Comparative Imagination: Indian and African Autobiographies

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This is an essay, theoretical, critical and textual, that attempts a fully comparative understanding of the literary and social structures that exist in autobiography, with reference to Indian and African autobiographies, whose authors shared similar historical, that is, colonial experience. The images of history, culture, politics and the problems of social structures in which autobiography and history intersect are examined and explored. And in engaging in this enterprise, the fantasies which the autobiographer moulds into reality and vice versa constitute the creative imagination which he perpetuates and publishes for us to study and digest. Of course, because our enterprise is of a comparative nature, it is of necessity confined to the comparative imaginative temper, so to say, and the comparative denominators or relationships, again, so to say, between the Indian and African autobiographies that engage our attention. The autobiographies are Indian Nirad C. Chaudhuri's *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* and Mohandas K. Ghandi's *An Autobiography*: *The Story of my Experiments with Truth*, the African NabothMokgatle's*The Autobiography of an Unknown South African*, Nelson Mandela's*Long Walk to Freedom*and Lawrence Vambe's *An Ill-fated People*. These African autobiographies, in varying degrees, owe their creation to Ghandi's and especially Chaudhuri's,despite their authors' varieties of individuality in methods and the image of man, the generic notion of his human nature, which are reflected in the constructions.

The term "comparative" imagination may be viewed here as a troublesome one in the same way that "comparative" literature is, a reason that perhaps accounts for the difficulty in giving a distinct definition and description to the study of this aspect of literary enterprise. And what is or can be "comparative" in the imagination (or even memory) of such writers, of such autobiographers, as the ones listed here, who are from different and distinct regions and literary and cultural traditions and experiences of the world? It would be helpful to attempt to answer this question by quoting two critics and experts, one a Nigerian called D. S. Izevbaye, and the other an American called Henry Remak. Let us begin with the former:

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> The central purpose of comparative literature is a simple, unambiguous one. It is to establish a relationship among a variety of writers and literatures, and help enhance our understanding of literature as a human activity with similar aesthetic and social functions in different cultures (1).

And according to Remak:

> Comparative literature is the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationships between literature on the one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief such as the arts (e.g, painting, sculpture, architecture, music), philosophy, history, the social sciences (e.g. politics, economics, sociology), the sciences, religion, etc, on the other. In brief, it is the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression (1).

India and Africa share the same historical experience of European colonization. And the Indian and African autobiographies to be investigated are by "British Indians" and "British Africans". So they share the same colonial destiny, consciousness, memory and imagination. The ideas of comparative imagination imply the discovery of sameness in dissimilar works, of shared imagination and denominators in works by writers from unlike cultures and traditions. There is thus the suggestion here (along Izevbaye's general argument in his essay) to perceive oneness in all literature of colonized peoples and to regard it as a part of one literary experience and culture. This, however, does not and must not imply that the method of engaging in the detection of the similarity in works of dissimilar sensation, feeling, thinking and intuition by authors of unlike resources and types must be the same.

A close attention paid to Remak's definition must clearly suggest to us that the discipline of autobiography belongs to the valid domain of "other spheres of human expression" which can be studied side by side from the perspective of comparative literature. The range of thoughts, ideas and knowledge, which the autobiographies under investigation grapple with and which there is an attempt to study or illustrate, is most likely to differ from one reader to another and from critics from different regions and schools of criticism and comparative literature and scholarship. To put all this in another way, comparative autobiography, which we must accept as an aspect of comparative literature, must include the study of the different interpretations and pictures which excite us. Any aspect of the picture or of the experience recalled in autobiography, such as Chaudhuri's or Ghandi's or Mokgatle's or Vambe's or Mandela's

examined here from a comparativist's perspective, ought to reflect the quest or imagination that inspired it. And the common quest or imagination which induced the details the five autobiographies under investigation portray is historical.

If the five texts were inspired by the respective historical imagination of each autobiographer, what then should we call each one? History or autobiography? Or can we collectively, jointly or comparatively call the texts autobiography and history at the same time? In an earlier essay, I stated as follows:

> Can autobiography be history and can history be autobiography at the same time? This is one question that several students, critics, or observers who know what autobiography is are not in agreement about. For instance, James Olney, one of its foremost observers, tells us that the "subject of autobiography produces more questions than answers, more doubts…. by far than certainties." Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, Olney tells us that "what is autobiography to one observer is history or philosophy, psychology or lyric poetry, sociology or metaphysics to another" (Afejuku 508).

