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Literary Aesthetics of African Biographies and Autobiographies

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Abstract

Arguably, biographical theory is not regarded as a popular area of research, hence the interest of this present effort in it. This paper proposes to join the critical debate that this area of criticism is as important as other areas of critical discourses. This paper examines literary and social values in selected biographies and autobiographies. The selected works examined here are: Nnamdi Azikiwe's *My Odyssey*, Phanuel Egejuru's *Chinua Achebe: Pure and Simple*, Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*, Wole Soyinka's *Ake*. The paper is hinged on M. M. Kanwadkar's theory of autobiography. The paper argues that biographers and writers of personal life history also employ literary techniques just the same way as novelists do when attempting to construct their respective intentions. It has been discovered that biographies and autobiographies generally contain great social values that may not easily be available in other arts or genres of literature.

Keywords: Autobiography, biography, literary aesthetics

Introduction

According to M. M. Kanwadkar, the theory of autobiography postulates that the yardsticks to measure if a work is autobiographical include:

- Truth
- Selection of Events
- Subjectivity and Objectivity

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- 'Self' as Centre
- Detached View of the 'Self'

Kanwadkar adds that the two major functions of an autobiographical work are for self-revelation and for contemporary documentation. Autobiographical works can be traced to the Renaissance in the 15th century. The earliest autobiographical work is known to be St. Augustine's Confessions published circa A. D. 309. Other early autobiographical writings include *The Book of Margery Kempe,* published in 1436 and *The Autobiography of Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury,* published in 1764. Critical assessment of the artistry of the selected texts for the purpose of this paper requires association with correlative theories of literary criticism. Though the authors of some of the texts, perhaps, did not intentionally write for such classification, the level of their popularity has attracted literary critics.

Literary Aesthetics of African Biographies and Autobiographies

Literary assessment of Soyinka's *Ake* requires knowledge of the author's view about negritude, and his application of the philosophy in the text. Negritude originally a literary and ideological movement of French Speaking black intellectuals is a comprehensive reaction to colonialism in most Africa. This movement rejects the political, social and moral domination of Africa by the colonisers. The term, which has been used in a general sense to describe the black world in opposition to the West, assumes the total consciousness of belonging to the black race. The negritude literature includes the writings of black intellectuals who affirm black personality and redefine the collective experience of black people. An example of such intellectuals is Leopold Sedar Senghor who in his writings rejects the classical view that human races can be mutually exclusive. Senghor believes in the expression of values of traditional Africa, which are embodied in the thinking and institutions of African society and reflected in negritude literature.

However, Wole Soyinka reacts against the original principles of negritude, which he sees as belonging to colonial ideology. He shares the view that "negritude gives a defensive character to African ideas" (Carlberg 4). He argues that the artist should rather draw from the past, only for the purposes of significant lessons. He takes into account the imperfections of the past, which he considers to be inherent in the contemporary human conditions, and therefore have provided a basis to question the present. He thinks that the innocence of Africa has to be stressed and should constitute the mainstream of African consciousness and its literature. Other theories necessary in this discourse are postcolonialism, Marxism and Archetypal or Mythic

literary ideologies. Post-colonialism refers to the period following the decline of colonialism, such as the end of domination by the colonisers. In its use as a literary critical approach, it refers to a collection of theoretical and critical strategies mainly used to examine the culture of literature, politics and history of former colonies, and their relation to the rest of the world. The postcolonial writers attempt to resurrect their culture and to combat preconceptions about their culture. Major post- colonial writers and critics include Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Spivak, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Buchi Emecheta.

According to Jung, "archetypes are innate patterns of thought and behaviour that strive for realization within an individual's environment." (Darowski and Darowski 15). In line with this view, such major critics as Robert Graves, Francis Fergusson, Phillip Wheelwright, Leslie Fiedler, Northrop Frye, Maud Bodkin, and G. Wilson Knight view individual plot patterns of literature as recurrences of certain archetypes and essential mythic formulae.

