

HISTORY, MEMORY AND IDENTITY IN NELSON MANDELA'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY: LONG WALK TO FREEDOM (1918-1962

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In his autobiography which he had started to write in 1974 when jailed in Robben Island, Nelson Mandela accounts for the root causes of his commitment to free his people who were smarting under the cruel system of apartheid. In the narrative he unfolds, history, memory, and identity are constantly intertwined. Before analysing their relationship in his writing, it seems worth recalling the great variety of definitions some critics have provided of these concepts, including the term of “autobiography.”

As a literary work, the autobiography has been at the heart of debates between scholars mainly because of its ill-defined contours. Scholar Candace Lang raises the issue when she remarks: “if the writer is always, in the broadest sense, implicated in the work, any writing may be judged to be autobiographical, depending on how one reads it” (qtd. in Anderson 1). To avoid confusion with other types of writing, Philippe Lejeune supplied a more precise definition. For him, an autobiography is a “retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality” (qtd. in Anderson 2). In other words, to differentiate the autobiography from other genres like biography and fiction, the author of an autobiography must be at the same time the narrator who relates the story of his own life, especially the experiences that fashioned his personality.

Other analysts highlighted other salient features of the autobiography to distinguish it from other forms of writing. Lejeune contends that it must be “truth-telling” to distinguish it from fiction whereas Candace Lang emphasizes its critical aspect (Anderson 5). Laura Marcus argues that its author should say “something of historical importance” (qtd. in Anderson 8). In her view, an autobiography occupies the apex of a typology including the memoir, journal or diary

(Anderson 8).

Among these categories of "life-writing," memoirs have been at the centre of controversial analyses, too. Georg Misch believes that unlike autobiographies, where the authors are fully involved in the story they recount, memoirs "tend to avoid psychological depth and concentrate instead on external events of which their writers are merely observers" (Anderson 113).

To reconstruct the story of his personal trajectory and the events that shaped it, the author of an autobiography relies on memory without which human beings would be reduced to the present only. For Andrew Lass, memory is a concept which is often used broadly as a "catchall term for a wide variety of phenomena" (qtd. in Cubitt 5). Confusion may arise from the close connection between memory and history. For the philosopher George Santayana, "history is nothing but assisted and recorded memory" (qtd. in Cubitt 31) whereas Peter Burke considers "history as social memory" and Patrick Hutton sees "history as an art of memory" (qtd. in Cubitt 31).

On the other hand, other scholars insist on the necessity of distinguishing the two concepts. David Lowenthal asserts that: "History differs from memory not only in how knowledge of the past is acquired and validated but also in how it is transmitted, preserved and altered" (qtd. in Cubitt 31). For Michael Bentley as well, the two terms are largely antagonistic because they operate differently: "History is precisely non-memory, a systematic discipline which seeks to rely on mechanisms and controls quite different from those which memory triggers" (qtd. in Cubitt 31). According to the philosopher R.G. Collingwood, historical knowledge draws its strength from evidence while memory derives knowledge from "the personal consciousness of the rememberer who alone could experience its authority" (Cubitt 33). He therefore implicitly lays stress on the subjectivity and unreliability of memory, by contrast with history which he regards as more objective and scientific.

Memories are revived as a result of a conscious, deliberate attempt at remembering or they come to mind unexpectedly "in response to some accidental stimulus." (Cubitt 76). They are not captured as they occurred in the past but undergo a process of "reconstruction" or adaptation to the present needs. Frederic Bartlett, one of the leading scholars of the "reconstructionist" approach, advocates that: "Remembering is not the re-excitation of innumerable fixed, lifeless, and fragmentary traces. It is an imaginative reconstruction or construction" (qtd. in Cubitt 79). In the eyes of Wilhem Dilthey, memory plays a central role in autobiographical writing "not

by indiscriminately preserving the traces of past experience, but by ordering them selectively and interpretatively in ways which articulate an unfolding sense of life's direction" (Cubitt 34).

The way memory and history apprehend time have also divided critics. Some have seen a rupture between past and present in history whereas memory implies a continuum between them: "For history, distance between present and past has to be bridged; for memory, the two are always connected" (Gardner 89). Other scholars consider memory and chronological order, which is essential in history, as antithetical. Thus, according to Mona Ozouf, memory is "largely indifferent to a linear unrolling, the calendar is not its religion" (qtd. in Gardner 104).

