical nature discourse is never drawn on maps of antediluvian paradise or imagined utopia. "[t]hey were drawn out of oblivion by stabs of anxiety at the center of their chests. It was time to go. And he left"(9).Short abrupt sentences reinscribe the narrative in realist postcolonial discourse. Mannete watches her husband go, "darkness swallowed him up." The narrator alludes to paratexts of no return

Figuration of African women's resilience through centuries of oppression, Mannete deconstructs the celebrated binary between traditional, subjugated, rural woman and Westernized, independent business woman, as she successfully establishes a little business in her local village and clears a living space for herself in postcolonial margin after her husband's non-return. Unlike her husband who migrates to the city and is lost in the moral disorder and social chaos of hostels and townships, Mannete, after having traveled to the city in futile search of her lost husband, returns to her village in rural Lesotho, bringing modernity with her. She subverts masculist dominant discourse, as she writes back in magic narrative at her homecoming husband. Mannete's attempt to find her lost husband I reread as figuration of lost roots and impossible return to precolonial Africa.

The second descendent, Delia, writes narrative discourse in the same psychic space as Mannete but in a socially other landscape. Patiently waiting, longing for, hoping in the absent husbands (male figuration of patriarchal, traditional Africa) the two protagonists write back in differing feminist discourses, as they empower themselves and subvert dominant male discourse. Perhaps Delia is angry and more disappointed and disillusioned, because she, the most westernized of the four, had hoped to share the social prestige of her husband. Her pedantic mimicking of European bourgeois tea-ceremonies writes a comic discourse with interlinear satire. The omniscient third person narrator, whose discourse is interspersed between first

person narratives, tells us the importance of this ceremony in her childhood home. Historic-political metatext questions how far back in history European mental colonization goes and how influential it was. Delia had longed for and waited for the day she would be the wife of the first western educated doctor in the township. She had sacrificed for it and helped him economically in woman's unchallenged, selfless domestic discourse that has been inscribed on the female body for generations. When he betrays her patience and takes too long to finish his studies, she can only write back in the subaltern's mute way by betraying him sexually, a physical non-emotional betrayal. But woman has to pay the price, while man goes shot-free. Delia finds herself pregnant from a man not her husband. When the latter eventually returns and finds a child that he has not fathered, he leaves Delia. Did he intend to do that anyway and is just happy to get an opportunity to blame her? He makes Delia the scapegoat and pours out his anger and frustration at his own failure and lack of success in Europe over her in an attempt to save his male ego. Does Delia realize it? Did she ever question his fidelity all those years of his absence? He never became the first doctor in the township. Her bitter disappointment is foregrounded, when he marries a nurse and they establish a clinic and inscribe themselves as the "medical couple" in the landscape, where Delia is displaced in a postcolonial middle class margin with fluctuating borders she cannot cross, either into colonial Europe, as her parents did, or into postcolonial Africa, where her husband and her *rival* (In Delia's psychic discourse his new wife will never be anything else.) perform imagined liminal existence. "Slowly, this abandoned Penelope discovers she has been alone all along. It was a feeling marked by self-denial" (15). Her self-denial is rewritten as non-identity, a subtle critique of the role of many women in traditional African society. Her identity is first as her father's daughter or brother's sister, later as her husband's wife. All through the novel Ndebele emphasizes woman's vulnerability in society. Domestic violence, physical, mental, emotional or spiritual, is the language of the day. "[s]he realizes clearly now the firm contours of the life she has led. A postponement without duration" (15). Is Ndebele here deconstructing Bergson' duration-theory? Time is deconstructed, as dreams are disassembled. "How exhilarating! Frighteningly so. To see things for what they really were" (15). "To realize that her entire life had been a refusal to see what was there to be seen" (16). Postmodern homelessness, displacement, an almost religious longing for something like what Lejone sensed in the Lesotho mountains, is intertextually inscribed in Delia's kitchen.

"[S]he looked around the kitchen, listening to the empty house, heard a hen cackling after laying an egg, and gave way to tears. It was something that happened as if it had to happen. Something to give expression to a deep sense of longing beyond words.