The five texts tend to confirm my earlier observation above and to underscore Olney's point that "one never knows where or how to take hold of autobiography" (3"Autobiography and the Cultural Moment"). It is my contention here, however, that the two Indian and three African texts which in varying degrees are written in the bildungsroman mode are respectively significant both as history and as autobiography. As autobiography, as a literary work that offers us a man's testimony about his own self and other fellows, each book deals with the states of mind inspired by the experiences of communicated aesthetics. But the aesthetic value which it renders, if one would endeavour to grasp the essence of the enterprise of autobiography, seems yet not primary in comparison with the anthropological, historical significance and imagination which induced it, and which is the main exploration of this essay.

The autobiographies are rich in the evocation and description of their respective Indian (Chaudhuri and Ghandi's), Zimbabwean (Southern African (Vambe's)) and South African (Mokgatle and Mandela's) societies, and are written from the perspectives of adults who frequently editorialize their childhood and boyhood in the endeavour to give immediacy and power to their imaginative recreations of their past. Thus we see in them, in varying degrees, the "characteristic drama of the autobiographical act" that juxtaposes the current self of the autobiographer which is presented before us and the past self which inevitably the juxtaposition

induces. The concern of the comparativist here is the satisfaction he derives from his reading of otherwise disparate autobiographies whose thematic thrusts and design closely parallel one another. The similarity between the title of Nirad Chaudhuri's autobiography and Naboth Mokgatle's is very striking. So also is the elaboration of their respective cultural and historical details. Of course, Mokgatle was clearly acquainted with the work of Chaudhuri, the great Indian intellectual who was universally known but who untruthfully called his scholastically impressive autobiography *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*. The identification being pointed out here clearly reveals the relationship which an autobiographer shares with another from a different region and literature. This remark equally applies to Lawrence Vambe. He calls his engagingly historical autobiography *An Ill-fated People.* This title is not similar to Chaudhuri's, but its mode and thematic thrusts are not unclose. One would not be wrong, therefore, to say that the former had influenced the latter, directly or indirectly. The comparativist does not need to engage in "valuable detective scholarship" to prove this, no matter how qualitatively, intellectually, critically, textually and theoretically satisfying the detectively scholarly proof may be. An awareness of any evidence of influence that exists in comparative texts should suffice as sufficient proof to the inquirer in order not to take anything away from the creative effort of the author, in this case, the autobiographer at the receiving end. This perspective may generate a serious debate, but it is needless to get entangled in such a debate.

A common remark to make concerning the five texts is that they could rightly be considered or read as autobiographies of the political genre despite their vivid historical details, goal and interest. Each autobiographer reveals himself as an eloquent speaker and chronicler, erudite, man who loves his culture, history, people and country, who possesses the impressive powers of recall employed in manufacturing a memoir of both oneself and one's destiny. This type of assessment may imply a comparative assessment of two different historical or cultural attitudes with the reference to the meaning of "comparative imagination" and the fascination the term holds for us. It should not, for the comparative assessment here is used in the limited sense of the word.

Chaudhuri, Mokgatle, Vambe and, to some extent, Mandela present in their autobiographies their respective peoples' history, their social classification, ethics, customs, myths, religions, cosmology, and perhaps most important, their traditional wisdom passed down from one generation to another through various tales, anecdotes, proverbs and idioms. Each of

them, in his own way, and as much as he can, tries to describe the social ethos from the point of view of an insider who is re-creating a world of far gone years never to be re-seen and against which the present one (as well as perhaps the future) is to be judged. This manner of autobiographical recollection and presentation is clearly employed apparently to engage the attention of the Western audience whose colonizing mission wrought havoc in India, South Africa and Zimbabwe, the home countries of the respective autobiographers. Of course, each autobiographer's pre-occupation and resolution to present the predominant characteristics of his people's social, cultural communities and societies is also to demonstrate to the people that they had a culture and a history of great civilization before the coming of the Europeanconquerors. It may take no perspicacity to state this but the cultural and historical perspective is so large that we cannot but be compelled to say that history is the dominant figure in each autobiography. But to say this does not imply that, comparatively speaking, the autobiographies are of the same creative and intellectual formation.