Other critics view history as the province of a ruling elite which excludes and oppresses the marginalized and memory as the latter's voices (Cubitt 36). However, for the historian Gerder Lerner, the two terms tend to overlap. She considers history as a tool to air the grievances of subalterns—"women especially but also...slaves, proletarians and colonized peoples"—(Cubitt 57) and not just as a heuristic device designed to record the conditions and experiences of the ruling elites only (57).

The issue whether memory is individual or collective has also been raised. Some think that individual memory as such is a pure fiction as it is always impregnated by social life. Michael Schudson asserts that "in an important sense, there is no such thing as individual memory at all" and he adds that "it is distributed across social institutions and cultural artifacts" (qtd. in Cubitt 11). From Patrick Hutton's viewpoint, too, the personal act of remembering is, in fact, influenced by the events that impact on a community's memory: "We do not retrieve images of the past as they were originally perceived but rather as they fit into our present conceptions, which are shaped by the social forces that act upon us" (qtd. in Gardner 103). For David Kaplan, too, individuals are part and parcel of a community, and as a result, their memories are pervaded by "otherness." As he puts it: "otherness is not external to selfhood but internal to and constitutive of it" (qtd. in Gardner 110) and he further specifies: "We are always connected in a continuity of generations, linking us to the past and the future. So long as our identities are constituted by stories, our lives are intertwined with the stories of others; I am a part of the story of my parents, my sister, my friends, my enemies" (qtd. in Gardner 110). For the sociologist Gary Alan Fine, the process of remembering is nurtured by "ideoculture" defined as "a corpus of group-specific folklore (stories, myths, anecdotes, etc.) that groups develop through the interactions of their members, and that those members refer to in

organizing their collective activities” (Cubitt 137).

For some scholars, memories are always attached to places which act as powerful bulwarks against oblivion. As Paul Ricoeur points out:

‘Things’ remembered are intrinsically associated with places...It is not by chance that we say of what has occurred that it took place. It is indeed at this primordial level that the phenomenon of ‘memory place’ is constituted... offering... a support for failing memory, a struggle in the war against forgetting... (qtd. in Gardner 111).

C.E. Reagan puts forward the same idea when he writes: “Every memory refers to a particular point in space (e.g. the house I used to live in) and collective memory is always attached to a traditional or sacred place” (qtd. in Gardner 111-112).

The relationship between memory and identity has also been the field of deep investigations. Commenting on the conception of memory, Allan Megill, an authority in social science, explains that “crucially, the Holbwachsian model held that memory is determined by an identity (collective or individual) *that is already established... fundamentally identity precedes memory*” (qtd. in Gardner 102). Although there is a common agreement on the role of both memory and history in the preservation of identity, some dissident voices have stressed that they operate at different levels. For instance, Richard Hofstadter has argued that “memory is the thread of personal identity, history of public identity” (Cubitt 41). Now let’s see how these concepts function in Mandela’s work.

History, Memory, and Identity in Mandela’s Autobiography

In his *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela tries to explain his personal itinerary as a freedom fighter against the racist system of apartheid based on an absurd skin colour classification. A lawyer by profession, he voiced the grievances of subalterns and thus became an iconic figure not only in the history of his country but in the world at large. Like all non-Whites, he smarted under the oppression of the white regime and therefore “self” and “others” can hardly be distinguished. He starts his autobiography by his childhood recollections not so much out of respect for chronology but because some events which occurred during that particular period constituted a very important landmark in his later struggle against apartheid. From the opening pages of his book, the intimate relationship between individual and collective memory is present in the narrative of his father’s and by extension all the traditional rulers’ degradation by the white government. Once an influential Thembu chief and king maker, his father was

reduced to a mere figurehead overnight. Mandela cannot help being overwhelmed by a deep feeling of injustice: "Although the role of chief was a venerable and esteemed one, it had... become debased by the control of an unsympathetic white government" (4).

The whites' interference sparked off the rebellion of his father because he saw the colonizer as an intruder, or to use Albert Memmi's terminology as a usurper: "My father's response," Mandela writes, "bespoke his belief that the magistrate had no legitimate power over him. When it came to tribal matters, he was guided not by the laws of the king of England, but by Thembu custom" (9). Mandela was deeply grieved by his father's loss of status as a result of his insubordination to the white man: "I was unaware of these events at the time, but I was not unaffected. My father, who was a wealthy noble man by the standards of his time, lost both his fortune and his title" (9).