"What? Was it him she longed for? Themba. A desire for a redemption of a 'decent' relationship after her secret affair----"(17)

Will Delia be able to pick up the shattered pieces of her life and reassemble realistic discourse? She attempts to subvert self-deception into self-affirmation and write woman's empowerment. "No more time to waste. She acts fast. She stops teaching and opens a *spaza*, selling tea, soap, sugar, salt, fat cakes, toothpaste, aspirin, and countless little things that make life possible" (16). The resolute expediency with which Delia acts is adroitly foregrounded by short sentences and uninterrupted annunciation of simple domestic items. Her successful economic and social empowerment does not overwrite the moral discourse that destabilizes Delia's psychic peace. How could she have given in to a moment of weakness? "[T]his Penelope continues to this day to blame herself for having yielded to a moment's weakness"(16). Do the two men responsible for her "mistake" blame themselves? Subaltern woman is always blamed, whether guilty or innocent. "Of course, the world will always know the mother of the child, for a woman can never escape the messages of her body"(17). Public gossip never spares her. "Proof of infidelity is the aim of society's interest in the life of a woman who waits for an absent husband. If they cannot find the proof, they"ll invent it"(31). Ndebele's uncanny empathy for woman's suffering demands gender equality, socially, culturally, sexually. Woman will no longer be a passive object to be used (and abused) in society but an active subject on the stage, demanding her right to initiative. When Delia's patient waiting is stretched to its limit, she revenges herself on her lover. "He attempted to resist, but there was only one predetermined victory: hers"(18). Politic interlinear narrative rewrites psychic discourse on the moral and ethical map of the postcolony. Ndebele's open questions leave South Africa and by implication all Africa and the rest of the world at the crossroad.

"How has the growth of the imagination or the nurturing of new values been affected by the dramatic oscillation of individuals and communities between comfort and discomfort, between home and homelessness, home and exile, between riches and poverty, love and hate, hope and despair, knowledge and ignorance, progress and regression, fame and ignominy, heroism and roguery, honour and dishonour, marriage and divorce, sophistication and crudeness, life and death, return and departure?" (70)

Political analysts are rediscovering the importance of imagination in creating a viable political and social order. Social imagination is foregrounded in Ndebele's narrative, as political, cultural, psychic and religious interlinear discourses make complex reading of the novel necessary, if we do not want to miss the subtle points Ndebele sharply and adroitly weaves into the narrative. Binaries in the above quotation must be disassembled and collapse into one another in ambiguous marginal

questions. "Which way will the balance ultimately go between creativity and destruction?"(71)

Postmodern homelessness and disillusion are inscribed in the physical landscape of dire poverty, exploitation, hunger, sickness in the "third world" (made third by the first world's draining of its resources). "There would be no departure for her now, only the agony of waiting for the return of a man into a moral situation so complex she began to lose confidence in any claim to really know him"(18). The loss of identity, personal and communitarian, in formerly colonized people will not be reversed until independence ceases to be an illusion. Fanon revisits the site of mimicking in *Black Skin, White masks*. When home, root of identity, is displaced on a global map, postcolonials try to reassemble fractured identities. Spivak rewrites displacements as a critique of nation-states.

[W]omen carry internalized the lesson of the exchangeability of the home, the basis of identity. The superexploited women in Export Processing Zones are set adrift from "cultures" that are, in context, not necessarily "national. The gendered tribal subaltern shares this lesson with the subaltern's distancing from both the culture of imperialism and anticolonial and postcolonial nationalism. (*Outside in the Teaching Machine* 252)

Inscribing narrative, fictional and historical, in diverse intellectual, social, political and economic landscapes enables Ndebele to critic postcolonial society the moment he foregrounds suffering and injustice inflicted on individual citizens, especially women, who often are the most vulnerable. It is important to note that the men, who will be immediate causes of the suffering and alienation inflicted on their female partners, are neither beasts nor monsters. Colonial and postcolonial states rewrite them as other to their one-time lovers. Could it have been otherwise? Ndebele leaves impossible questions open. At the end of the novel any return to the beginning is foreclosed. Africa can never return to a precolonial past. Postmodern liminal existence, where everybody is migrant (Rushdie), constantly on the move, attempting to cross fluctuating (imaginary or magic) borders, deconstructs ethnic identities in order to reconstruct them as hybrid possible post-pessimistic futures.

