Metaphor of Self : Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*

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An Autobiography reflects the historical and cultural milieu of the writer's times. However, when the author happens to be Nelson Mandela, the autobiography takes on more significance because it becomes an indispensible historical document of South Africa's long struggle with apartheid. The character which is represented here is "iconic" as well as "indexical" and is a metonymic representation of the national character. Nelson Mandela's inspiring life, contained in his *Long Walk to Freedom*, bears testimony to his epic struggle to free his countrymen from the shackles of dehumanization, humiliation and disillusionment at the hands of white supremacy. But, most important, it also embodies the evolution and spiritual progress of a man, who had been mythologized as an anarchist and a revolutionary, into one of reconciliation and compromise and who used his experiences in prison to learn the " true secrets of leadership" (Sampson). The book contains the essential ingredients of autobiographical writing but what makes it different from other books of its kind is that it combines nation and narration.

Mandela started writing his autobiography in secret when he was in prison on Robben Island in 1974 at the prompting of Walter Sisulu and Ahmed Kathrada, The book takes us from his birth upto the Rivonia Trial. He writes: "Those nights, as I wrote in silence, I could once again experience the sights sounds of my youth in Qunu and Mqhekezweni; the excitement and fear of coming to Johannesburg; the tempests of the Youth League; the endless delays in the Treason Trial; the drama of Rivonia. It was like a waking dream and I attempted to transfer it to paper as simply and truthfully as I could"(464). Since his release, it has been added to with the collaboration of Richard Stengel and others assisted by Fatima Meer, Peter Magubane, Nadine Gordimer and Ezekiel Mphahlele. Depending mostly on recollection of past events and episodes, the work was written because "in prison, one has time to review the past" (483). A copy was smuggled off the island by Mac Maharaj in 1976 and given to Oliver Tambo in Lusaka…….Although it was not published while I was in prison, it forms the basis of this memoir" (467). On his release, twenty six years later at the age of seventy one, he resumed his writing and in the year 1994, the year he was elected President of South Africa, *Long Walk to Freedom* was published.

In order to understand Mandela's life story, it is necessary to know and understand the political, social and cultural life in South Africa during his lifetime. Mandela's story is quintessentially the story of South Africa's quest for freedom, identity and modernity. In colonial discourse Africa used to symbolize darkness and backwardness. It is to Mandela's credit that it now stands proud in its claim to selfhood, history and modern identity.

Divided into eleven sections, each dealing with a particular phase in his life, it starts with a first-hand picture of his birth into a high-ranking family of the Xhosa speaking Thembu chieftaincy in the Transkei and childhood spent from 1930 at the home of the Thembu regent, a Thembu "tribalist" imbued with the values of Britain. The young Mandela thus grew up believing that "the educated Englishman was our

model; what we aspired to be were "black Englishmen, as we were sometimes derisively called" (36). However, it was from these traditionalists that he learned the stories of conquest and resistance of his country and countrymen. Among his most formative influences was the observing of the enactment of democracy and fellowship through discussions leading to a consensus in the course of the tribal meetings This, according to Mandela, played a major role in his later style of leadership.

He was expelled from his school Fort Hare and trouble at home made the young Mandela run away to Johannesburg in the turbulent 1940s. Martin Legassick correctly observes: "Clearly the Johannesburg of the 1940s…….was the crucible for his politicization" (447). He met Walter Sisulu, who was to become his lifelong friend and who introduced him to the African National Congress and the freedom struggle. It was through Sisulu too that he met Antone Lembede who showed Mandela a model for African nationalism. With him and others, Mandela launched the Youth League in 1944. This was Mandela's formal entry into politics. It was at this point that he earned the reputation of being "hot-tempered" and a "rabble-rousing speaker"(146). Under the influence of Lambede, he graduated from being a supporter of "paternalistic British colonialism" to "militant African nationalism" (91). Up to this point he was, as he himself admits, strongly anti-communist, but towards the1950s he mellowed towards non-racialism and communism and was willing to hold out a hand to other groups in reconciliation, thus emerging as a stronger nationalist.

The Defence Campaign of 1952 was a boost to Mandela's public profile because crowds across the country marched non-violently against apartheid legislation. Its success gave Mandela a new confidence as a 'freedom fighter:' "the white man had felt the power of my punches and I could walk upright like a man," he says. The government responded to the Defence Campaign with drastic measures in the form of raids, arrests and penalties. In July 1952, he was arrested. This was the beginning of ten years of repeated arrests. Mandela's policy of non-violence and passive resistance, it is well-known, was a manifestation of his influence of Gandhi, the apostle of non-violence. Both leaders achieved independence for their countries through non-violent means, but Gandhi's approach was more rigid uncompromising in a way that Mandela's was not. In Mandela's career across five decades from 1950 to 2000 we see Mandela turning away from his early Gandhi phase towards a support for armed resistance. However, the two leaders were unanimous in sharing the vision of a common humanity transcending racial, cultural and other differences. In his book on Mahatma Gandhi, Mandela says: "Though separated in time, there remains a bond between us, in our shared prison experiences, our defiance of unjust laws and in fact the violence that threatens our aspirations for peace and reconcillation."