The tight link between "self" and "others" can also be perceived in the evocation of the Whites' disruption of the larger black community to which Mandela belonged. Indeed, they imposed not only their power but also their own religious beliefs, education and lifestyle, and the few Blacks who had access to them turned their back to their African heritage and thus lost their identity. Although Mandela is himself one of the few converts, he nevertheless blames the missionaries' ethnocentrism and his countrymen's internalization of the Whites' proclaimed cultural superiority and implicitly their acceptance of the colonial situation: "They confirmed the missionaries' axiom that to be Christian was to be civilized and to be civilized was to be Christian" (17).

Indeed, nineteenth century Evangelists were instrumental in the occupation of alien territories in the name of their cultural superiority. To mention one example, the Reverend William Shaw suggested in 1820 that the settlers in the Cape Colony were to "be placed like Ebenezer in occupied territory to keep the Philistine 'Caffres' out of the land of God's favoured people" (Stuart 66). To add insult to injury, the "heathens" whose lands had been grabbed by the newcomers were expected to be grateful for this act of Christian "Charity and Benevolence" (68).

In western rhetoric, Africans were caricatured as immature children who needed colonization, a thesis which was later developed by colonial apologists like the French philosopher and ethnologist Octave Mannoni (1899-1989) but strongly challenged by Frantz Fanon (85) and other anti-colonialists. For John Philip, the Superintendent of the London Missionary Society, the autochthonous populations presented "all the weaknesses and prejudices of children associated

with the vices of Manhood” (Stuart 79). The victims of many forms of confiscation became criminals that the Gospel would redeem by “laying the axe” to the root of “pagan customs and criminal indulgences” (72). The early missionaries, or at least some of them, distorted the Christian message of love, brotherhood, and tolerance of mankind’s cultural differences and the African converts were not long to discover disappointedly the gulf between the Christian ideals and the grim reality of racial segregation, even in the Church, which triggered massive desertions (Campbell 224).

Racism was at the core of the Dutch Reformed Church in which Dr. Malan served as a minister before leading the Nationalist Party (NP). The principle of *baaskap* or white supremacy underpinned the policy of apartheid applied by the NP. To quote Mandela, they believed that “Afrikaners were God’s chosen people and that Blacks were a subservient species” (159) and thus inevitably created what Amin Maalouf called “*des identités meurtrières*.”

In his autobiography, Mandela wards off the colonizer’s attempt to legitimize his rule by retrieving and idealizing his traditional culture. For example, he brings to the fore what he perceives as the embryonic democratic institutions of pre-colonial Africa. He observes that

The regent was surrounded by his amaphakathi, a group of councillors of high rank who functioned as the regent’s parliament and judiciary. They were wise men who retained the knowledge of tribal history and custom in their heads and whose opinions carried great weight. (29)

In African societies, griots played a significant role in the preservation of collective memory. The tales transmitted orally during his childhood about military heroes like Moshoeshe,¹ king of the Basotho, Dingane,² king of the Zulus, and others, strengthened his African identity and his commitment to change the prevailing situation. Indeed, as time went by, the Black South Africans had new reasons to stand up against the brutal regime of Apartheid. In several passages, Mandela revisited their conditions to denounce his race’s marginalization and frustrations: the miners were subject to an inhumane exploitation by the white-owned companies (145); full-fledged teachers

¹ Moshoeshe (1786-1870), also spelled Mshweshwe, or Moshesh, whose real name was Lepoqo was regarded as the founder of the Sotho nation, called Basutoland by the British. A shrewd diplomat, he managed to rally not only his people but also the British in 1843, but this alliance was short-lived because they took over most of his lands. The war he waged against the British ended by the latter’s defeat. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, UK, 2001, CD-ROM Edition.

² Dingane also spelled Dingaan, the Zulu king of Natal since 1828 was beaten by the Boers at the Battle of Blood River (16 Dec. 1838). *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, UK, 2001, CD-ROM Edition.

were “expected to scrape before a white man” with less qualifications (49-50); the law firms employees “were given the crumbs from the table and had no option but to accept them” (100); the inhabitants of the townships were daily at grips with filth, the lack of amenities, blatant poverty, and the criminal activities of gangsters or *totsis* (108) and when they rebelled, they were shot dead or jailed as it occurred in Sharpeville (344-345); men and women were constantly harassed by the threat of pass laws and made history by staging demonstrations against them. Mandela clearly perceived himself as a descendant of a great lineage who would, in his turn, carry the torch of anti-colonial struggle. Cubitt is thus right to argue that “events and personalities do not establish themselves in social memory as isolated containers of symbolic meaning: much of their significance comes from the ways in which they get connected to other events” (214).