Mamello, Penelope's third descendent, reads hybridity in historical discourse with bitter psychological paratexts. Her husband, former freedom fighter and hero of nationalist struggle, now turned postcolonial bureaucrat, leaves her and marries a white woman, "comrade from the struggle." Mamello's ambiguous reaction draws confused maps of denial, acceptance, revolt, subjugation, subversion and revenge. It climaxes when her ex-husband appears on television with his new wife and their child. Triple victim, of patriarchy, colonial dominance and apartheid propaganda, Mamello writes him a letter in a last desperate attempt to win him back. "Come back home to me"(19). When euphoria of independence is rewritten as postcolonial

pessimism, nostalgic dreams of return to precolonial Africa are foreclosed. Mamello in magic time narrative remembers his arrest and her prison visits in the ambivalence of present questions.

"He was arrested ... I visited him in jail dutifully. Even then, I registered the distance between us when we met for the first time after his sudden departure. There was a remoteness to him ..."(21)

In her letter she vehemently castigates his miscegenation and scorns the offspring of that union. In his reply he makes it unequivocally clear that the relationship between him and Mamello is definitively ended. At the same time he takes the opportunity to "educate" her, writing a discursive discourse on non-racist society and universal humanity. He upbraids her for offending his child. Did he ever consider that perhaps Mamello's emotional outburst was largely an anguished cry of pain for her own barrenness, a curse in traditional Africa? Her humiliation is intensified by the fact that it is a white woman who fulfills what she was incapable of doing. She begins to question her husband's motives for joining the struggle. "Was the heroism of joining the struggle a justification for a flight from me" (26)? "Did he fly from my barrenness" (26)? Mamello's only (im)possibility to cope with her confusion, where imagination is real and reality is imagined, is insanity. After her third breakdown she revisits traditional Africa in an ambiguous, ambivalent attempt to rewrite her identity and reassemble her marriage.

"After the third breakdown some friends told me about a *sangoma* who helped women get their husbands back. I laughed it off. Such silliness. But alone at home, I began to be obsessed with the idea. I decided to try it." (22)

Western educated Mamello tries to exist in deconstructed, fluctuating time-space margin, homeless before and after, in Africa and in Europe. "Was that really me?"(23) Mamello's lost identity and broken mind are inscribed on the map of postcolonial Africa. As tragic actor on the stage of 21st century South Africa Mamello is trope of millions of women, men and children in Africa who have lost their lives, their minds, their limbs in fruitless wars and genocides. Subaltern's voiceless subjugation becomes a cry of horror, when the only discourse left is insanity. Mamello's pessimistic postmodern narrative must be revisited and intertexts of (im)possible future reread.

Mara, Penelope's fourth descendent, is the weakest character in the novel, and the least successfully presented. One almost gets the impression that Ndebele put her in as an afterthought. Be that as it may, she is not an improbable figuration in the postcolony. She might even be the most prolific in her bleakness. She proudly refuses to publicly admit her husband's social and economic collapse. Having inscribed herself in woman's traditionally subordinated role, she might fear to lose her own identity in his non-identity. Her metanarrative of disgust and pain is

underwritten by lost feelings. His infidelity and degrading life have long since killed her feelings. Why does she not return his infidelity, tooth-for-tooth? She does not know. Even if her husband is a scoundrel, she remains faithful in the tradition of Penelope. Social gossip displaces her in erotic landscape with lovers.

Against the grain Mara negotiated her subaltern voicelessness and collapsed it into proud silent self-affirmation. Ndebele does not shun moral discourse. Without morals and ethics the postcolony has no future. Nations that uphold traditional morality and ethical demands in modernity of global village is the only (im)possible social discourse to write a map of Africa without corruption, and by implication of the world. Economic and political justice will only be a reality, Ndebele cautions, in hybrid cultural landscape, where ethics and morals from varying traditions co-exist in ambiguous unity. Religious signifiers (redemption, conscience) are inscribed in intertexts.

"But often the easiest things are the most impossible to do, until they become habit. Then they truly become easy. Habit is doing without thought. In such matters habit spells the death of conscience. But before thought and conscience disappear into habit, they are your hurdles, your redemption." (30)

Ndebele shows woman's vulnerability, not only sexual, domestic, vulnerability but social and political. Woman is looser in all cases. If she is unfaithful, she is scorned, as Delia was, if she is faithful, nobody believes her, as in the case of Mara and Penelope. Media's ripping open of woman's body is foregrounded, when Ndebele disassembles the public discourses on Winnie Mandela.

