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Personal as Political in Nelson Mandela's *Conversation With Myself*: An Otobiographical Reading

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By

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Letter of Recommendation

Sanjit Acharya has completed his thesis entitled “Personal as Political in Nelson Mandela’s *Conversation with Myself:* An Otobiographical Reading” under my supervision. He carried out his research October 2018 to May 2019. I hereby recommend his thesis be submitted for viva voce.

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Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled "Personal as Political in Nelson Mandela's *Conversation with Myself:* An Otobiographical Reading" submitted to Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, Sanjit Acharya has been approved by members of the Research Committee.

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Abstract

This research paper makes an analysis of autobiographical memoir Conversation with Myself *authored by a South African anti-apartheid revolutionary leader Nelson Mandela in order to argue that one's personal experiences reveal the public dimension of life or the social structure that the individual belongs to. It further contends that the autobiographical accounts hold the social picture of one's life rather being empirical sketch of philosophical ideas including facts that can be verified through historical documents.*

The memoir has the protagonist Nelson Mandela whose constant struggles, anxiety and sufferings portray the life during apartheid era of South Africa. The pretensions of the protagonist seems to be refuting own immense courage and ability to risk his own life for collective values. This study has been carried out taking theoretical insights from Otobiography, a term proposed by Jacques Derrida in order to interpret life narratives. It insists that writer advances behind pseudonyms with his signature and that signature constructs the system. By this the writer as an individual becomes secondary. The writer makes an immense auto/biographical paragraph by reaffirming his experience throughout life and signs or seals with the signature. But the reaffirmation is selective where negativity is reduced and this makes almost impossible to discover the inner self. Thus, in autobiographical narratives even in diaries and letters which are considered to be personal writings, the story that is already in public discourse is cited and recited.

Key Words: Otobiography, Subjectivity, Selfhood, Autobiographical 'I', Color Prejudice, Apartheid

Personal as Political in Nelson Mandela's *Conversation with Myself*: An Otobiographical Reading

The name Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela has contributed to literary domain in a great extent since his life has been represented in innumerable publications from freedom songs to biographies. He has become the birth legend or creation myth of modern day South Africa by his fearless and unexhausted struggle against legal system that ill-treated non whites for almost half a century. *Conversation with Myself* by Mandela is an autobiographical memoir with collection of letters, diary entries, desk calendars, draft for a second autobiography and also transcripts from recorded conversation with Richard Stengel and Ahmed Kathrada which provides us panoramic view upon his life. It gives readers insight into darkest hours of Nelson Mandela's nearly three decade imprisonment and his troubled life in his cell on Robben Island.

The book includes Mandela's early life at Thembuland, his association with African National Congress, his arrest and life in Robben Island prison, health concerns, family concerns, dreams, and travel diaries across world years after his release from the prison as most revered leader of his age spill out together to form a formal narrative thread. In 1941 he left Thembuland village for Johannesburg for a different life, he never cuts himself from the traditional background since his opinions were already formed in the village. The self-reflexivity Mandela has made in his book is largely modified by his traditional background in Thembuland. His distinctive habit of standing for collective values was shaped by his experience of carefully listening elders during tribal gatherings, including church and chieftaincy. Further, he was a qualified attorney, having practiced as such for nine years prior to his detain and conviction. Individual subjectivity, cultural unity and identity, national identity, ethnicity, race are the key issues heightened in Mandela's private archives thus

Conversation with Myself is personal equally ideological and cultural narrative. The protagonist's political career has served as a mirror through which we can see him. His autobiographical subjectivity is constituted in terms of his experience in historical circumstances of institutionalized color prejudice and African independence movement and his experience with African National Congress. His political and social activism has been understood interchangeably as if he was claiming identity for black race but in this book he makes it clear that it was not the question of race rather the activism was for a nonracial society where, he notes, people will cease thinking in terms of race. His thoughts and emotions depict the several social, cultural, political and other aspects of social life that contributed for building up African national identity. He was a prominent figure of African independence movements; of course the archive has been marked by his years of struggle, of life underground, of life in prison. Here, we see him as a scholar and politician; as a family man and friend; a visionary and pragmatic leader. His charismatic leadership, simplicity, sincerity or readiness to serve others made him a universal icon of peace and reconciliation. His intention seems that he is protesting against projection of him as a saint of struggle regarding it as unwitting projection or false image however it almost impossible to penetrate his very formal public persona.

Several reviews on *Conversation with Myself* have shown that this text of life writing is largely a private mode of writing. It primarily provides glimpses on private life of the narrator. However, the political significance of these personal narratives has been mentioned by some critics. Reviewing in *The Guardian,* Peter Godwin quotes Verne Harris, the editor of the book who has insisted, "Intensely moving, raw and unmediated, told in real time with all the changes in perspective that brings, over the years, mixing the prosaic with the momentous. Health concerns, dreams, political

initiatives spill out together, to provide fullest picture yet of Mandela. By going to his most personal of jottings, we finally get glimpse of the man behind the mask" (n.pag). In Godwin's view, this book interweaves personal and public aspects of Mandela's life however readers ultimately have look on Mandela as an individual rather than public figure. Godwin insists that readers could unmask the public persona of Mandela. Graham Boynton in *The Telegraph* thought that this book includes the private side of Mandela's life. He writes:

> Most compelling about this collection is that it jumps from the mundane (blood pressure readings taken at 7am and again at 2.30pm; trouser size noted as 34R; his disappointment at the ending of the film *Amadeus*), through to the historic "(his arrest by a plain clothes policeman who he describes as being "very, very, very correct and courteous") with barely a breath taken (n. pag.)