Through Chief Joy’s stories, Mandela learned how the whites with their superior weaponry had deprived them of their land, reducing them to poverty and subservience: “Chief Joy’s war stories and his indictment of the British made me feel angry and cheated, as though I had already been robbed of my birthright,” he complains (33). He also realized that the whites manipulated history to justify their domination: “I did not yet know that the real history of our country was not to be found in standard British textbooks, which claimed South Africa began with the founding of Jan Van Riebeeck at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652” (34).³ Chief Meligqili’s sad remarks made him further understand that his people had become social, economic and political pariahs under white rule: “...We Xhosas, and all black South Africans, are a conquered people. We are slaves in our own country. We are tenants in our own soil. We have no strength, no power, no control over our own destiny in the land of our birth” (42). Mandela cannot conceal the mounting resentment he harboured against white oppression: “His words,” he adds, “soon began to work on me. He had sown a seed, and though I let that seed dormant for a long season, it eventually began to grow” (43). His decision to stand against it was reinforced by the griot Krune Mqhayi’s open call for rebellion against occupation and oppression:

What I am talking you about is the brutal clash between what is indig-
enous and good and what is foreign and bad. We cannot allow these
foreigners who do not care for our culture to take over our nation.
I predict that, one day, the forces of African society will achieve a

³ Jan van Riebeeck’s arrival in South Africa in 1652 marked a turning point in South Africa’s history. A member of the Dutch East India Company, Jan Van Riebeeck (1619-1677) landed at the Cape of Good Hope on April 6, 1652, but his presence set off the Hottentots’ opposition and war against him (1650-60). *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, UK, 2001, CD-ROM Edition.

momentous victory over the interloper. For too long, we have succumbed to the false gods of the white man. But we shall emerge and cast off these foreign notions (59).

In his autobiography, Mandela refers to symbolic sites which the French historian Pierre Nora calls *lieux de mémoire* (memory loci), especially the ones he saw as catalysts or weapons which would spur his quest for a free and just society. While operating underground, he crossed Natal which reminded him of Cetywayo, the great Zulu king who had defeated British troops at Isandhlawana in 1879. The sight of Majuba Hills called back to his memory the Afrikaners' fight for freedom against British colonialism, a freedom they nonetheless refused to grant to the Blacks, Mandela sadly noted (254-255). His visit to Alexandria Museum again brought back memories of the Egyptians' great cultural past which destroyed definitively in his mind the Whites' stereotypes about his race's backwardness and stirred his pride to be an African:

It is important for African nationalists to be armed with evidence to refute the fictitious claims of Whites that Africans are without a civilized past that compares with the West. In a single morning, I discovered that Egyptians were creating great works of art and architecture when whites were still living in caves (432-433).

Commemorations such as the National Day of Protest (26 June 1950) were also designed to enable the future generations to remember the most outstanding features of their history (168).

Traditions and the common experience of racial discrimination further conveyed this sense of collective identity. After dancing the *indlamu*, a traditional Zulu war dance with other detainees, he asserted that they "felt the hand of the great past that made us what we were and the power of the great cause that linked us all together" (288). In the same vein, the traditional *kaross* he was wearing when he appeared before the Court on October 15th, 1962 may be interpreted not only as the symbol of his people's cultural legacy but also as an assertion of their right to respect and dignity in a society which disdained them. As he explained:

I had chosen traditional dress to emphasize the symbolism that I was a black African walking into a white man's court. I was literally carrying on my back the history, culture and heritage of my people. That day I felt myself to be the embodiment of African nationalism... (469).

Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* is the story of a man's personal experience of apartheid with its inherent racism, exclusion, and alienation. It is at the same time the story of the non-Whites who smarted under the same Afrikaner overlords and who resolved to recover the basic rights of dignity and freedom that they were denied although

as several intellectuals like Emmanuel Levinas pointed out “the self is only possible through the recognition of the other” (qtd. in Kapuscinski 5). Because of their common history, the South Africans’ individual and collective memories were even more closely intertwined, whatever their racial identity.

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