Marxism on the other hand is a sociological approach to literature that viewed works of art as the products of historical forces. It largely focuses on the clash between the dominant and repressed classes in any given age or society. The ideology encourages art to imitate what is often referred to as objective reality. But contemporary Marxism views art as reflective of the age in which it is produced. An interesting aspect of Marxism, dialectical materialism, suggests that history does not develop in random fashion or in a linear way. According to Francis Ferguson, history develops from struggle between contradictions that finally resolves in a synthesis of the two sides. An example is class conflict, which often leads to new social system like the situation in South Africa as reflected in Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*.

There is a somewhat remote link to existentialism in Mandela's autobiography that may attract the critical arguments of such critics as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Soren Kierkegaard in this paper. Kierkegaard in his existential theory does not propose complete rejection of the idea of God, but rather argues that since there is no assurance of God's existence, those who profess such faith should be committed, in order to reduce the despair of an absurd world, (Robert 215). In other words, one could create social protective devices in his or her mind through personal commitment. Nelson Mandela's total commitment to the struggle against apartheid policy in South Africa, as indicated in his *ong Walk to Freedom*, could be likened to this philosophy. As a character in the text he does not consider any other thing but the struggle for freedom, even when his life is threatened. The theories of

deconstruction and post-modernism that seek to overturn classic literary paradigms also appear to have justified the choice of some of the texts in this discourse. Avant-garde similarly gives opportunity for some intellectual works to be considered as works of art. It seeks to eliminate or reduce the distinction between art and life. Avant-garde artists aim at creating new literary order that is alienated from the established tradition.

My Odyssey and *Long Walk to Freedom* may be studied under the umbrella of such theories as Dialectical Materialism and Postcolonialism. But the critic has the liberty to apply Deconstruction and aspects of New Criticism, especially when there is no uniform style for biographies or autobiographies other than the fact that while biographies are written in the third-person narrative, autobiographies are written in the first-person narrative point of view. The diction also varies from one author to another, though all adopt the same prose form. Nnmadi Azikwe in his autobiography, *My Odyssey*, like other writers of personal life account, reports self, as an archetype character, quite different from the actual personality of late Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe, the politician, even when he, in the book, relives most pieces of personal experiences from the cradle to partisan politics. However, Chinua Achebe of Egejuru's biography is not different from Achebe, the novelist. He functions in the book as a dual character: one, being the novelist that Egejuru reports while the other is the Albert Chinualumogu Achebe, who in the biography retells his actual life experiences to the biographer. Moreover, he becomes a literary character as his actions are reported from a third person narrative point of view. He is not fictional or imaginary, for the author finds out from the actual Achebe through real life interviews and relates these to the readers. The biographer presents parts of the data in quotations to authenticate the reality of Egejuru's findings in line with chronological sequences.

It has also been observed that some aspects or passages of some autobiographies or biographies could be as humorous as comic plays or fiction. An example is taken from Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*, which presents some comic aspects of Mandela's childhood. He reports the game he most enjoys playing with the girls as a child. It is referred to as 'khetha,' meaning *choose-the-one-you-like* in Xhosa language. "This was not so much an organised game, but a spur-of-the-moment sport that took place when we accosted a group of girls our own age and demanded that each select the boy she liked" (10). The rules of the game, according to Mandela dictated that the girl's choice must be respected and once she had chosen her favourite boy, she was free to continue on her journey, escorted by the lucky boy she chose. The author recalls that the girls were nimble-witted far cleverer than the

boys were, "and would often confer among themselves and choose one boy, usually the plainest fellow, and then tease him all the way home" (10). The narration of the childhood antics in Mandela's autobiography makes a humorous reading as though it is a created story intended to elicit laughter from the readers.

There is also this gripping descriptive power of South African writing on matters that affect humanity: quest for identity and freedom, similar to the narration of the West Indians on the same or similar subject matter. It is a common trend in postcolonial literature. Even when the narration of Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* is largely historical, some passages are strikingly similar in passion, diction, and content to some passages in Peter Abraham's *Tell Freedom*. For instance, the description of Lee's flight from home after the death of his father is not quite different from Mandela's narration of his flight from home after the death of his father: "We travelled by foot and in silence until the sun was sinking slowly towards the horizon. But the silence of the heart between mother and child is not a lonely one. My mother and I never talked very much, but we did not need to… (Abrahams 16)."