Although he also mentions about Mandela's arrest by plain clothes policemen, he argues that the forceful issue which hooks readers is Mandela's care for own health, his concern for dressing, and his interest on films.

Ivan Fallon in the *Independent*, says, "Many of Mandela's letters to Winnie, his children and friends were intercepted and kept by the prison authorities. Here we read them for the first time, and they are very poignant and personal" (n. pag). Since Mandela was communicating with own friends and family members through these letters, we find him emotional. Thompson thought that readers may be upset by any attempt to discover flawed Mandela, like ordinary people. He writes, "In short, *Conversations* allows readers the wonderful privilege of communicating with the iconic Nelson Mandela, the saint, but not flawed man "full of contradictions, who is stable and fickle, strong and weak, famous and infamous," as he himself puts it" (507). He believes Mandela's very nature for "striving towards good conduct prevents

readers from detecting the contradictory, weak man within the serenely charitable demeanor of this great man" (508). In this book, therefore, readers' attempt to discover Mandela as ordinary men like us leaves them with tantalizing glimpse of South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle. We find these private archives laden with fewer emotions and feelings rather than Mandela's politeness, cool-headedness, sincerity, and humility.

J. M Ledgard in *The New York Times* argues "*Conversation with Myself* is outstanding for what it offers. Its collection of letters and mediations belongs on the shelf of anyone interested in the nature of power and resistance. Yet the only one of these books that meets of its goal of offering a fresh portrait of this-modern day saint is "Young Mandela" (n.pag). Ledgard insists the collection of letters and notebooks in this book are narratives of power and resistance thereby it is the story of a man whose life was struggle for the people of his country. In his foreword to the book, former president of America, Barack Obama writes:

> *Conversation with Myself* does the world an extraordinary service in giving us that picture of Mandela the man. By offering us his journals, letters, speeches, interviews, and other papers from across decades, it gives us a glimpse into the life that Mandela lived – from the mundane routines that helped to pass the time in prison, to the decisions that he made as President. (xii)

Reading this volume we can create a portrait of Mandela's journey as revolutionary to the president. Readers have great privilege to learn about Mandela's different steps towards freedom, peace and reconciliation.

The scholars on reviewing *Conversation with Myself* have mixed opinions. Some of them have insisted that the book interweaves Mandela's private life with his long and arduous struggle for freedom, peace and reconciliation while others argue

that readers get opportunity to gain exceptional insights into his private life. Readers, however, get access to Mandela through aide-memoirs kept during years in prison, and actual conversation he had with Richard Stengel, and Ahmed Kathrada, an African National Congress comrade who was imprisoned with Mandela at Robben Island but these are laden with Mandela's intellect and his anxiety for collective values. The autobiographical 'I' is not confined to revelation of Mandela as a country boy who lived a mediocre life combing errors, weaknesses and indiscretion.

The purpose of this study is to explore how Mandela himself endeavors pain and suffering to refute that he is a saint, through personal texts such as letters and diaries. The personal experience of the writer is an outcome of the social and legal structure of the African society that prejudiced people based on skin color. The personal archives such as letters and diaries emerge directly from writer's inner concise. They are fresh and intimate, bringing us close to what person was. These writings provide raw data and convey a sense of contemporariness. They show us what hopes, worries, struggles and aspirations the writer had. We can regard diaries and letters as tantalizing window into the history of South Africa.

Although private in one sense, letters and diaries also can be seen as carrying cultural conventions of expression. Letters are dialogic because they are written to a certain particular other. Though diaries are written for oneself, the possibility of an imagined reader cannot be denied. The writer cannot write his life story without imagining a reader. The self-referential modes are addressed to anonymous readers who are across any culture, geography, time, purpose and so on. The letters and diaries blend writer's intimate feelings and experience with comment on what people did, witnessed as well thought in a particular historical moment. These personal texts have equal importance as literary texts and historical documents which are evidenced

by the fact that they wrote about it. We cannot read them in isolation with the outer world. The outer world is of utmost importance because selfhood is shaped and modeled by these external factors. By experience and witness of certain events a person becomes a certain kind of subject. Diaries and letters are not to be treated as if they provide an unmediated access to either experience or facts. Diaries can incorporate diverse materials such as the chronology of reportage and self reflexivity, objectivity and subjectivity in narration, private and public experience.

Letters are testimony to the enduring attempts of human beings to bridge the communication gap between themselves and others. The addressee is usually well-known to the writer and has shared many experiences with the writer. A letter originally intended for a small audience may later be published and so acquire a larger public audience. The subject matter of the letter, like the diary, is usually drawn from the writer's daily experience and it can be more thoughtful because writers attempt to make clear their reasoning process clear to another person or group of persons. For bridging the communication gap the writers of letters require to supply enough background information that helps to make letters argumentative.

