

Intersection of the Personal and the Political Life in Nelson Mandela's Long Walk to Freedom

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Abstract

The autobiography is a genre that focuses on the personal life of the autobiographer as narrated by him. In an autobiography, the autobiographical narrator engages in the reconfiguration and reconstruction of his own personal history which is inextricably connected to the social, political, economic and many other discursive contexts. Nelson Mandela's autobiography Long Walk to Freedom records the tension between the personal and the political in the context of Mandela's life and shows how it resulted in the formation of a larger personal identity. Although Mandela's autobiography revolves around the personal, the subjects that it incorporates are much broader and complex than a personal narrative. It is at the same time the story of his personal life and the story of how his country gained independence as seen and experienced by him. Mandela's autobiography not only represents his personal life but it is also representative of an era. In writing his autobiography, he also writes the major political events that effected millions of lives. The autobiography documents Mandela's life, the struggle against apartheid in South Africa and the struggle across Africa to shake off the control of colonial powers. This paper will address the

interlacing of details pertaining to the individual as well as the political activist with a support base across Africa.

Keywords: Personal history, Autobiography, Political struggle, Representation

Introduction

Nelson Mandela's autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom* was first published in 1994. The book contains the story of Mandela's early life, education, imprisonment and final achievement of freedom for his country. Mandela started his autobiography during the period of his imprisonment in Robben Island upon considering the suggestion of his friends that his story should be preserved for the future generations. *Long Walk to Freedom* is the story of hardship, endurance, resilience and the indomitable zeal of a great leader which culminated in the attainment of freedom for his country from colonialism. Given that Mandela has a goal to achieve—document their long struggle against apartheid—his autobiography consciously tries to intertwine personal stories with the public accounts of their fight against the apartheid regime in South Africa.

Mandela's autobiography intertwines his personal life with his public life consciously minimizing the distinction between the two. It reflects Nelson Mandela as person whose personal life has assimilated with the life of all Africans who suffered under the oppressive apartheid system becoming at the same time one of the masses as an oppressed African and one out of the masses as a representative figure. *Long Walk to Freedom* as an autobiography drifts from a narrative of one's personal life to include larger experiences and struggles that have shaped his life as well as that of others. Throughout his autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela projects his life as being connected to the collective life of his people. Despite strong feelings and ideas, Mandela chooses to stay focused on his political agenda—

even in jail through passive resistance—and his work reflects the man and his commitment to his people.

Discussion

Mandela's autobiography begins with his childhood experiences, his life in the village Qunu, the Xhosa people, their traits and customs. Mandela's description of his early childhood provides an insight into the life of the Xhosa tribal life which was still not exposed to western modernity. His childhood and upbringing had a major role in his initial construction of his self-identity. The stories that he heard from his parents about the historic battles, great Xhosa warriors and Xhosa fables and legends that had been passed down through generations stimulated his childhood imagination. However, throughout the Autobiography Mandela's self-identity is in a state of flux, gradually expanding both politically and ideologically to incorporate larger identity as an African and to address larger issues that Africa confronted with. Mandela's journey from childhood to maturity parallels the long process of his identity formation as a leader of all the Africans irrespective of race, class and gender.

Mandela's description of his educational life highlights his intellectual as well as political awakening. Mandela's education gave him the opportunity to bring himself closer to his friends who were, like him impacted by colonial education. His education in Healdstown and later in Witwatersrand connected him with those who shared the same fate with him and who were intellectually his equals to share solidarity and get united to delineate the roadmap to freedom. A major incident in Healdtown school that Mandela narrates in his autobiography which created an impact in the students' minds was the visit of the famous Xhosa poet Krune Mqhayi. The poet was an extraordinary orator who for the first time stirred Mandela's mind with his Anti-Colonial speech. The poet talked about the clash between the

cultures of Africa and Europe and the oppression of the former by the latter. Mqhayi's speech infused in Mandela's mind the idea that all African tribes had much in common and that an African can stand his ground with a white man.