Ghandi's autobiography, placed within the context of the other autobiographies, is that of an inflated ego of the autobiographer. It is also an autobiography in which Ghandi seems to be more concerned with his spiritual growth than with the history, that is, the political history, and political independence of his country. It is at once a work of metaphysics and the individual's spiritual growth in the quest for his people's political salvation. As at the time it was published, it shaped a new path to collective resistance. But political autobiographers, heroes and freedom fighters such as Nelson Mandela did not follow his ideas and thoughts and style, literary and otherwise, to the letter even though he was a great influence on them. Yet it must be understood that Ghandi's is an autobiography of a wise man, a wise man whose work would continually strike the right chord in readers or audience that enjoy the way or manner the autobiographer imagines and manipulates them to achieve his autobiographical goal. To quote Ghandi:

> What I want to achieve,-- what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years,-- is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain *Moksha*. I live and move and have my being in pursuit of this goal. All that I do by way of speaking and writing, and all my ventures in the political field are directed to this same end. But as I have all along believed that what is possible for one is possible for all, my experiments have not been conducted in the closet, but in the open, and I do not think that this fact detracts from their spiritual value (xxvi).

In the above passage we can see clearly a major aspect of Ghandi's image or self-portrait. We can see his sense of self, of history, of his motives for writing. He is the profound spiritual narrator of his story as well as the supreme protagonist who enacts the spiritual and political deeds that match the narrator's spiritual thoughts. His strategy is to let us have glimpses of his character side by side his thematic strategy.

But, it must be pointed out here that Ghandi's strategy ironically did not go down well with many of his country-people. In the words of Chaudhuri:

> In truth, in the sphere of politics, the people of India, taken in the mass and including the intelligentsia, never accepted Ghandism as Mahatma Ghandi understood it: they accepted only their own version of Ghandism and made it serve their own ends…. Towards the end of his life Mahatma Ghandi seemed to have become suddenly aware of this fact, of the repudiation by his country-men of the only thing for which he cared— his vision of truth and right. The disillusionment made him wish for death, which came with merciful swiftness from the pistol— the sacred weapon of Indian nationalism— of a Hindu fanatic. I speak of merciful swiftness because if he had lived he would have suffered tortures infinitely more cruel and excruciating death. For the real assassin at large was not a single individual, nor a group of conspirators, nor even a reactionary minority of his people, it was an entire geographical environment, a society, a tradition acting in unison, and arrayed as a colossal, nescient murderous force against his principles and teachings (441).

In the above passage is well captured the irony of Ghandi's life principles and teachings. But his untoward end in the hands of his own people who conspired against him cannot vitiate his principles, teachings, ideas and beliefs that give significance to his autobiography and the imagination that inspired it. Indeed, this is a major reason why the autobiography is engaging our attention in this enterprise.

In his compelling essay entitled "Some Principles of Autobiography," William L. Howarth says that an important element in the composition of autobiography is that of "theme," "those ideas and beliefs that give an autobiography its meaning, or at least make it a consistent replica of the writer" (87). Let me quote Howarth in full:

> Theme may arise from the author's general philosophy, religious faith, or political and cultural attitudes. His theme is personal but also representative of an era, just as other literary works may illustrate history of ideas. Infact, autobiography has an especially

> inclusive base, since its writers constantly grapple with issues— love, memory, deat— that appeal to a broad reading public (87).

As already said, Ghandi's autobiography illustrates his personal history— the history of his quest for salvation, spiritual and political, but it also is representative of what many Indians (and non-Indians) of his era (and beyond) desired spiritually and politically. As rightly stated in the blurb, Ghandi's autobiography is historically important as one that "recounts the story of his life and how he developed his concept of Satyagraha, or actual non-violent resistance, which propelled the Indian struggle for independence and counters other non-violent struggles of the twentieth century." The historical causes of his time induced his thematic strategy and the elements of character and of style which he deliberately employs. Throughout, his style, that is, his rhetoric is powerful, controlled and rational. The white colonizer would not expect the colonized Indian to wield such an impressive weapon that totally demoralised him in his rear.