Penelope's four descendents subvert their subjugation and rewrite their betrayal in socially diverse ways. Mannete establishes herself as a successful petty trader. Delia involves herself with another man with disastrous consequences for herself. Mamello retreats into insanity. Mara tries to establish a homeless existence in the debris of her life. Ndebele revisits woman's victimization through history. Her socio-economic space or psychic pressure creates sites for moral and ethical collapse. The woman is blamed and scapegoated as with Winnie Mandela, as with Delia. Dominant masculine discourse writes no moral guilt. Imaginative discourse displaces woman on a stage alien to her. She is never innocent. Why try to be just and faithful and resist corruption, when nobody believes you? Ndebele leaves modernist and postmodernist questions open. There is hope for postcolonial Africa through the women who have been the strength and mainstay of African life since time immemorial, not only as mothers and life bringers but in prominent political and cultural positions in a history we are only now beginning to uncover, as we preempt colonial archives. *Women writing Africa* (2003) is a noteworthy attempt. Thomas Hale discovered in his study of griots in West Africa that male history was overdetermined and by no means exclusive.

The absence of women in the culture of griots is questionable. A more gender balanced view is pertinent.

In the second half of the novel magic realism inscribes itself in conventional social discourse as the narrative draws the four fictive characters together to disassemble their non-identities in order to reassemble identity and empower themselves in written dialogue with Winnie Mandela, whose complex identity the novel attempts to write. Finally, in magic psychic discourse Ndebele problematizes postcolonial identity, as historical/fictive Winnie writes a letter to her own imagined self.

"First, I narrated you from the outset, and then from the inside: two stages of a journey towards myself. I have arrived at myself. Although I conjured you into being, you've become too real for me to extinguish you. I acknowledge your existence, but take the liberty of leaving you to your own devices.----Thank you for being there. Thank you for taking me to the most difficult period of my waiting: the beginning of its end." (107)

The concluding chapter adroitly breaks down binaries of Africa-Europe, colonized-colonizer, history-fiction, reality-magic. Time and space collapse in hope for future as women empower themselves in universal sisterhood, first enunciated in the delimited site of a car, *on the move*. African women are not immobilized in precolonial past. "A deep feeling of fellowship and confidence embraces the women on their journey."(115) Penelope joins the five African women in their ride towards the coast to repossess their land. Africa writes back; *African women give a lift to a European woman*, who now has to beg. Penelope, homeless migrant, inscribes herself in every landscape where women rise up to claim their right to self-determination and empowerment. Feminist discourse is rewritten in universal humanity as Penelope joins her African sisters in gendered solidarity.

"I too claim Greece now for the message of freedom I bear. I'll travel on seeking out key moments in the growth of the world's consciousness, and to lay at each such moment the imprint of my message. Affirming new ways of experiencing relationships wherever they emerge." (120)

Six women perform important roles as signifiers of women empowerment in texts and intertexts, fictive and historical, magic and realistic. Interlinear readings weave the strands of the narrative dexterously into a complex social and psychic tapestry. It is worth noting that in the novel's feminist discourse the driver of the car, taking the five women to the coast, is female. Another woman, who never figures in the narrative, overshadows colonial and postcolonial feminist discourse. The book is dedicated to her, and a photo of her statue covers the front page: Sara Baartman, the tragic figure of the 19th century. Few subalterns have spoken so eloquently with their violated silence. The mute cry of Sara writes a discourse of slavery, old and new,

exploitation, violence against woman, physical and mental. British and French empire brutally drew their racist map on Sara's body that continued to be humiliated even after her death. Colonial dominant discourse overwrote feminist loyalty. European women deconstructed femininity and joined their males in exploiting and humiliating their own female body in the figure of subjugated Sara. Only when South Africa achieved freedom and democracy was the text rewritten, and Sara Baartman's body brought back to her homeland

Sara at last rests in a grave, in her homeland. Penelope, migrant in time and space, constantly crossing imaginary borders, vanishes out of the narrative. As figurations of universal feminine, indestructible empowerment their discourse deconstructs time and history, as their magic presence travels with the five. "They drive on---- continuing on their *pilgrimage* to eternal companionship" (121, emphasis added). Ndebele deploys religious tropes in fictive narrative with historic and socio-politic paratexts.

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