Mandela writes about his experience in the University of Witwatersrand where he enrolled for an LLB, a bachelor of law degree which was an important episode of his personal life that shaped his desire to work for the greater whole. In his autobiography he describes Witwatersrand as an institution that made him meet many people who were to share with him the ups and downs of the liberation struggle. In Witwatersrand he befriended Tony O'Dwod and Harold Wolpe, who were political radicals and members of the communist Party, and people like Jules Browde who was a supporter of the anti-apartheid cause. He also formed close friendships with a number of Indian students like Ismail Meer, J.N Singh, Ahmad Bhoolia etc. Ismail Meer's house became a kind of headquarter for them for political discussions. These kind of discussions and associations were instrumental in the construction of Mandela's political outlook. Politics for Mandela was a way to connect with his people and address issues that affected them. Politics was one thread that bound his personal life with that of the masses. Both in practicing and in being affected by politics, Mandela realized that politics must be the way to achieve freedom and political solidarity of the Africans must be its base, for which a transpersonal assimilation of Africans across races and tribes was necessary.

Nelson Mandela was a witness and a partaker of one of the most crucial periods of South African history. *Long Walk to Freedom* is also a narrative of South Africa's journey to independence narrated from a personal point of view. However, Mandela's position as a leading figure of the South African struggle of independence increases the significance of that point of view. Throughout his autobiography Mandela's life is in sync with the political events impacting South Africa. Mandela's account of his personal life is

interlinked with his political life. Unlike many popular personalities Mandela's life is not discernable in the dichotomy of the personal versus the public as it is the synthesis of the two. In *Long Walk to Freedom* Nelson Mandela's autobiographical self is a person who selflessly devotes himself to the cause of the nation and his people. However, Mandela clarifies that such dedication is not deliberate but enforced. In the colonial South Africa where apartheid was the basis and racism was the norm, nobody could disregard politics. In fact, one becomes politicized as soon as he or she becomes conscious of the reality around him/her. Mandela becoming a freedom fighter was the product of the same injustice and oppression that millions of Africans felt under the apartheid rule. As he says "I had no epiphany, no singular revelation, no moment of truth, but a steady accumulation of a thousand slights, thousand indignities, a thousand unremembered moments produced in me an anger, a rebelliousness, a desire to fight the system that imprisoned my people.

There was no particular day on which I said, From henceforth I will devote myself to the liberation of my people; instead I simply found myself doing so and I could not do otherwise"(89).

As he points out, his taking up politics did not happen suddenly but was the result of years of suffering and indignity. Having been exposed to discrimination on grounds of race and colour in his youth, Mandela felt that his joining the struggle against apartheid was a natural progression for him. His training as a lawyer made him realize that such obvious and mindless discrimination was unlawful and should be challenged. That there would be serious fallouts was something that did not register fully or by that time he was so fully committed to the cause of his people that personal suffering and obligations took a back seat in his life.

Mandela's dramatic journey to Johannesburg was a turning point in his life as there for the first time he came into proximity with modern city life, racial laws and influential political personalities from ANC, the African National Congress. In the 1940s the ANC was

the major organization that represented all the Africans. Mandela developed an interest towards the ANC when he came under the influence of his political mentor and comrade, Walter Sisulu. The ANC played a central role in shaping Mandela's personal life as well as South African political history. In the 1950s Mandela's increasing affiliation to the ANC and its political activities compelled him to compromise with his duties and activities of personal life. Mandela's autobiography narrates his initial hesitancy to join the Youth League as he knew that it would necessitate him to undermine his personal commitments. As he writes

“I was nervous about joining the league and still had doubts about the extent of my political commitment. I was then working full-time and studying part-time, and had little time outside those two activities. I also possessed a certain insecurity, feeling politically backward compared to Walter, Lembede and Mda. They were men who knew their minds and I was, as yet, uninformed” (94).

After joining the ANC, Mandela's personal inclination shifted towards a different direction. Until then he was preoccupied with his educational life and work life outside any kind of political activism. He more or less accepted the whites were cultured, progressive and civilized people. As an autobiographer Mandela is making the readers sense the major ideological shifts that transformed his personal commitments to his near and dear ones into a commitment for liberation. His belief that his destiny was to become a counselor to the Thembu king was diminishing alongside his adherence to tribal separatism and personal commitments. His duty as a freedom fighter often intervened in his personal responsibilities as a lawyer, as a student and after his marriage as a father and a husband. In *Long Walk to Freedom* Mandela manages to capture the dilemma that he underwent while choosing politics over personal responsibilities as he felt that his attempt to serve his people also prevented him from fulfilling his “obligations as a son, a brother, a father, and a husband” (610).