It is similar to Lee's narration of his flight with "the strange woman" in Peter Abrahams's *Tell Freedom* after the death of Lee's father, or like in Michael Anthony's *Green Days* by the River where Shellie's report of his visit to the hospital to see his sick father who eventually dies leaving the boy as poor as Mandela's father leaves him at childhood. The same literary sources have provided vital information to the three works irrespective of content. While Nelson Mandela writes about his real experiences in life, Abrahams and Anthony capture the miseries faced by growing children painfully searching for identity. The three authors similarly employ stream of consciousness technique as a reportorial style. Irrespective of content and thrust, their experiences are largely revealed through the use of imagery.

However, while narrating his release from prison, the language/tone of *Long Walk to Freedom* changes from good prose to prototypical political reporting. The passionate appeal to readers' emotion becomes coarse and assumes the tone of a hector. For example, the reporting of Mandela's separation from his wife largely for political reasons lacks humour or pity, but repulsive and arrogant, unlike the appealing narration of their meeting while he is in detention.

> On April 13, 1992, at a press conference in Johannesburg, flanked by my two oldest friends and comrades, Walter and Oliver, I announced my separation from my wife. The situation had grown so difficult that I felt that it was in the best interests of all concerned – the ANC, the family, and Winnie – that we part… (Abrahams 599).

The tone is tense, different from the appealing one used in the narration of his meeting with Winnie while in prison. Nevertheless, every situation or subject matter has its diction. The respective variation in diction is, therefore, an addition that the text is a work of art. A converse situation is plausible about Soyinka's *Ake*, which confirms the author as a consistent mythopoetic philosopher-writer. His language in *Ake* does not contrast the diction of *The Interpreter* even when the former is a literary autobiography while the latter is an outright fiction. However, the narrative techniques of autobiographies and biographies seem to be less captivating than fiction, given that "truth," in most instances, does not require embellishment for effect. Even where there is little remarkable variation in diction between the autobiography and his fiction, Wole Soyinka in *The Interpreters* is able to use symbols and images to portray the dilemma faced by the Postcolonial Africans returning from overseas after university education. The literary devices, albeit the same mythopoeic manner of writing, rarely apply to his *Ake: The Years of Childhood* in which he gives the account of events of his childhood.

Interestingly, though Soyinka, the first person narrator appears to be the central character, much of his childhood experience is revealed through the actions, fate and consciousness of his uncle Sanya, Bukola, Wild Christian, and others. For instance, the human relationship with the ancestral spirit is revealed through the interactions between Sanya and the 'iwin' (a wood spirit also believed to live in the ground) as revealed by the illness of Sanya, believed to have been induced by his association with the wood spirit.

The fictionalisation of *Ake* is quite overt given its authorial superlative characterisation. The author seems to withhold the true identity of the bookseller. In a straightjacket autobiography, the actual name of the individual is certainly necessary, but Soyinka introduces her as just Mrs. B, perhaps, to avoid hurting someone. He also paints a picture of "abiku" about Bukola, the only daughter of the bookseller: "Her only daughter, Bukola, was not of our world. When we threw our voices against the school walls of Lower Parsonage and listened to them from a long distance (Soyinka 16)."

In a simple autobiography, one wonders if the representation of spirit world among the human as Soyinka portrays above could be authentic. Such characterisation seems much plausible in fiction. However, the author is giving an account of his actual experience and it beholds that he should be given the benefit of doubt, only supposing that artistry demands embellishment. Also worthy of note is the symmetry of thrust despite the contrast in the characterisation between Nelson Mandela's

Long Walk to Freedom and Coetzee's *Age of Iron*. Mandela as a first-person narrator discusses himself and events around him. He is quite visible and almost "precise" in history. Conversely, Mrs. Curen as a fictional character assists Coetzee to discover the horrors of apartheid in South Africa. Mandela, also as a character in his *Long Walk to Freedom*, tells his actual life experience within the same social and political context. In similar approach, with the 'egungun' and 'oro' mythology, Soyinka attempts to contrast the African traditional religion and Christianity, giving none vintage over the other while he leaves the reader to pass varying judgements on the rivalry. He also places emphasis on things of the spirit than socially human, particularly his respect for the bookseller's eccentric disposition.