Diaries, journals and letters are composed for number of purpose. They chronicle writer's experiences through narration and description. Drawing subject matter out of own experience and narrating it for audience, the writer has grown from personal to political. It is through experience a person becomes a certain kind of subject. Writing about his experience in a color prejudice society the writer is performing an autobiographical act that is the 'I' as historical person located in a particular time and place. Experience is directly connected with the formation of identity. Identity involves narrators identifying themselves to the addressee. It is constructed discursively and marked in terms of many categories: race, ethnicity,

sexuality, nationality, class and others. Experience in an autobiographical narration is merely personal but it is already political because the narrator is conveying cultural information, justifying own perception and claiming collective identity. He narrates the events during the days when black people in South Africa based numerous indignities merely on the basis of skin color.

What experiences have been given importance in confirming to particular models of identity? At particular historical context (place and time) life narrators are influenced for entwining self experience with public issues.

Nelson Mandela was conditioned by historical circumstances and experiences of power since he was the prominent figure of the movement against color prejudice in South African in 1960s. Mandela reflects himself in relation to the history of South Africa, his struggle against White Supremacy, his role in African social and political order. The experiences of power, prejudice and resistance against discrimination consciously or unconsciously dominate his thoughts and feelings manifested in his letters and diaries. What Mandela shares is modified by his own individual perception and at the same time his subjectivity is an outcome of social, cultural and political process. Every letter to a loved one and diary about deeply personal things was written with the knowledge that a third person, the authority, was also reading it. Mandela's personal thoughts and feelings are not static since his diaries and letters are filled with his memories of struggles and other painful incidents which share immediacy with the spirit of anti color- prejudice movement he was a part of. How does his subjectivity shift from being a normal colored person to political rebel to President of South Africa? How it marks the change in his view towards own image in outside world?

The theoretical insights on autobiographical subjects, particularly on experience is taken to analyze the book. In addition, the ideas from 'Otobiography' are drawn to evaluate critically the notion of experience, and identity or proper name. 'Otobiography' is the term proposed by Jacques Derrida in a lecture and discussion on 'Nietzsche and the politics of name'. In this lecture, Derrida insists on revaluation and revalorization of autobiography by rethinking the role proper name or the signature. An autobiographical signature is activated on addressee's side in its hearing and apprehension. And the name bears death each time it is inscribed in a list, civil, registry or, a signature. Derrida postulates that an autobiography is constituted only when his narration passes through the labyrinthine passage of the reader's ear. In addition, Derrida insists that there lies a border line between the work and the life. The borderline is what says the narrator and what say the narrator of him.

The writer makes an immense biographical paragraph out his experience, puts his name, places signature through the process of eternal return or reaffirmation where the negativity is reduced. When the writer signs he seals and readers have to put this on active record. The signature comes as the pseudonym and induces us to think we are reading the author as he narrates 'I' under the signature or autograph. The writer lives is guaranteed by a nominal contract between the writer, the signature and his great name or a system of his signature. This auto-representation is tactical move of dissimulation. Everything that will subsequently be narrated have to be revaluated based on question: To whom the signatory has the duty and debt? The theoretical certainties what we think we know about identities and proper name.

The life story of Nelson Mandela has been represented in countless publications from biographies to journal articles, from newspapers, magazines to television documentaries, from praise poems to freedom songs. In representation of

Mandela's life, he has been regarded as international figure of immense courage and ability but *Conversation with Myself* is his vainly attempt to protest that he is a common man with weaknesses, errors and indiscretions. The presentation of Mandela as a hero of struggle was because of his willingness to risk own life for collective values. In addition, he lived the kind of life for what he believed – "the principle of human rights and fundamental freedom" (145) to make the world better place for all. Although, Nelson Mandela was a private man, even in his private life was seldom his own. His subjectivity was constituted with African cultural consciousness. His thoughts and actions were influenced by church, chieftaincy and tribal gatherings. Experience is one of the major dimensions for constitutive of the autobiographical subjectivity. Experience is the knowledge gained through visual and visceral perception of objects and events around us. The intimacy and immediacy of our sensitivity makes us to say we have experience and it is ours. The representation of experience in an autobiographical narrative seems merely personal however it also carries the political possibility.

In our day to day life we come across multiple domains of discourses that are social and cultural. These discourses help us to register our experience by feelings and perception of events and images. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson insist, "Experience is the very process through which a person becomes a certain kind of subject owning certain identities in the social realm, identities constituted through material, cultural, economic, and interpsychic relations" (25). When an experience occurs there is not only experience but also a particular process through which an individual's selfhood is constructed. The narrator was influenced by own background that he grew up in a village, learnt through experience, watched and imitated adults. In this process customs, rituals and taboo played important role. He insists, "As I look back to those

days I am inclined to believe that the type of life I led at my home, my experiences in the veld where we worked and played together in groups, introduced me at an early age to the ideas of collective effort" (10). He asserts, "The type of formal education I received tended to stress individual more than collective values" (10). Nevertheless, in the mid 1940s when he was drawn into political struggle, he asserts, "I could adjust myself to discipline without difficulty, perhaps because of my early upbringing" (10). The narrator acquired knowledge on variety of subjects such as history of own county, it's geography, natural wealth and problems, culture and collective values in the process of his early upbringing. Although there seems simply nothing new but the upbringing was exclusively the narrator's from which he became a certain kind of subject. By this the narrator invites readers to his experiential history.

