# Historical Figure Of The 20th And 21st Centuries: A Radical Woman Winnie Mandela

## A Radical Woman

In South Africa, a system known as apartheid that discriminates against people based on race was part of the government which was controlled by whites. Nelson Mandela was one of the strongest forces to go up against the government to end apartheid. He symbolized all black South Africans who wanted to end their segregation and discrimination. His wife, Winnie Madikizela, better known as Winnie Mandela, symbolized the same. Winnie was raised in an environment that nourished her and molded her into the woman she became and ignited the flame that would spread and help the fight against apartheid. However, in the process Winnie Mandela made personal sacrifices in the areas of family, freedom and fame. Winnie was born in 1934 in a rural village in South Africa called Bizana. Her parents were physically abusive when it came to punishments, and Winnie became known for being quite violent. Her parents raised her and her siblings to have strong self-esteem and pride in their Xhosa tribal heritage. Winnie's father was the village teacher, and although he taught many subjects, he was best at history. The school was supplied with textbooks that said that white people "civilized" Africa. They claimed white superiority and that whites owned the land. Yet Winnie's father taught the ancient civilizations and traditions of the Xhosa tribe, how the white people stole their land and how the native African people became enslaved. Winnie was raised as a headstrong woman empowered by her family and heritage, and she went to many lengths in order to help lead black South Africans in their fight against apartheid.

Winnie was involved with the African National Conference (ANC) when she met her husband. When her husband was sentenced to life in prison for sabotage Madikizela-Mandela with no livelihood, she was left alone to care for their two children. Even so, she continued to fight and became the leader of the ANC Women's League and the Federation of South African Women. With Nelson Mandela imprisoned this made her his representative, she became a focal point for international media. As a result of this and her activism, she was banned from coming and going as she pleased and communicating freely with others, and she was placed under house arrest for nearly 11 years. This included limitations on visitation and communication. During these years Winnie was incarcerated and put in solitary confinement, "She was arrested several times on trumped-up charges. Once she was kept in solitary confinement for nine months awaiting trial.". She had to send her children away to keep them safe, at one point they almost died from malnutrition because they weren't being well taken care of. She gives vivid descriptions of what her solitary confinement was like in her book 491 Days, "Solitary confinement is worse than hard labour. When you do hard labour you are with other prisoners, you can tolerate it because you all dig together, you communicate and you are alive. Solitary confinement is meant to kill you alive.". Madikizela-Mandela was treated inhumanely during her imprisonment, "it was purely because of my name that I survived because the easiest thing for them at the time would have been to kill me, which they threatened every day. 'Oh you're still alive?'

They would come in and say, 'You're still alive? We don't know if you will be alive tomorrow'.", she was also starved, "even when you tried to eat you brought up because you were very, very hungry". Reasons for her imprisonment were because she numerously violated

her banning orders and continued promoting the outlawed ANC. “In 1975 her banning orders expired. After 13 years of banning she tasted freedom for nearly a year...Mandela’s freedom was brief, however.” She was forced to relocate in 1976 to the Orange Free State of South Africa, she was confined there for eight years. Then in 1985 her Brandfort house was firebombed which she accused the government of and moved back to Orlando. Madikizela-Mandela was a target for most of her life, she gave up her freedom, she sent her kids away, and she went through so much suffering. This didn’t stop her, she never gave up on the brutal fight to end apartheid.

Winnie Mandela was the primary connection to the outside world for Nelson Mandela during his imprisonment. In the world’s media she kept the name “Mandela” alive through the trope of the rhetorical widow. Women who were widowed or not whose authority came from their husband’s inability to speak were called rhetorical widows. Widowhood provided them with a platform from which to speak and transformed women from individuals into mouthpieces. As a result of becoming her husband’s spokesperson, Winnie lost her own identity. Due to the fact that she was the rhetorical widow of Nelson Mandela along with having her own character flaws and passions she continued to dedicate her life to end apartheid. “The U.S. popular press made use of the cultural commonplace of widowhood by establishing the following: first, that she should be seen as analogous to other rhetorical widows; that she was an extension of the imprisoned Nelson Mandela; and third, that she was the most reliable spokesperson for Nelson Mandela.” Even though she was “being seen as merely the extension of Nelson Mandela” she herself “seemed aware of and resigned to her status as his wife”. She accepted the fact that in all her own efforts when people looked at her all they saw was her husband, she gave up her individuality. She was proud to be a symbol of all she and others have been fighting for. She said, “When they send me into exile, it’s not me as an individual they are sending. They think that with me they can also ban a political idea. What I stand for is what they want to banish. I couldn’t think of a greater honor.”.

Even though she did all that she did, towards the end she was hated for her violent and radical ways. It was said the “she did not deserve the positive interpretation that she had received before 1989” and “that in elevating Winnie Mandela in her husband’s absence, black South Africans made the mistake of letting a black woman take charge.”. She became a controversial figure and many anti-apartheid groups avoided and distanced from her. She was shunned and in a way people “systematically dismantled her credibility by stripping her of the three testimonials. Instead of empowering her words with the power of the convert’s tale, she was portrayed as self-serving”. “In 1986 Winnie Mandela was quoted as saying, ‘With our matches and our necklaces, we will liberate South Africa.’ Necklacing refers to a practice of placing gasoline-soaked tires around the necks of people whom antapartheid activists consider 'traitors' to the cause and then setting them on fire.” She was never given positive credit for what she did in the end, Madikizela-Mandela has always lived a life filled with violence. Everything she went through, how could she just live a normal life after everything, no one saw her as an individual once apartheid ended, she was the negative and Nelson Mandela was the positive.

Winnie Mandela made personal sacrifices in the areas of family, freedom and fame, she went to many lengths in order to help lead black South Africans in their fight against apartheid. Not being able to watch her children grow up, being despised, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela was not your everyday housewife. She reflects back, “Looking back as a parent, you feel you do not deserve this forgiveness because you cannot explain yourself to the children and you fear that they would never understand. You are lucky that they understand so much anyway; that they do

not begrudge you.”. Madikizela-Mandela kept and continued the work of her husband, Nelson Mandela when he could not. She stepped up even when their leader was imprisoned, she was the engine that pushed South Africa into a future without apartheid.

## Sources


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