In whatever approach employed by the various authors, all devices lead to one desire: the achievement of authorial intention. It is not explicitly revealed in fiction. But no doubt, swaying public opinion seems to be the focal point of most biographies or autobiographies. Their means are literary signifiers. James Booth in his *Writers and Politics in Nigeria* (1981) comments that although individuals may be egocentric in the narration of their personal life history, Azikwe in *My Odyssey* appears to be "peculiarly Nigerian in reflection" (53). He accuses Azikwe of "over-embellishment," for political reasons. According to Booth, high sounding words as used by Azikwe are too literary for an autobiography. On his part, Ali Mazrui in his *Political Value and the Educated Class* (1978) is of the view that such high sounding words used by Azikwe, "could send an audience into ecstasy if enough of them were used near together to create an impression of massive verbal power (Mazrui 15). Though these two critics may have written aside literary instinct, they seem to have achieved the same or similar artistic feat. Azikwe, who appreciates the impact of intellectual association with literary celebrities, empowers the artistry of his autobiography by quoting from the great political poet, Victor Hugo. He opens the preface with a passage from his 'Where Goes Thou,' and every major chapter is introduced with extracts from famous speeches or poems that have correlation with the content of the chapter. Indeed, the "embellishment" Booth talks about in *My Odyssey*, even if it betrays ostentation on the part of the author, supports the argument that the text is, to some extent, a work of art. If the speeches of the sage as reproduced in his autobiography send "his audience into ecstasy" as Booth claims the signifiers are, therefore, successful, though Derridarists might discover otherwise in their deconstruction experimentation.

Another important aspect of Autobiography that classifies it as a form of literature is that it compresses history, sociology, and fictional prose into a single field of study,

thus giving literature a broad scope. This is evident in the performance of what seems an epic solo-drama by a local poet Krune Mghayi as indicated in Mandela's autobiography. As narrated by Mandela the performance was supposed to be a live performance in a school theatre, which he attended. "Suddenly, the door opened and out walked, not Dr. Wellington, but a black man, dressed in leopard-skin kaross and matching hat who was carrying a spear in either hand…" (Mandela 40) At one point the solo-dramatist raises "his assegai (instrument of war) into the air for emphasis and accidentally hits the curtain wire above him" (Mandela 40). Like some experienced artistes do, the performer quickly improvises and converts an error to humour as if it is part of the script. He "stopped walking, faced us and newly energised, exclaimed that this accident – the assegai striking the wire – symbolised the clash between the culture of Africa and that of Europe" (Mandela 41). Like the Greek epic drama, the assegai stands for what is glorious and true in African history. It is a symbol of the African as a warrior and the African as artiste. The metal wire is explained as an example of western manufacturing, which is skilful but cold: "What I am talking to you about is the brutal clash between what is foreign and indigenous and good, and what is foreign and bad…" (Mandela 40-42).

The above narration is beyond mere life experience of the author. He dug into archive as a sociologist or historian would do, and rehearsed it in a literary manner. The presentation combines fiction and real life situation, while the narrative diction is poetic, thereby passing the test of art, part of which constitutes classic literature. It is therefore suggested Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* is an example of autobiography that compresses history, fiction and sociology into literature. Similarly, as can be seen in the passages quoted from *Long Walk to Freedom* on the natural forces that compel erratic behaviour in Mandela, the author uses capital letter 'O' in "only" in every case to emphasize the limitedness of opportunities for Africans in South Africa. He also uses "Africans" a noun, as an adjective in each case, perhaps, to emphasize the extent of racial segregation in the country. In a similar intensity, Soyinka's *Ake* tends to remove the doubt about artistry in certain autobiographies. Almost every aspect of the story is as interestingly embellished as good fiction. For example when he describes the funny appearance of a missionary, the portrayal is so comical as though it is intentionally imagined to amuse the readers: "but he had only stopped to talk to a little boy held by the hand by a woman, perhaps his mother. He stopped to part him on the head, his largemouth opened in an endless smile and the corners of his eyes broke into wrinkles." (Mandela 14)