Autobiographical subjects do not come as being earlier to experience. Joan W. Scott writes, "It is not individuals who have experience but subjects who are constituted through experience" (779). The narrator upon retrospection of his life admits, "I have not forgotten the days of my childhood when we used to gather round community elders to listen their wealth of wisdom and experience. That was custom of our forefather and the traditional school in which were brought up" (23). The narrator emphasizes that the knowledge produced at everyday life has taught him about African history. He comes to know oneself as deeply planted into African soil. The traditional understanding of experience as the reproduction of knowledge conceived through the conscious consideration of past events by an individual regards the experience as self evident. It assumes that individual's own account of what he or she has lived through is the source of explanation or history.

This presupposed relationship between individual experience and claim for unique selfhood is to be contested because the notion of meaningful experience is

socially produced. Joan W. Scott, taking the analysis of Teresa de Lauretis as point of departure, questions the notion of individual experience produces unique individuality. She insists that autobiographical subjects are constituted by discursive processes in social life so experience is neither obvious nor straightforward rather it is discursive which historical specific is. Joan W. Scott admits:

> Experience is the process by which, all social beings, subjectivity is constructed. Through that process one places oneself or is placed in social reality and so perceives and comprehends as subjective (referring to, originating in oneself) those relations—material, economic, and interpersonal—which are in fact social, and, in a larger perspective, historical. (782)

Experience is the social process because it is a relationship between various social discourses like individual cognition and social reality. It is shaped in social realm by the relations of multiple domains of discourses such as cultural, economic, ethnicities and so on. The speaker admits, “I saw chieftaincy not only pivot around which community life turned, but as key to the positions of influence, power and status. Equally important was the position of church, which I associated not so much with the body doctrine in the Bible but with the person Reverend Matyolo” (12). The effect of experience as social process is “autobiographical subjects know themselves as subjects of particular kinds of experience attached to their social statuses and identities” (Smith and Watson 25). They know themselves to be woman, or Native American, African, formerly colonized “because these identity categories seem natural” (25). The narrator seems confined to own culture by saying, “I consider myself obliged to pay proper respect to my customs and traditions, provided that such customs and traditions tend to keep us together and do not in any way conflict with

the aims and objects of the struggle against racial oppression" (26). The narrator regards cultural unity as one of the strategies to achieve freedom, equality and justice. It is narrator's signal that his autobiographical story is blended with collective history of South Africa. It highlights the institutionalized color prejudice in South Africa and colored people's identity claim against such oppression. The personal experience of the narrator seems to engage with the moments of shared experience of people of color in historical specific circumstance of the African society. The immediacy of lived experience of autobiographical narrators and the political and cultural contexts of the historical past becomes vivid which manifests the lack of opportunities and numerous indignities to which people of color were subjected in daily life. Since the discourses are historical specific so they are spatial and in broader process of social, cultural including political transformation the experience may change over time.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have postulated that there is an inextricable connection between experience and identity. They write, "We recognize that memory; experience, identity, embodiment, and agency are not separable constituents of autobiographical subjectivity. They are all implicated in one another" (49). Identities are marked in terms of different categories: gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, class, religious and political ideologies, are some taken as some most obvious categories. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue, "These are differences that have meaning in the material and symbolic structures that organize human experience" (33). The narrator's experience in the society where "a white minority of barely 15 percent of the country's population owned about 87 percent of resources, while the black minority- Africans, Colored and Indians – occupied less than 13 percent" (395) made him to lead the minorities in resistance to sufferings of racial prejudice. Identity in an autobiographical story is assumed from the signature

on the title page. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write, 'I' is far more diverse and dispersed than the story that is being told of it" (59). In the process of autobiographical subjectivity revelation 'I' cannot simply be an individual, it is a historical person located in a particular time and place. The autobiographical narration is an articulation from subject position which corresponds to the multiple social relations in a particular historical context. Every autobiographical narrator is culturally and historically situated; 'I' is the product of certain geographical space and time. The selfhood and subjectivity of the narrator is constituted in terms of culturally available heterogeneous identity markers like ethnicity, race, religion etc. The narrator speaks multiple, fragmented, and heterogeneous voices.

The traditional determinations of life narrative view auto/biography should be of great man as a corpus of empirical occurrence. The academic notion of life narrative with such determinations supposes that lives of great persons can give an account of genesis of philosophical system. The practice of life narrative and autobiographical writing in the first wave criticism of autobiography criticism was heavily influenced by notion of representation of individual personalities. However, they were bound always to be representative of their period. The emphasis was laid on autobiographer's role in public sphere, people who have been decisive in important historical events; achieved notoriety and fame were regarded as important subject of the autobiography. The writer's relationship with public arena was valorized and other kinds of life narrative namely letters, diaries, journals, memoirs, and other autobiographical modes of writings practiced to a large extent throughout human history were excluded from cannon of autobiography. Read from this theoretical framework, Nelson Mandela's very formal public persona would be sufficient to understand his life and his role for freedom and equality in South Africa as well his

contribution for global peace and reconciliation. However, the glimpse of his personal life is equally important to understand his immense struggle to make the world better place for all.