In 1955, a Freedom Charter was drafted which was liberal and humanistic and which would shape the future of South Africa, getting rid of racialized politics for good. In December, 1956, the government arrested key participants in the Defiance Campaign and charged them with high treason. Although the Treason Trial which followed crippled the livelihood of many, it also created a sense of solidarity among Africans of fighting for a common cause. The Pan-Africanist Congress was formed in 1959 on an exclusively Black nationalist platform. By now Mandela's hectic political activity had started having disastrous consequences on his marriage to Evelyn which

ended in divorce in 1958. Mandela now transferred his attention to the fascinating Winnie Madikizela, Johannesburg's first black social worker.

The next decade saw many African nations winning their political independence. Against this background, the PAC and the ANC launched protests leading to police firing and the death of many people. As a result, there was declared a national state of emergency. Mandela was called to give evidence at the Treason Trial and in court he talked about his ideological alliances to African nationalism, Congress multiracialism and communism. His ban having expired by now, Mandela appeared at the National Convention and gave a fiery speech ending with the cry Amandla ngawethu! (Power is Ours!). Until his arrest in 1962, Mandela, dubbed as the Black Pimpernel, lived in hiding and was on the run, running about in various disguises: night watchman, student, petrol attendant.

In 1961 the Treason Trial collapsed with full acquittal for all the judges establishing that the ANC had planned to overthrow the State by violence. Mandela worked hard to form Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK, 'Spear of the Nation' – the coinage is Mandela's) as a powerful instrument "that would take the struggle to the heart of white power." On December 16, 1961, the Spear of the Nation, headed by Mandela, launched its first sabotage campaign with bomb explosions at government buildings in three major cities. On 10 January 1962, Mandela secretly left South Africa to attend the Pan-African Freedom Movement for East and Central Africa (PAFMECA) Conference in Addis Ababa as the ANC delegate. His key purpose was to make contact with other African governments and nationalist groups. He also visited London where he talked to Labour and Liberal MPs and paid his respect to Western democracy by visiting Parliament Square. He returned to South Africa in July 1962 where he was soon arrested. In the trial, he conducted his own defence: "I was the symbol of justice in the courtroom of the oppressor"(304). He was sentenced to five years in prison, but shortly after, he was summoned to court again for the Rivonia Trial (1964) on a charge of sabotage. Mandela, along with his co-defendants, was sent to prison for life. The autobiographical narrative now concentrates on his incarcerated life on Robben Island and his trajectory leading him through the final decades of apartheid.

Undoubtedly, the story of his time on Robben Island is the most important section in the book as also the most crucial in the life of Mandela. "Between the early 1960s and 1990 power relations in South Africa were transformed. So too, in a different way, was Mandela on the island. Those experiences were etched on the face we saw emerging from Victor Verster prison in February 1990 – in comparison with the well-known photos of the face of the pre-prison Mandela. His book hints at what took place," insightfully observes Martin Legassick. It is true that the rigors of prison life lifted him to a higher plane of the universal human condition while preparing him at the same time to take on his duties as the leader of South Africa on his release.

In his narrative, Mandela talks about the harsh conditions on this "most iron-fisted post in the African penal system," (372) where there were "no black warders and no white prisoners"(372) and "where we had to create our own lives in prison"(376). "The challenge for every prisoner," he writes, "particularly every political prisoner, is how to survive prison, how to emerge from prison undiminished, how to

conserve and even replenish one's beliefs……Prison is designed to break one's spirit and destroy one's resolve. To do this the authorities attempt to exploit every weakness, demolish every initiative, negate all signs of individuality – all with the idea of stamping out that spark that makes each of us human and each of us who we are"(375-76), writes Mandela. He admits that "There were many dark moments when my faith in humanity was sorely tested, but I would not and could not give myself up in despair" (377). The excruciating trials and tribulations, both mental and physical, which he faced on Robben Island, however, refused to subdue the indomitable spirit of the man. His humor and optimism kept him going as when he describes prison food as "a balanced diet," balanced between, "the unpalatable and the inedible"(379). The tone is neither bitter nor negative.

It was a difficult task that lay before him : "a new and different fight had begun" (372) where Mandela had to prove himself again. Here the fight was over basic issues like food, clothes and working conditions and hence more arduous and exacting. Yet, it was through the experiences during his incarceration that the noblest and most excellent qualities of Mandela surfaced. He earned the respect and love of all round him including his gaolers as a model of good behavior and moral authority. His son's death and his split with Winnie was dealt with a quiet maturity, he himself taking some of the blame: "when your life is a struggle……. there is little room left for family" (592).