This passage though, appears quite real just because the author claims that it is true account of his childhood experience, it passes as good comic prose in travel fiction or theatre of manner. In Egejuru's biography of Chinua Achebe, she largely uses a stereotyped research method by presenting the interviews she had with the respondents. It makes her findings quite authentic and real to life. She reports where necessary and allows each respondent to speak to support her remarks. Even though it is more historical than some autobiographies, the biographer's ability to align her findings with Achebe's novels qualifies the work as a non-fictional literature.

Major literary theories that apply to fiction also may be used as literary paradigm to assess various biographies or autobiographies. From the classic to the post-modernist literary movements and theories, some autobiographies and biographies can be classified as forms of literature. According to Microsoft Encarta 2004, a traditional reader believes that language is capable of expressing ideas without changing them; and that in the hierarchy of language, writing is secondary to speech. The traditional reader also supposes that the author of a text is the source of its meaning. In line with this linguistic view, it supposes that impact of the written words may be a viable gauge for artistry.

However, reader's theory of deconstruction subverts these assumptions and challenges the idea that a text has an unchanging, unified meaning. Applying the concept, the de-constructive reader may want to suppose that a biographer's views cannot adequately represent reality about which he or she pretends to write. The deconstructive reader may not really distinguish between biography and fiction or the former's exclusion from literature. The purview of such reader is the summation of extraneous and textual signifiers for the determination of literary values of, in the case of this discourse, biographies or autobiographies. It is therefore pertinent to suggest that not all that is contained in biography is true-life experience. And from the point of view of the deconstructive reader, the single account of a sage in his autobiography may not be enough information on the subject matter. It is however important to concur with the theory of deconstruction, to come extent, that facts outside written biography or autobiography are necessary in the evaluation of any text under discourse. For example, Azikwe's suggestion that Onitsha was founded about 1748 AD should not be used as sufficient information to determine the date of the founding of the Eastern city given that contrary information exists. Details are found in the text chapter where the literary and social values of biographies and autobiographies in African literature are discussed.

Nevertheless, the accounts of the lives of Nelson Mandela and Nnamdi Azikwe are largely achieved through good prose, which is also the Vehicle of fiction. As noted by Encyclopedia Britannica Volume Six, biography is recognised as a form of literature which is regarded as "non-fictional prose". Bearing in mind that literature is a body of written composition, in prose or verse especially of lasting quality and artistic merit, there does not seem to be any controversy that biography and autobiography are integral forms of literature.

Values of African literature are rarely considered on the basis of artistry, but largely on the basis of advocacy for African worldview. A good number of early novels and poetry written in Africa are made popular largely by their treatment of colonial issues and the emerging historical reality in the continent. Such texts include Kenneth Kaunda's *Zambia Shall be free* (1962).

Alex Laguma's *A Walk in the Night* (1962), Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *Weep Not Child* (1964) and a host of others. Their thematic preoccupation is largely the historical reality in Africa, for which the novels are popular. Though Ayi Kwei Amah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is regarded as classic a novel, the attacks by African critics, given the author's cynical approach to Postcolonial politics in Ghana overshadows recognition of the artistry of the novel. Therefore, many Afro-centric critics mostly give premium to social and political themes in consideration of good novels in Africa.

Given that biographies and autobiographies are written in prose form and in similar rendition as in novels, their social relevance is as important as the artistry. However, in a continent where group identity and leadership in the past three centuries have been shrouded in crises, writing the literature of the continent or individuals or groups of peoples has become a serious intellectual activity. While some appear in sociological or historical form, others are in various kinds of biography. National biographies are, however, quite common. A good example of such national biography is the national biography of Egypt, which is expressed in religious and literary movements in the continent of Africa.