In the second wave criticism of autobiography, the creative aspect of autobiographical writing was emphasized. The autobiographical-self was supposed to be autonomous and creative. One of the influential critics of this theorization, Karl Weintraub insists "an autobiography can only be understood if the 'place' the authors themselves occupy in relation to their lives can be reconstructed by the reader. Reading an autobiography 'properly' means reading with an already existing knowledge of the text's meaning" (Anderson 3). These critics viewed autobiographies as presenting validity on certain conceptions that authors are have authority over their own texts and reading their texts would mean to direct access to the authors. So the identification of autobiography with individuality and greatness can be traced even in the second wave criticism.

In theorizing the first wave criticism of autobiography, "German Philologist Georg Misch" (Smith and Watson 113) positioned the man and his actions in specific historical and cultural contexts. Autobiographical narrator was meant to speak self-evident facts and the historical record could confirm or refute textual inconsistencies. While, the second wave criticism scholars namely Gusdorf, Hart, and Weintraub argued autobiographical narrating as an act of creation rather simply transcription of the past. The focus was put on the autonomous selfhood and the practice of self-creation. The autobiographical notion that each individual possesses "unique selfhood which is also the expression of a universal human nature" (Anderson 5) was powerfully present in autobiography criticism till middle of twentieth century. The theoretical interventions of the last quarter of the century challenged the notion of an

autonomous self, intentionality, belief of transparency etc in autobiographical narrative. In *Conversation with Myself* also seems to have intention of giving the picture of writer's private life through revelation of private achieves.

The claim of nineteenth century theorization of autobiography criticism that positioned author at the center and source of meaning has been undermined by the poststructuralist interventions in theorizing autobiography criticism. Barbara Johnson in *Critical Difference* writes, "As notions of authoritative speaker, intentionality, truth, meaning, and generic integrity have been challenged, the former preoccupations of autobiography critics with the nature of its truth, its formal structures, the struggle with identity, even the assumption of a motivating self, have been displaced" (qtd. in Smith and Watson 137). The debate within critical theory since 1970s to 1990s led to the reconceptualization of self, and subjectivity, thereby autobiographical acts, particularly the autobiographical 'I'. The conceptions of self-presence, authority, authenticity, truth, and stable meaning were dismantled. Then, the focus of narration shifted towards collective 'I' proposing new concepts of autobiographical self and subjects as multicultural, transcultural, ethnic, and hybrid, diasporic, to name few. The generic conventions were also challenged by including journals, diaries, letters, and other forms of everyday writings in the domain of life narrative.

Jacques Derrida proposed the term 'Otobiography' in a lecture and discussion on 'Nietzsche and the politics of the proper name'. In this lecture, he insists on reevaluation and revalorization of autobiography. Derrida explores the difference in the ear, and transforms *Auto* into *Oto,* asserting that the ear of the other says me to me and constitutes my autobiography. According to Derrida, for reformulation of the problem of autobiographical two particular dimensions are important. First is the rethinking of the role the signature, and the 'proper name' or autograph, and the way

it inhabits that problematic borderline between life and work; the second is redefining autobiography as ‘thanatography’. The autobiographical signature or the proper name is activated on addressee’s side, in its hearing and apprehension. We name and call someone alive because we know his name survives him but it bears death each time it is inscribed in a list, civil registry or, a signature.

Conversation with Myself, renowned politician’s life story comes as the memoir; the biography; and the collection of papers. There are interesting revelations about him: the family concerned Mandela; the emotional Mandela; the visionary leader Mandela; he speaks through plurality of self. By the law of genre letters and notebooks are personal writings because they are the record of writer’s emotions, intimate thoughts and feelings but sometimes these writings may have political content too, then they do not confine to the generic law. Many historians and critics argued that life narratives serve as historical and social demands. Many heroes were created and myths on them were told through autobiographical narratives however such myths are truthful within a relative paradigm. While revisiting the history, in post-apartheid Africa many heroes were created in attempts to construct the heroes of the struggle against color prejudice. Nelson Mandela is one of the great figures of twentieth century. He has become the birth legend, or creation myth of the modern day South Africa. He has been represented in a wide range of spheres, in autobiographical; media; museums, namely few, there seems a borderline between his life and his great name. Derrida notes that there lies a borderline between the work and life, “the system and the subject of the system” (5). In the letter to Fatima Meer, dated 1 March 1971, the signatory admits that, to brag public at large about their unique achievements people tend to write autobiography.

> What a sweet euphemism for self-praise the English language has evolved! Autobiography, they choose to call it, where the shortcomings of others are frequently exploited to highlight the praiseworthy accomplishments of the author. I am doubtful if I will ever sit down to sketch my background. I have neither the achievements of which I could boast nor the skill to do it. (7)

On writing an autobiography narrators read their own experiential histories, they bring discursive schema that are culturally and socially available to them to put up with what has happened. They offer fascinating glimpses into an autobiographer's successive interpretation of the past. The speaker thinks that nothing could coax him to publicize himself. He insists, "Had I been in a position to write an autobiography, its publication would have been delayed until our bones had been laid" (7). He is conveying the message that he lived everyday of his life as mediocre man.