In his autobiography Mandela writes about the South African general election of 1948, which was a turning point in the country's history. The election brought the National Party led by Dr Daniel Malan to power on a platform of apartheid. Apartheid was a system of institutionalized racism that denied the non-white South Africans basic human rights including the right to vote. As Mandela writes:

Malan's platform was known as apartheid. *Apartheid* was a new term but an old idea. It literally means 'apartness', and it represents codification in one oppressive system of all the laws and regulations that had kept Africans in an inferior position to whites for centuries (104).

The implementation of the oppressive system of apartheid received strong resistance and protests from the ANC in which Mandela actively participated. It also in a way pinpointed the discourse for Mandela against which he would fight for the rest of his life.

The 1950s was an important decade of Mandela's life for many reasons. Mandela writes about his marriage to Evelyn Muse, his first wife and the birth of his first child, Thembi which took place in that period. During the same decade, in 1947 he was elected to the Executive Committee of Transvaal ANC to serve under C.S, Ramohano, who was the President of the Transvaal region. As a member of the executive committee Mandela's personal life became embroiled in politics. Mandela started to see himself as a part of the ANC to the extent that it gave him a new identity. As he says

From the time I was elected to the executive committee of the Transvaal region, I came to identify myself with the congress as a whole, with its hopes and despairs, its success and failures, I was now bound by heart and soul. (102)

Mandela's autobiography narrates how this wholehearted involvement in politics strained his relationship with his first wife, Evelyn. As a political leader he rarely managed to spend time with his family. On 26 June, 1950 the ANC staged a National Day of Protest

against the government's murder of 18 Africans on 1 May and the passage of the Suppression of Communism Act. It was for the first time Mandela played a significant role in a national campaign. The day was significant for both Mandela's personal and political life. It was in the midst of the Day of Protest when his second son Makgatho Lewanka was born. As Mandela narrates in his autobiography, he barely managed to visit his wife in the hospital as his duties on that day gave him little respite from his activities.

Mandela in his autobiography narrates how his political success came at the cost of his personal sacrifices. After becoming a member of the National Executive Committee, he realized that a man involved in the freedom struggle was a man without a home life. Mandela's involvement with greater issues forced him to neglect his family and other personal duties which was painful for him. As he says "I did not relish being deprived of the company of my children. I missed them a great deal during those days, long before I had any inkling that I would spend decades apart from them"(112). Although Mandela was not neglectful towards the responsibilities of a father and a husband but his determination to sacrifice his life for the greater cause compelled him to put his family life in a secondary position. In his autobiography he writes about the dilemma that he had to face when his wife gave him the ultimatum to choose between ANC and herself. As he writes – "In 1955, she gave me an ultimatum: I had to choose between her and the ANC" (102). Mandela realized the irreconcilable difference between his life as a revolutionary and that of Evelyn as an ordinary woman who wanted her husband to stay by her side taking care of his family. The breakup with his Evelyn was a traumatic event of Mandela's life. It had emotionally wounded his entire family including his children. However, for a revolutionary like Mandela, it was only one among several traumatic episodes that he had to go through while struggling for the independence of his nation.

In the course of his political struggle, Mandela repeatedly contemplated his ideological position as a leader. His educational life and his association with the ANC propelled him to get rid of the shackles of tribalism and imagine of a national unity that transgresses tribalism and other ideological differences. However, he was also conscious of the perils that extreme nationalism entail. Mandela was aware of the chauvinism and racial exclusivity that their idea of nationalism could engender and he was determined to eliminate such possibilities alongside his war against racism. As he writes:

Our problems while distinctive and special, were not unique, and a philosophy that placed those problems in an international historical context of the greater world and of course of history was valuable. I was prepared to use whatever means necessary to speed up the erasure of human prejudice and the end of chauvinistic and violent nationalism (113).

Mandela's stance on nationalism here echoes Frantz Fanon. Fanon believed that nationalism cannot thrive on bourgeoisie ideals of nationhood where there is no real action or attempt to address the needs of all the people of a nation. Fanon argued that if nationalism "is not made explicit, if it is not enriched and deepened by a very rapid transformation into a consciousness of social and political needs, in other words, humanism, it leads up a blind alley" (*Wretched of the Earth* 204). Mandela's concept of nationalism was one of unity, in which political parties, irrespective of their ideological differences would work for the common good. In his autobiography Mandela narrates how his cynicism towards the communists was diminishing as he started believing that unity is more important than the assertion of ideological differences. However, Mandela's political journey was also shaped by his own ideological shifts which were a result of his constant search for a better strategy to counter every oppression and exploitation unleashed by the racist government of South Africa. Following his arrest in 1952 in Johannesburg in the charge of violating the Suppression of Communism Act, Mandela had to undergo a long series of judicial procedures

and oppressive measures which finally compelled him to go underground and form “Umkhonto Wesizwe”, also known as MK, the armed wing of the African National Congress. In his autobiography he writes about the rigorous discussions that were held among the ANC leaders regarding the formation of the armed wing. Despite of receiving strong disagreements from many leaders, he stressed on the necessity of an armed struggle. As he writes:

