



WOMEN CREATING A *Safety Net*



Sphiwo Mahala, PhD
Editor-in-Chief

We produced this second issue of *Imbiza* against a backdrop of mayhem and unrest in some parts of South Africa. What was initially purported to be a political protest following the incarceration of former President Jacob Zuma morphed into widespread public violence epitomised by massive destruction of property, flagrant looting and arson, leading to the deaths of hundreds of people, the arrest of thousands more and billions worth of damage.

One of the most defining moments of this upheaval is captured in the haunting image of a two-year old child, clad in a white nappy and a red hoodie, caught in midair with several hands below her outstretched and ready to catch her. The toddler was hurled from the first floor by her mother, identified by the BBC as Naledi Manyoni, in an audacious attempt to save her from the thick smoke and raging blaze that had engulfed the high-rise building. A group of men and women, standing on the street below the building, had their arms outstretched to form a safety net to bring the toddler to safety. "All I could do was trust a complete stranger," Manyoni told the BBC afterwards. The safety net that was created for Manyoni's child is what is needed in our society for women and children to feel safe.

In this edition of *Imbiza*, dubbed Women's Voices, we listen to women's voices as they tell stories of

what it means to be a woman in Africa and the world. Many of these women come from different parts of the continent and the world, but share a common factor of having been subjected to sexual violence, toxic masculinities and patriarchy. A reading of Pumla Dineo Gqola's essay, "Cartographies of Feminist Fury", where she retraces various instances of sexual violence that Mona Eltahawy has been subjected to, whether as a four-year-old child growing up in Cairo, Egypt, or as a teenager in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, or as an adult living in the United States, paints a grim picture of a prevalent culture of sexual violence across the globe. Gqola tells us: "The difference between the angry toddler and the silent teenager are years of socialisation into fear, patriarchal intrusion and gendered shame."

It is this feeling of shame that Sue Nyathi in her introduction to *When Secrets Become Stories: Women Speak Out* (2021), published as an extract in this issue, implores us to eradicate. "By uncovering the shame and exposing it to the world, you break the power it has over you," she says. She goes on to explain that this acknowledgement of shame is a vital step in the journey towards healing. "Only exposed wounds can heal; the hidden ones fester and cause you to rot inside." Nyathi argues that the perpetrators of gender-based violence can be intimate partners or family members. She is thus reminding us that the hand that caresses you is the same one that can strangle you.

Literary icon and prominent feminist Tsitsi Dangarembga shares her lifetime of struggle against patriarchy and the tyranny of power. Dangarembga's opus demonstrates that writing on its own is a revolutionary act. Through her activism she wants to influence systemic change, whereas her creative production is for changing the people. Similarly, Simamkele Dlakavu illustrates the convergence of Gqola's activism and scholarship, and how she remains an inspirational figure to a new generation of feminists. Zulaikha Patel, who burst into the public eye when she led a school protest as a teenager in 2016, continues her activism by revisiting the theme of the politics of hair in her writing.

This edition of *Imbiza* features poets who articulate similar concerns in very diverse languages, including Afrikaans, English and Tshivenda. Rotenda Gavhi, in her poem written in Tshivenda, pays a fitting tribute to Zindzi Mandela, who passed away around this time a year ago. Mandela, best known as a political activist, was, in fact, a writer who published her first poetry collection, *Black as I Am* (1978), at the tender age of 13. She was named after Zindziswa, the daughter of poet S.E.K. Mqhayi, because her father, Nelson Mandela, was a great admirer of the Xhosa bard.

Included in this issue are short stories written in English, Kiswahili, Sepedi, isiXhosa and isiZulu. These short stories range in their themes and settings, but preoccupy themselves with the lives of women. In "Lagos Nights", written in a dialect of Pidgin English spoken largely in Lagos, Nigeria, Ufuoma Bakporhe documents the lives of many young women who fall victim to human trafficking rings. Keletso Mopai is a writer who is after my own heart, and her new offering "Bereavement Hallucination" does not disappoint. In "What the Body Does Not Forget", Mabel Mnensa grapples with the question of identity.

Identity issues also feature quite prominently in the "What's Cooking" section, where we share tidbits from newly published works. We publish a chapter from Aminatta Forna's *The Window Seat* (2021) in which she grapples identity complex using Barack Obama's lineage as an entry point. In a hilarious exploration of the same theme, Shubnum Khan shares her international travel experiences during which her South Africanness is put into question. These excerpts are followed by book reviews in which our independent reviewers share their thoughts on some of the newest titles in the market.

While feminist rage is a present and necessary emotion, this edition also features stories of assertiveness, perseverance and ultimately triumph. The meteoric rise of South African actress Thuso Mbedu to Hollywood superstardom, the international

recognition of Dangarembga's exploits as a writer and activist, as well as Gqola's legion of achievements, stand out as antidotes to the erasure and suppression of women voices. The mutual admiration evident between actors Nolo Phiri and Mbedu, Gloria Bosman's heartfelt endearment towards fellow musicians Neo Motsatse, Jude HarpStar and Berita, and how Dlakavu magnifies Gqola's intellectual contribution stand out as examples of much-needed affirmation among creatives, academics and other thought leaders. Here, women artists and scholars are forming a safety net to support and protect one another.

ONE IS COMPELLED TO SELF-INTROSPECT AND THINK DEEPLY ABOUT THE MEANING OF OUR ACTIONS AND NON-ACTIONS IN THE FACE OF GROSS INJUSTICES.

This edition of *Imbiza* is dedicated to amplifying women's voices, whose writings are wrought with the history of subjugation. We sought the expertise of one of *Imbiza* board members, Barbara Boswell, who is an accomplished writer and feminist literary scholar in her own right, to be Guest Editor of this edition. Boswell earned her Doctoral degree from the Department of Women's Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park, where she studied as a Fulbright Scholar. As an intellectual and keen researcher, she continues to teach and pursue research in Black diasporic women's writing, Black South African women's literature, and queer theories.

Working with Boswell in this edition of *Imbiza* has been an exhilarating and edifying experience. Reading the articles in this publication compels one to self-introspect and think deeply about the meaning of our actions and non-actions in the face of gross injustices. For I, too, am a beneficiary of the patriarchal society that raised me and many men of my generation. Perhaps, the most invaluable lesson I have learned from working on this edition of *Imbiza* is that at times men like me have to keep quiet and listen. But for now, the best way to listen is to indulge in this intellectual and creative feast.