With Howarth's thesis still in mind, we may offer a specimen from Chaudhuri's autobiography:

> THIS BOOK describes the conditions in which an Indian grew to manhood in the early decades of this century. His adventures in the world, where at the end of the narrative he is left more stranded than making his way, have to remain unrecorded for the present. But the argument of the whole life so far as it has been lived is stated here in its completeness. The story I want to tell is the story of the struggle of a civilization with a hostile environment, in which the destiny of British rule in India became necessarily involved. My main intention is thus historical, and since I have written the account with the utmost honesty and accuracy of which I am capable, the intention in my mind has become mingled with the aspiration that the book may be regarded as a contribution to contemporary history. I do not think that any apologies are expected from me for the autobiographical form of the book or for the presence in it of a good deal of egoistic matter (vii).

This quotation clearly illustrates Chaudhuri's conscious dualization of his personal history and that of India in his autobiography. He is an Indian patriot and nationalist of the foremost rank. But he starts the history of India from a history of his own self. His own emotions and feelings start this book which he wants the reader to regard as "a contribution to contemporary history" of India. These personal emotions and feelings he projects through rhythms and images which are unified by the compulsion of his patriotic, nationalistic and broad

historical vision. His imagination is both visual and auditory even though his autobiographical intention or motiveis clearly and unmistakably to produce a creative history of self and a realistic history of his country. Chaudhuri is satisfied with his creative engagement and the process of this engagement. But the reader or critic, who is not totally satisfied with his method, may wish to query Chaudhuri for the frequently wide elaborate references and allusions to European writings and Western ideas in a work which he intended to be a useful weapon or instrument to promote the greatness of Indian civilization. In other words, Chaudhuri could rightly be accused asa Eurocentric autobiographer on account of these references and allusions to Western thoughts. But it could also be argued that he employs the strategy of alluding to Western sources elaborately, as he has done, to demonstrate to the European colonizer his intellectualism, his diverse learning and the cleverness of an Indian scholarly personage who is an outstanding representative of his people. This Indian intellectual (as well as many others) can compete favorably with the best of intellectuals in the colonizer's country. In fact, this may well explain why the autobiography, despite its clearly Indian details, characteristics and life, is unmistakably European in its narrative design. Yet from the perspective of a comparativist the references and allusions to a foreign tradition may be seen as helpful "cultural crosscurrents," to borrow Izevbaye's phrase (7).

Almost every writing, including autobiography, begins with a prime decision, according to Coleridge, which affects the writer's whole process of composition. Whatever this decision is, it induces and dictates to him his strategy as he engages in his enterprise.

Naboth Mokgatle's autobiographical strategy is that of a composer who possesses a realistic imagination, which derives from his initiative to write effectively, factually and convincingly, without recourse to fiction, even in the manner of his composition, about the social and historical circumstances of his people in apartheid South Africa:

> I am mindful that some people who read these accounts will try hard to persuade others to disbelieve them. But what I describe here is not what happened in the past but what happens today. South Africa is not fiction, is not an abstract state which can only be told in stories, it can be visited; my descriptions can be tested. The bureaux can be visited; police arrests are taking place every day, and they can be seen; farm prisons are filled with convict labour, and these can be visited and the convicts there can be spoken to. Europeans who migrate to South Africa must know that they are invited to go there to help make all those things work; to

> keep the African down, to deny them human rights and democracy. Musical artists who claim that they are not politicians and therefore go to South Africa to entertain Europeans only must search their consciences. They must choose between money-making and upholding human rights (250).

Apartheid South Africa was not a place of fiction—or an abstract territory that existed in the imagination of a story-teller who would tell the stories of the emasculated blacks purely from an aesthetic perspective. Apartheid South Africa was a historical reality, and the evil of the whites needed to be described and presented expositorily and "scientifically"—tested for veracity. In *The Situation of the Novel*,Bernard Bergonzi states that to transform "experience" into "fiction" is to be evasive. The writer's primary purpose is to communicate, not to make, not to be evasive (239). Mokgatle does not possess an evasive imagination. His primary decision to write his book in the manner in which he has written it is in stark contrast to the others even though, as I have already argued, he clearly was influenced by Chaudhuri whose autobiography is glaringly of the scholastic mode. Of course, of all the autobiographers under consideration, Mokgatle is the least educated, as he possesses only a minimal education of primary standard six or so. This disability, if it is correct to say so, may be responsible for his kind of autobiography, which elicits from James Olney the following reaction:

> Because he records the details of his life chronologically and without the artist's eye for significant details, or the philosopher's need to find a meaning in his experience, Mokgatle's book is largely lacking in structure and pattern (*TellMe Africa* 252).