The convention of autobiography criticism regards great man as normative subject of autobiography. It supposes that life story of great man as corpus of cognitive philosophical reading but "a new problematic of the biographical in general and of the biography of philosophers in particular must mobilize other resources, including, at the very least, a new analysis of proper name and the signature" (Derrida 5). In the same letter addressed to Fatima Meer, the speaker says, "I'm one of those who possess scraps of superficial information on a variety of subjects, but who lacks depth and expert knowledge on the thing in which I ought to have specialized, namely the history of my country and people" (7). The appearance of the autobiographer's name on the tile page can be read as unobtrusive claims for truthfulness and authenticity for history including political philosophy. But such claim functions as a myth that is a tale about past which is neither true nor false. Myths usually are the stories of particular significance and they express and codify certain beliefs and

suggest that myths are universal. The mythologization of Mandela as creation myth of modern day South Africa because he sought to sacrifice own life, he saw the need for peace and reconciliation in the national mission “against political and racial persecution, and which demanded full political rights for Africans, Coloured, and Indian people of this country” (145). He was a well-known member of the political organization that demanded a democratic South Africa free from the evils of Color oppression, and his political career is mirror to his life.

A life story of the freedom fighter is supposed to deal frankly with political issues, colleagues, their personalities and their views. The reader would like to know what kind of person the writer is, his relationships with others, and many more. These things should emerge from the facts however the autobiography of a freedom fighter inevitably be influence by the question whether the revelation of certain facts contributed to advance the struggle or not. But the disclosure of such facts, till date, may adversely affect the political realm as well the particular individuals concerned. So there lies a borderline between what says the narrator and what says the narrator of him. Derrida calls this borderline “dynamis because of its force, its power, as well as its virtual and mobile potency which is neither active nor passive, neither outside nor inside” (5). In his autobiographical manuscript written in prison, the narrator insists, “An essential part of that caution and fair play would be to have the widest possible measure of consultation with your colleagues about what you intent to say about them, to circulate your manuscript and give them the opportunity of stating their views on any controversial issues discussed so that facts themselves may accurately reflect all the standpoints concerned” (210). The signatory was writing in the conditions where the security considerations made him hard to consult any but handful of his friends. He seems to wish as if he could tell us more about his

colleagues, fellow prisoners, and the political movement but he could not because of the censorship, hardships and tensions of prison life.

Life is the subject matter of auto/biography, what Derrida puts is it “does not stand face to face with something that would be its opposable object: death, thanatographical” (6). Derrida marks it as the first complication. Also he says, “It is practically difficult for life to become an object of science, in the sense that philosophy and science have always given to the word “science” to the legal status of scientificity” (6). Human being all over the world, simply come and go but some leave their great name because their noble deeds are recognized beyond the grave, even far beyond the borders of their countries. So, an autobiography is not merely a catalogue of events and experiences in which a person has been involved. Derrida admits “that there is, between the dead and the status of scientific object, a co-implication which interests us, and which concerns desire to know” (6). Readers expect that the life narrative of a disciplined and dedicated person fighting for a worthy cause to reveal empirical facts and evidences on the movement against evils of color bias, injustice and inequality. In contrary, we see the writer emotional brimful of pain as prison authority did not allowed him to attend the funeral of either his eldest son or his mother. In a letter to the commanding officer of Robben Island prison, dated 22 July 1969, the narrator says, “My eldest son, Madiba Thembekile, aged twenty four, passed away in Cape Town on July 13, 1969, as a result of injuries he sustained in a motor-car accident. I wish to attend, at my own cost, the funeral proceedings and to pay my last respects to his memory” (168). This is the line from a letter to the commanding officer of Robben island prison, dated 22 July 1969. His request to the prison authority is overfilled with painful misfortune. The blow has been very grievous to him by the line he writes, “If he will already have been buried

by the time you receive this application, then I would ask that I be allowed to visit his grave for the purpose of 'laying the stone', the traditional ceremony reserved for those persons who miss the actual burial" (169). This application is such a humanitarian gesture is heartbreaking image of painful misfortune of an imprisoned man.

The next is a letter to Nolusapho Irene, dated 29 September 1969, where he mentions of being denied by prison authorities in the similar circumstances. He narrates, "Ten months before this I had made a similar application when my mother passed away, although the authorities had then adopted a hard line in refusing what I considered in all the circumstances to be a reasonable request" (169). Mandela had been very anxious to attend the both funerals and to pay his last respects to own loved ones. People pondering on the problems of an average prisoner tend to concentrate on the hard labor, the coarse and tasteless menu, grim and tedious boredom but the writer have had experience much more than these, because these experiences too deeply pierce into one's soul. Moreover, rather than scientific or empirical sketch of revolutionary strategies these writings have intense emotional pain and suffering. This is an image of the darkest hours of his nearly three decades of imprisonment. He sacrificed his personal life for freedom and equality for all people of South Africa. At prison he suffered "humiliation daily" (211) but there is no any complaint or physical manifestation of indignities he suffered at the prison. If any it is spiritual rather than physical since in a letter to Winnie Mandela dated 1 February 1975, the speaker says "the cell is an ideal place to learn to know yourself, to search realistically and regularly the process of your own mind and feelings" (211). For him the cell gives an opportunity to introspect upon own weaknesses and mistakes. In the same letter the narrator further says, "Honesty, sincerity, simplicity, humility, pure generosity, absence of vanity readiness to serve others – qualities which are easy reach of every

soul – are the foundation of one's spiritual life" (211). Even in the bad news about the family he developed some inner strength that helped him to forget about difficulties, frustrations and loneliness. The narrator seems to have message for readers that success in the broad national movement demanded calmness equally with courage.