Nadine Gordimer, novelist, political activist and a great admirer of Mandela, observes that it was on the island that Mandela learnt to "live for others" and this, combined with his generosity of spirit which allowed him to forgive his worst enemies, saw a transformed Mandela - a visible contrast to the fiery nationalist of the Youth League and Black Pimpernel of the underground. Life in prison had undoubtedly consolidated this transition. Kobie Coetzee, NP Minister of Justice, visiting him in hospital in late 1985 said, "He came across as a man of Old World values. I have studied Latin and Roman culture, and I remember thinking that this is a man to whom I could apply it, an old Roman citizen with dignitas, gravitas, honestas, simplicitas."

Another example of this change is evident from the autobiography when Mandela describes his experience with Colonel Badenhorst: "perhaps the most callous and barbaric commanding officer we had had" (444). However, when he was transferred, he wished "you people good luck." Mandela comments: "I thought about this moment for a long time afterwards……he had revealed that there was another side to his nature, a side that had been obscured but still existed. It was a useful reminder that all men, even the most seemingly cold-blooded, have a core of decency, and that if their hearts are touched they are capable of changing. Ultimately, Badenhorst was not evil; his inhumanity had been foisted upon him by an inhuman system. He behaved like a brute because he was rewarded for brutish behavior" (448). This generosity of spirit which allows him to forgive his torturers is reminiscent of Mahatma Gandhi whose values and principles Mandela was a great admirer of.

The cause of African nationalism was paramount in his political philosophy through which he has demonstrated how the traditional and the modern can be reconciled and how ethnic and national cultures can coexist, each reinforcing the

other. Adherence to the principles of justice and freedom, tolerance, understanding the opposite viewpoint seemed to be the basic tenets of his political philosophy and like the Mahatma before him, his life is an example for posterity to follow and emulate. This spirit is no where better illustrated than in one of the final passages of the book:

> No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite. Even in the grimmest times in prison, when my comrades and I were pushed to our limits, I would see a glimmer of humanity in one of the guards just for a second, but it was enough to reassure me and keep me going.

Under tremendous pressure to perform at all times, it is miraculous how Mandela overcame and transcended all the trials and tribulations during the freedom struggle and, especially the almost three decades in prison. There seems to have been an inner strength that helped him to maintain and keep intact his dignity. Perhaps his religious faith, although he never embraced any particular faith, was the source of his sustenance. Or, perhaps, it was his sense of family which provided great support in his long years in gaol. There is evidence of this not only in the autobiography but also in Fatima Meer's biography, *Higher Than Hope*, which quotes his letters to Winnie and to his children. But his pride in his family was also mixed with an inevitable sense of guilt. He confesses: "I rued the pain I had often caused my family through my absence" and "sometimes there is nothing one can do to save something that must die." Most of the time, he was torn in conflict between his role as a father to his children and father to a nation: "My family paid a terrible price, perhaps too dear a price, for my commitment. Thus, it appears that, more than his religious faith or his family, what gave him the courage to go on was his dignity which had taken its roots during his childhood when he had witnessed a traditional sense of respect for leadership and tribal democracy. Added to this, was responsible the harsh discipline of his years in prison where he learnt self-discipline and also the art of being flexible and malleable with his colleagues, while maintaining an independence of opinion. All these qualities, both inherited and acquired, combined to make him the formidable leader he was to become after his release from prison in 1990 and as the presidential leader of the so-called "rainbow nation."

On 2 February 1990, de Klerk began to dismantle apartheid, Mandela was released and he resumed his public political life placing the remainder of his life in the hands of the people. Mandela worked relentlessly during the period before the elections to ensure a just and humane social, political and economic order. Showing sound political judgement and offering his hand in cooperation with de Klerk, his efforts were rewarded when he won in 1994 the first Democratic Elections in South Africa by a landslide victory. At his inauguration as President of South Africa in Pretoria on May 10, his words echoed all around the world with emotional significance: "Never, never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another…….The sun shall never set on so glorious a human achievement. Let Freedom reign. God bless Africa!" With his commitment for a nonracial social democracy, Mandela would now take his beloved country towards a better, united future, a picture which he had always envisioned for South Africa.

The author, at the end of the book proceeds to remind us that the road ahead is strewn with difficulties and problems and while his long walk to freedom is over in one sense, it has only just begun in another, and that he "can only rest for a moment, for with freedom come responsibilities and I dare not linger, for my walk is not yet ended."During his years as President, he strove to redress inequities visited upon black people especially in areas of education, employment, health care and land ownership. The walk was not easy – in 1999 South Africa had the highest number per capita of people living with HIV/AIDS in the world and promoting AIDS awareness became one of his most important agendas after he retired formally from public life in 2000.

Long Walk to Freedom is an inspiring and enthralling autobiography of the extraordinary life of a man who had a dream and was privileged to see it come true. It is as much the author's "pilgrim's progress" as it is a political document.

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