I countered by saying that in fact non-violence had failed us, for it had done nothing to stem the violence of the state or change the heart of our oppressors (259).

The decision to become an armed revolutionary was an important turning point in Mandela’s life. His decision to opt for violence made him more susceptible to governments’ oppression. Although anti-colonial struggles often involve violence, as Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* argues that decolonization is always a violent phenomenon, Mandela’s case was also an example of how colonialism left an ordinary man no option except falling back on violence to fight for the rights of his people.

Mandela’s decision to use violent strategy to fight against the apartheid put his life in greater danger. In his autobiography he writes about the situations that led to his arrest and imprisonment in 1962, and following the Rivonia Trial, his life imprisonment for conspiring to overthrow the state. Imprisonment is a painful physical as well as psychological experience that involves repression and social seclusion for the prisoners. Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* argues that the modern prison is a disciplinary institution that aims at “making the bodies more useful for mass production and at the same time easier to control” (Taylor, *Foucault* 101) However, for Mandela although his imprisonment was a painful experience at the personal level, he transformed it into a different way of raising his voice against the apartheid rule. Even during his trials and the legal measures taken against him including imprisonment, Mandela took less cognizance of his personal afflictions and sought ways to continue his struggle for freedom amidst difficult conditions. In his autobiography Mandela

writes about his trial following his arrest on 5 August 1962 where he conducted his own defence and questioned the legitimacy of a white court to try him:

I realized the role I could play in court and the possibilities before me as a defendant. I was the symbol of justice in the court of the oppressor, the representative of the great ideals of freedom, fairness and democracy in a society that dishonoured those virtues....By representing myself I would enhance the symbolism of my role. I would use my trial as a showcase for ANC's opposition to racism (299).

Mandela's autobiography documents the long series of trials that Mandela underwent in his life and how he used that experience to address the issues of his people and raise concern regarding them. Mandela's trial was also an issue that contributed to the consolidation the unity of South African people to fight against the Apartheid. Mandela writes in his autobiography that for his support during the trial, the ANC had set up a "Free Mandela Committee and launched a lively campaign with the slogan 'Free Mandela'. Protests were held throughout the country and the slogan began to appear scrawled on the sides of buildings" (306).

Mandela's trials and subsequent imprisonment resulted in the formation of strong nationalist ethos among the South Africans and it reenergized the freedom movement of South Africa, though all these came at the cost of Mandela's personal suffering. However Mandela was adamant on the achievement of independence and was prepared to have it by any cost. His autobiography records his famous speech 'I am prepared to die' that he delivered in the Rivonia Trial which led to his life imprisonment:

I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die (352).

As Mandela points out, his life was a life dedicated to a greater cause and therefore measures taken against him by the state could not demotivate him from his path. His imprisonment marked not a halt, but a shift in his revolutionary activities. Mandela writes in his autobiography about the struggle that went on even when along with many of his comrades his was sent to the Robben Island. Mandela was aware of the fact that imprisonment might destroy their revolution by dismantling their willpower. During his imprisonment he opted for different strategies that would refrain them from giving up and keep their struggle alive. As he writes:

I was now on the sidelines, but I also knew that I would not give up the fight. I was in a different and smaller arena, an arena for whom the only audience was ourselves and our oppressors. We regarded the struggle in prison as a microcosm of the struggle as a whole. We would fight inside as we fought outside (374).

The imprisonment for Mandela was in a sense an experience that further strengthened his determination to fight for his cause although it inflicted immense damage to his personal life. The long period of imprisonment in the Robben Island allowed Mandela and his comrades to contemplate their political decisions and future prospects of their struggle. For Mandela however it was also period that kept reminding him of his helpless situation as a husband and a father who fails to take care of his family. He was hurt by the news that he received of his wife being tortured by police. As he writes:

Her office was searched by the police shortly before she was sacked. The authorities were convinced that she was in secret communication with me...The banning and harassment of my wife greatly troubled me: I could not look after her and the children, and the state was making it difficult for her to look after herself. My powerlessness gnawed at me (386).