I disapprove of Olney's remark on the grounds that it is that of a Western scholar who seems to have a light grasp of Mokgatle's book. In any case, Mokgatle's purpose of writing his autobiography (which also is the autobiography of other unknown black South Africans that Mokgatle's life is a microcosm of) is clear in his above cited passage. His compositional strategy is justified by his primary purpose and vice versa. But I must reiterate my disapproval of Olney's remark. Perhaps I am sounding racist unconsciously, but that a scholar, theorist and critic of Olney's stature should have dismissed such an autobiography so off-hand on account of its direct, simple chronological sequence in relation to historical time, which I personally consider to be one of the high merits of Mokgatle, is something that I could not fathom. Since when has chronological sequence (and its simplicity of patterns) ceased to be an artistic virtue? Since when has it become a tool with which to mark down its applicator who should be dismissed as a failed

artist or as a failed literary philosopher? It is unreasonable to adopt Olney's type of attitude in any rigorous or intelligent discussion expected of a critic or theorist, especially a Western one, when he elects to interpret for us the text of a non-Western author— be he a novelist or an autobiographer such as Mokgatle.

Though he does not avow it, Mokgatle must owe to Ghandi (who led a political rebellion in South Africa) the basis for his own political revulsion and revolution against the apartheid regime which inspired his type of creative imagination as demonstrated in this book. But why the term "creative imagination" in reference to Mokgatle in view of the seeming contradiction here that some critic may allude to? Every form or kind of writing involves some creativity. Every form or kind of writing, no matter how elementary or realistic it may be, is an act which involves some art. This art is the "creative process". According to Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, the "creative process" should cover the "entire sequence from the subconscious origins of a literary work to those last revisions, which with some writers, are the most creative part of the whole" (85). Mokgatle's and the other autobiographies covered can or should be viewed and appreciated from this stand-point. Similar to Wellek and Warren's theoretical remark is Howarth's, which needs to be fully quoted here:

> Autobiography is thus hardly "factual," "unimaginative", or even "nonfictional," for it welcomes all the devices of skilled narration and observes few of the restrictions— accuracy, impartiality, inclusiveness— imposed upon other forms of historical literature. So a reader can legitimately study autobiography as he does other literary genres, by identifying its structural element, and observing their complex relations (86).

The above quotation clearly announces the vast possibilities of autobiography. And because these possibilities that autobiography contains are so broad, one can conveniently say that autobiography is a vast field of impossibilities the critic or theorist can study or lay claim to with utmost uncertainty, no matter the gift of his critical or creative imagination.

The Indian and African autobiographies which engage our attention here from the perspective of a comparativist possess the vast possibilities and impossibilities that they intended to dwell on, although it is mainly argued in this essay that each one's historical imagination is glaring and dominant in each one's autobiography. To understand oneself one must understand one's country. This passion is elucidated in all the autobiographies although with each autobiographer's peculiar verve, the verve of the oppressed whose writing indicates his attempt

to gain full freedom from the hold of the oppressor: the colonizer, who, to borrow the words of Ghandi, must learn “to rise above the opposing currents of love and hatred, attachment and repulsion” (504).

But it is apposite to end this enterprise with a portion of the closing remarks of Nelson Mandela whose *Long Walk to Freedom* is the most recent of the autobiographies:

> …my hunger for the freedom of my own people became a hunger for the freedom of all people, white and black. I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man’s freedom is a prisoner of hatred, he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness. I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else’s freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is taken from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity (624).

This is a simple construction in which an irresistible philosophical and political thought is well couched for the benefit of mankind. It is quite representative of the philosophical, political or historical thought of the other autobiographers who want us to understand that the myth of the conqueror and the conquered must be buried forever— if all persons the world over must understand, to borrow Chaudhuri’s words, that the “choice before us is of revolving round ourselves to die, or of revolving round a sun in order to live” (510). Ultimately, the oppressed and the oppressor need a renewed affiliation that recognizes the positive “stream of human evolution” with one another if they hope to live on this planet in perpetual peace. This is the thrust of each of the autobiographers despite their respective idiosyncratic constructions. The creative imagination that impels each autobiographer’s historical construction is the creative imagination of life. It motivates him to deconstruct the vast and strange body of negative myths about his country in the positive endeavor to imbue his country-people with “life-renewing force” which they need to enhance their humanity and mankind.

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