In spite of deeply personal writings some letters and notebooks are with political content. The writer of these letters has his proper name or the autobiographical signature what "readers have to put on active record" (Derrida 6) because the writer has implicated himself to us through "the force of signature remains of his text" (8). The letters and pages of notebooks are dated. Derrida insists, "To date is to sign. And to "date from" is to indicate the place of signature" (11). From his 1962 notebook, "Whilst political consciousness is vital in the formation of an army and in mobilizing mass support, practical matters must not be lost sight of" (99). It looks like he is sharing the revolutionary idea on how an uprising to be organized in such a way as to ensure its continuity and success. In the same notebook, he writes, "The base of your support will be amongst the common people, poor and illiterate but the intellectuals must be brought in" (102). He emphasizes on seeking the support of the entire population with perfect balance of various social class. A letter dated 14/3/1962, to Dr. Mostefai reads,

> The strategic may create a new situation which may make it necessary to alter the general plan. Your tactics will not only be confined to military operations but they will also cover such things as the political consciousness of the masses of the people, the mobilization of the allies in the international field. The political organization must be in complete control the people and their activity. (103)

This letter is dialogic because the signatory attempts to establish a communication with Dr. Mostefai. The subject is the evolution of political thought in South Africa. The signatory is speaking about political thoughts and fundamental principles of the movement. These letters and notebooks are in a certain way dated because they say 'today'—the day in specific historical context. When the year turns in an annulus the day becomes new and constitutes the autobiographical recitation. In such case, readers' desire to know facts about history becomes provisional.

The signatory has put his name on the line, placed his signatures, made an immense auto/biographical paragraph out of all that he has written on life or death and this is what readers have to put on active record. Derrida insists "with everything a name involves and which cannot be summed up in a self" (7). In the first place, the writer is dead but when his name is on the page it is the name of great man that makes us to forget the fact of his death. Derrida insists, "Only the name can inherit, and this is why the name, to be distinguished from the bearer, is always and a priori a dead man's name, a name of dead" (7). So, a man who rose to the position of premier in the country must be a man of ability, powerful personality, and uprightness in his public life. In his 20 April 1964 speech, he says, "During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against White domination, and I have fought against Black domination (121). These lines show his dedication for the collective interest of South African people. The autobiographical self is here is the subject to particular behavior, beliefs, and identity. In the same speech made 20 April, he speaks, "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 to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die" (122). The very formal public persona of the writer seems almost not

penetrable. In these speeches and letters his struggle for human rights, liberty and justice for ethnic minorities evolves. The anchor of his dream was collective human dignity. His individuality too seems overwhelmed by his enormous sacrifice for better social life. A letter to Sefton Vutela, dated 28 July 1969 reads, “I must, however, confess that for my own part the threat of death evoked no desire in me to play the role of martyr. I was ready to do so if I had to. But the anxiety to live always lingered. But familiarity does breed contempt even for the hideous and of death” (124). The signatory seems here somehow a worried and exhausted like an average common man. It is the public exposure of his private self. At this moment of self-recognition the letter becomes a narrative of the confession. However, we cannot be aside his contribution in South African conflict resolution, peace and prosperity in particular and world peace and common future.

Derrida insists that the name bears death each time it is used in a list, registry, or a signature. The death is not literal death rather the “I” who speaks is not to be anyway understood as the supposed unique signatory speaking. Derrida notes “the signature becomes effective performed and performing—not at the moment it apparently takes place, but only later, when ears will have managed to receive the message” (Derrida 50). It is presumed that writer lives and affirms his identity through the autobiographical narrative. The writer lives is verified on at some moment after death. So, everything that is subsequently narrated have to be reevaluated and the theoretical certainties, what we think we know about identities and proper name should be redrawn. *Conversation with Myself* includes series of desk calendars and notebooks which function as self aide-memoire. They could be most direct and unmediated records writer’s thought however the heath concern and worry for collective interest spill out together. Moreover, in theses writing there is absent of ‘I’.

These writings are dated and “date is the place of signature” (11). These writings may unsettle our simple understanding of presentation of identity in autobiographical narration. A desk calendar dated 24 May 1979, reads, “Start using Albucid 30% eyedrops midday” (270). Similarly, the next calendar dated 2 June 1979, reads, “In a sick country every step to health is an insult to those who live on its sickness” (270). In addition, the same calendar reads, “The purpose of freedom is to create it for others” (270). Reading these lines the formal public persona of the writer cannot be infiltrated. In personal life and health anxiety political views are apparent. Likewise, a notebook dated 8 August 1984, reads, “Overthrow of white supremacy the work of the liberation movement – ANC, PAC, Azapo, in varying degrees. Transformation also collective effort” (370). Since dated of that day it shows about their collective effort or strategy to root out all the evils of white supremacy. It further shows the social fabric of erstwhile society of South Africa.