More than imprisonment itself, Mandela's life in the Robben Island was tormenting for him because of the news that he kept receiving about the pathetic plight of his family. He writes in his autobiography about the tragedy that he had to undergo during that period when he received the news of his son, Thembi's death in a car accident. As Mandela writes: "It left a hole in my heart that can never be filled" (429). Mandela's autobiography becomes a record of his personal dilemma, helplessness, pain and at the same time the indomitable willpower with which he was determined to make headway.

Along with the personal tragedies that targeted him, Mandela's position as an influential leader of the struggle also made him a clear target of the state. Mandela writes how the government tried to use him to suppress the political unrest in South Africa. In 1985, the president P.W Botha, made an offer to Mandela to renounce violence in exchange for his freedom which Mandela rejected right at the onset because of his commitment to his people. His autobiography records the announcement that he made through his daughter Zindzi to his people reaffirming his stance:

I cherish my freedom dearly, but I care even more for your freedom. Too many have died since I went to prison. Too many have suffered for the love of freedom...I am not less life loving than you are. But I cannot sell my birthright, nor am I prepared to sell the birthright of the people to be free (506).

As Mandela points out, he dismissed the attempts of the government to isolate him from his organization. However following his transfer to the Pollsmoor prison, he was also sorting out ways to negotiate with the government and attain their goal through talks concurrently with the protests and violence going on in the country for independence. He writes in his autobiography about the talks that were held between him and the government which resulted in the attainment of independence for South Africa. The first major achievement of Mandela's talks with the president F.W.de Klerk was the partial removal of the apartheid in

1990 and unbanning of the ANC. These two important moves marked the end of a long period of oppression for the non-white South Africans and also the end of a long imprisonment for Mandela and his fellow political prisoners. It was also a sign of the success of his talks with the president as in the talks he stressed on the complete abolishment of the apartheid.

Mandela's autobiography records his experience of casting his vote for the first time in 1994. The elections of 1994 were in a sense a carrier of hopes and dreams for all those South Africans including Mandela who offered huge sacrifices for their struggle against the apartheid. The election resulted in the victory of the ANC and Mandela's placement as South Africa's first black president. In the final chapter he reinforces his historical consciousness by placing himself in the line of all those African patriots who had gone before him. As he writes:

I was simply the sum of all those African patriots who have gone before me. This long and noble line ended and now began again with me. I was not able to thank them and that they were not able to see what their sacrifices have sought (608).

As Mandela points out, he looked at himself as a part of the larger struggle. He thought of his struggle as a continuation of the larger struggles that African patriots of his earlier generations had fought. His autobiography also brings to light his historical consciousness which made such conceptualization possible for him. Moreover, as Bottomore puts it: "It was Marx's view that history itself had no meaning beyond that which men in their varying stages of development assigned to it" (*Marxist Thought* 239). For Mandela his political struggle was in a sense his personal contribution made in order to ascribe to their history a new meaning.

Conclusion

Mandela's autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom* is in a sense a history of the South African political struggle as seen, lived and experienced by one of its major leaders and written from a personal point of view. Mandela's autobiography records the real life of a revolutionary whose success comes at the cost of his personal sacrifices. It is also a story of how an ordinary man was turned into a revolutionary who had undergone immense difficulties because of the systems of racism and colonialism. The autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom* thus becomes a record of both the personal life and the political struggle in which the autobiographer was involved. Mandela shows in his autobiography that the balance between personal duties and duties to the nation for a revolutionary is something almost impossible to achieve. It records the entire struggle that he had fought and how that struggle shaped his personal life as well as the historical life of his country. Mandela's life was a journey shaped by both important personal decisions that he took with his personal intuitiveness and rationality and political events that took place outside the realm of the personal. Mandela's narrative shows that even in an autobiography the personal cannot be detached from the political and the writer inevitably interlaces the two in autobiography. It was Mandela's selfless contribution to the political struggle that gave him a new identity as one of the greatest political leaders in the world. His autobiography therefore, is also a record of the expansion of his identity, going beyond the limitedness of an ordinary life to embrace a wider, almost universal identity as a political leader.

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