Biographies and autobiographies appear to be advocates for the cause or interest of the groups, nations, professions, classes of people or ethnic groups as some of the texts analysed here have demonstrated. For example, Mandela uses his autobiography to speak for his people besides the freedom struggle in his country. His *Long Walk to Freedom* identifies the Xhosa people as a proud people traced through paternal lineage. Mandela describes them as a people "with an expressive and euphonious

language and an abiding belief in the importance of laws, education and country" (4). Still advocating for his people, he projects the Xhosa society as being "a balanced and harmonious social order in which every individual knew his or her place" (4). Of course, the book is an indirect vehicle for the people of Xhosa and Africans to assert their human dignity through thoughts and the reported leadership of Mandela. The values of African communal living are also appreciated through Mandela's autobiography. According to him, his mother preside over three huts at Qunu, which are always filled with the babies and children of his relations. He reveals that in African culture, the sons and daughter of one's aunts or uncles are considered brothers and sisters, not cousins as in the English culture. This is illustrated thus: "We don't make the same distinctions among relations practised by whites. My mother's sister is my mother; my uncle's son is my brother; my brother's child is my son, my daughter" (5). His account is of little or no doubt because the information has the force of history. This is not exactly the same as fiction that is largely imaginative even though they are both expressed in the same prose form. Thus, biography can be cited as an authentic source of information about people or past events. It may also become source of history given that most authors constitute part of the events about which they write. Perhaps, it is more credible than history because an author who is involved in the culture or event is the one who tells the story. Certain autobiographies could become sources of history where materials on some events or people are lacking. For instance, some aspects of Thembu culture that are handed down from one generation to another by oral tradition could have gone into extinction due to rapid urbanisation and cosmopolitanism. Such aspects have eventually been established and made available for study via written records, as Nelson Mandela has done in his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*. In other words, occurrences of events do not constitute history or literature. The events should have been recorded in communicable language for posterity as biographical literature often does. That is to stay that biographies and autobiographies have immense historical values especially in Africa where most aspects of rudimental life are rapidly going into extinct.

The wealth and uniqueness of African folklore and fables are revealed even in such autobiography as in Mandela,s *Long Walk to Freedom*, and Achebe's biography. From Egejuru's account of Achebe, sources of Achebe's literary prowess seem to have been revealed. The revelation is capable of assisting African literary scholars to embrace African fables and folklore as possible material for contemporary fiction. Mandela also writes that his father once told them stories of historic battles and heroic Xhosa warriors. His mother would "enchant" them with Xhosa legends and

fables that are handed down from numberless generations. "These tales stimulated my childhood imagination, and usually contained some moral lessons" (10). He recalls a story his mother told them about a traveller approached by an old woman with terrible cataracts on her eyes. "Then another man came along and was approached by the old woman. She asked him to clean her eyes, and even though he found the task unpleasant, he did as she asked. Then miraculously the scales fell from the old woman's eyes and she became young and beautiful. The man married her and became wealthy and prosperous" (11). Recalling the story is not only interesting as in most successful prose fiction, it also provides useful knowledge, as the author comments on his experience from the fable. "It is a simple tale, but its message is an enduring one: virtue and generosity will be rewarded in ways that one cannot know" (11). This is an aspect of folklore, which is largely used to teach moral lessons in African literature. It also supports the argument that some autobiographies can effectively combine fictional and nonfiction literature for social and literary effects.

Conclusion

This paper has examined literary and social values in biographies and autobiographies on this premise. It has established that biographers and writers of personal life history also use literary techniques like novelist to construct their respective intentions. Of particular interest is Wole Soyinka's *Ake*, a fictional autobiography, despite its similar artistic characteristics with the novel, is peculiar in theme to autobiographies. In a similar manner, it has been discovered that biographies and autobiographies generally contain great social values that may be similar to what is obtainable in other genres of literature

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