

**A dialogue opened up between past, present and future**

**Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, *491 Days: Prisoner Number 1323/69***

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She is one of South Africa's most controversial public figures, often leaving observers at odds as to the merits of her struggle credentials and legacy. Now, new light has been cast on Winnie Madikizela Mandela's experiences as a prisoner under the apartheid state during the 1960s:

I said I was not going to bask in his shadow and be known as "Mandela's wife"; they were going to know me as Zanyiwe Madikizela. I fought for that. I said, "I will not even bask in his politics." I am going to form my own identity because I never did bask in his ideas. I had my own mind (p 237).

While serving in prison, Madikizela Mandela was encouraged by advocate David Soggot to keep a record detailing some of her experiences in the form of a journal. Over four decades later, Greta Soggot, wife of the late David, returned the journal, and it has subsequently been published as *491 days: Prisoner Number 1323/69*. The journal can be said to form just under half of the publication, while the bulk of the text consists of letters, most of these written by Nelson Mandela to Winnie while on Robben Island. Added to these are some materials as found in Madikizela Mandela's file at the National Archives of South Africa.

To state that Madikizela Mandela's journal is a disturbing one, is an understatement. The journal highlights her emotional trauma due to the long periods of solitary confinement and the inhumane treatment of prisoners, as well as her struggles with numerous health issues, many of which probably stemmed from her psychological state of mind at the time, and her endless battles to fulfil her duties as a parent, despite being unjustly incarcerated. Apart from the obvious pressures, in practical terms, of being a single parent most of the time, Nelson Mandela's jail sentence seems to have served as more of an inspiration to Madikizela Mandela than a curse. These and other insights, come to the fore in especially in the numerous letters passed between them, many of which never arrived due to the unfair treatment of prison officials. The journal and the accompanying letters highlight Madikizela Mandela's influence as a political role player in her own right. This is, for obvious reasons, often understated in the related historiography, given the magnitude of her late former husband's global recognition and influence.

Yet to neglect her significance in the politics of South Africa is to miss completely her mammoth role in the fight for a democratic dispensation, and it is clear from the text exactly why Madikizela Mandela continues to remain a hero and an inspiration for so many ordinary South Africans, despite all the controversies that have haunted her over the years. This is perhaps best exemplified in one of her letters to Nelson Mandela where she notes:

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... any man who leads a normal life in an abnormal society is himself abnormal ... I chose the life of insults, hardships, and tears which have long dried up with the full knowledge that it was for the better or for the worst for my people" (p 213).

In terms of the letters, which constitute more than half of this publication, the many letters written by Nelson Mandela are a welcome addition. Amongst his numerous skills which have made him one of the most famous men to ever have lived, Nelson Mandela was a gifted writer who has left a treasure of wisdom in his scribbling. In a letter addressed to Winnie in 1969, Mandela observed:

Neither the moral standards of modern civilization, the teachings of the Christian faith, the universal idea of the common brotherhood of men, nor pure sense of honour will deter the privileged circles from applying the multitudinous pressures at their disposal on those who fight for human dignity (p 140).

This observation is as applicable to South Africa in 2015 as it was in 1969.

In the same vein, it should be noted, are Madikizela Mandela's observations as part of her epilogue to *491 Days: Prisoner Number 1323/69*. In this piece, there is a sobering stance taken towards post apartheid South Africa the South Africa for which she and so many other struggle stalwarts had to endure many painful sacrifices. Her comments, written in November 2012, just a number of months after the tragic events at Marikana, speak volumes when she notes:

Right now, people like myself who come from that era [apartheid] become petrified when we see us sliding and becoming more and more like our oppressive masters. To me, that is exactly what is happening and that is what scares me (p 293).

The publication of *491 Days: Prisoner Number 1323/69* is a welcome addition to the literature on South Africa's troubled past. The work succeeds in giving us nuanced rendition of the role and the character of one of South Africa's most fascinating politicians. Not only does it serve as a wonderful record, detailing just a small portion of the injustices endured by a member of a much marginalised group in South Africa, namely black women, but the work is also utterly intriguing in the way that a dialogue between past, present and future is opened up a trait which should, in my view be compulsory in all history writing.

*Barend van der Merwe*  
*Free State Provincial Archives*  
*Bloemfontein*