When a writer writes, at first place he writes himself to himself, by this he writes himself to other who is infinitely far away and is supposed to send his signature back to him. Derrida insists, “It is the ear of the other that signs. The ear of the other says me to me and constitutes the *autos* of my autobiography” (51). Through these personal jottings readers have been made to feel that the text comes to us unadulterated, just as the great man wrote or spoke it. A notebook dated 23 March 1983, reads, “The Anti-apartheid Committee Movement and the UN Committee Against Apartheid yesterday published a declaration carrying more than 4000 signatures using the release of ANC leader, NM” (286). The line has broader political message for the world. To hear and understand this message does not mean to simply receive it, rather we are introduced to the visionary leader whose struggle and effort for peace, reconciliation and unity is recognized beyond the border of his country. So,

the autobiographical ‘I’ is not confined to aide-memoire of the writer rather ‘I’ is the identifiable figure of historical past.

The auto-representation is tactical dissimulation. We will not be able to hear and understand the signatory unless we hear it with ear attuned to the name of the signatory. Further, “The effects or structure of a text are not reducible to its “truth”, to the intended meaning of its presumed author, or its supposedly unique and identifiable signatory” (Derrida 27). The notion of one book as a single genre is thrown into question along with the status of empirical facts as they apply to an author’s life or his corpus, his works. The narrator admits, “One issue that deeply worried me in prison was the false image that unwittingly projected to the outside world; of being regarded as a saint. I never was one, even on the basis of an earthly definition of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying” (410). From the perspective of already recognized conventions, autobiography guarantees author’s self presence, intentionality including truth and meaning by him. But the new understanding of autobiography insists, “The “I” thus has no prehistory, no point of origin outside writing; rather “I” is cited (recited) within the text: It is the eternal return that signs and seals” (Anderson 82). The *autos* of the autobiographical have to be totally redistributed. We have to rethink the role of the signature, autograph (the proper name) and this way we have to revalorize and reevaluate the autobiography.

The signatory tells his life story through the process of referring back to own past life. Derrida notes, “The ‘I’ of this *recit* only constitutes itself through the credit of eternal return; he does not sign prior to the *recit* qua eternal return” (13). The ‘I’ of the autobiographical narration constitutes itself through the reaffirmation or the eternal return and the signatory does not exist prior to this. The eternal return is selective, as Derrida puts it, “Rather than a repetition of the same, the return must be

differential relation of forces. It is a selective return without negativity, or which reduces negativity through affirmation" (46). Mandela has retained an image of a universal icon of peace and reconciliation but in his private life he has the troubled marital relationships since his first marriage with Evelyn Mase and the second marriage with Winnie Mandela messily collapsed. However, there is no detailed portrayal on his marital relationship. The narrator insists, "Now if I deal with Evelyn here, I will have to tell you why our marriage collapsed, because our marriage *really* because of political differences in politics and I don't want to say that now how against a poor woman, you know"? (65), he says in a conversation with Richard Stengel. He is unwilling to share what actually happened. If he mentions about her he would have better given proper story, or the full story rather he liked to leave that out.

Although, he admits that one argument with her turned violent, she then pulled a hot poker from red hot stove and tried to burn his face then, he says, "So I caught hold of her and twisted her arm, enough for me to take this thing out" (67). Further the narrator is quite adamant to talk about his separation from Winnie Mandela. In another conversation with Richard Stengel, he says, "No I would not go into details except just to sate that I had to separate from her on personal grounds" (327). These pessimistic events and issues have been made limited so this is signatory's vain attempt to protest that he is not a saintly person.

Autobiographical narratives do not produce truth rather they produce perspective because narrators tell their life story through the discourses available to them in particular historical context. Nelson Mandela, a revolutionary leader whose fearless activism and nearly three decade of imprisonment toppled the legal system that maltreated non white Africans for almost half of a century. The broad range of subjects and life experiences he witnessed throughout his life is evident in his private

archives. There is no detailed portrait of his childhood and family life. When he was young his distinctive habits were acquired from his traditional background in Thembuland, where he listened carefully to the elders speaking at tribal gatherings. Gradually he learnt the importance of freedom; even he escaped the marriage planned for him. Readers are left in imagination how he felt when he was not allowed to mourn properly the deaths of his mother and son; when he was humiliated at the prison. There is no physical manifestation of his anger and frustration rather we can say the manifestation is spiritual. In addition, he is quite reluctant to discuss his relationships with Evelyn Mase, with he was married for almost fourteen years Winnie Mandela, a woman with whom he shared almost four decades of his public and private life. When such textual omissions are there we cannot get to know the inner man. *Conversation with Myself* cannot be called a full revelation of Mandela's private life rather this book is professionally organized collection of numerous accounts of events, actions or initiatives with significance.

Diaries chronicle the day's events and the diarist's thoughts about those events, and letters are the writer's enduring attempt to bridge the communication gap. In these private archives we read his intimate feelings and emotions where we come to know his family tragedies, his troubled marital relationship but ultimately the image of visionary leader on the world stage evolves out. The core of the autobiographical-self can never be discovered, unmasked, or revealed because it is an infinite regress. The objective reality is not possible in autobiographical writings. Mandela's pretentions may portray him as an ordinary and flawed man yet the picture of incredibly great leader comes. Even his personal experience comes as mirror to his political career or his struggle for equality, peace and reconciliation.

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