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Boehmer, Elleke

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The hero’s story:  
the male leader’s autobiography and the syntax of postcolonial nationalism

I was literally carrying on my back the history, culture and heritage of my people. 
(Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* )

‘In Quest of the Golden Fleece’: the leader’s autobiography as national genre

Narratives, as has already been seen in this book, give form to and legitimate the process of postcolonial and national coming-into-being. Stories codify national reality and space, and allow emergent national identities to be performed. By looking at a particularly definitive, *form-giving* or *in-forming* narrative genre, the independence leader’s autobiography, the work of this chapter is to show how the story of the growth to self-consciousness of the leader at national independence often presents as a synonym for the rise of the nation. In both Indian and African nationalist movements, the two points of focus in this chapter, leaders’ tales operate as inaugural symbolic texts shaping and justifying configurations of status and power in the postcolonial nation(-to-be), including the interconnection of nationalist ideology and gender politics. Of particular interest here will be the way in which the leader’s autobiography helps legitimate the gender specifics of the nation. Where the leader’s individual selfhood is equated with the nation’s collective identity, key nationalist touchstones like pride and loyalty are represented as predominantly a matter for men.

Benedict Anderson and Timothy Brennan have spoken of particular kinds of texts, especially the novel, as tightly associated with the composition of nationalist imaginings and movements. The text which I would want to assign a crucial place at the very point of inscription of the new nation, specifically the formerly colonised nation-at-independence, is the autobiography of the chief or primary leader of the triumphant nationalist movement – often also the president or prime minister of the new nation-state. Across African postcolonial history, for example, the publication of the leader’s autobiogra-
phy coincided closely with the moment of independence. The trend continued into the 1990s with the appearance of Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* in 1994, the year of South Africa's first multiparty elections. The 2003 publication of the authorised biography of Walter and Albertina Sisulu, African National Congress (ANC) struggle leaders alongside Mandela, was in all likelihood planned as an anticipatory ten-year anniversary marker of that historic year.3

The new nation that emerges after the incursions of colonisation, one based on borders and hierarchies drawn up in colonial times, in many ways constitutes an impoverished symbolic field, certainly when it comes to establishing that nation as a player in the modern world, even if also rooted in tradition. Within this field, the leader's life-story plays the important role of supplying the nation with a self-determining modern history, as I will suggest in a reading of Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography* (1936) and its partial sequel *The Discovery of India* (1946) as foundational nationalist texts and templates of the genre.4 Yet in the same breath, even as it positions the leader at the historical summation point that is independence, the leader's autobiography also supplies defining images, drawn from the life, through which to understand the nation's emergence into subjecthood, and to justify its new arrangements of privilege and authority. As Declan Kiberd comments, though with specific reference to the visionary, form-giving impact of W. B. Yeats's poetry: 'In such a self-charged context, nation-building can be achieved by the simple expedient of writing one's autobiography: and the autobiography in [the nation] becomes, in effect, the autobiography of the nation'.5

A second key factor in addition to the struggle against colonialism to explain the importance of what I will call the national hero’s autobiography, is that anti-colonial nationalist movements, like fledgling postcolonial nations, are typically distinguished by the existence of small, western-educated elite leaderships socially divided from the national mass. The autobiography of the (normatively) male leader therefore serves the useful purpose of writing the leadership *into* the nation. In other words, by dramatising and thus explaining the leader’s self-description as nationalist, the life-narrative helps to validate his position and/or status. Self-inscription becomes nationalist self-realisation: composing the discrete, monadic entity, which is conventionally the objective of autobiography, involves incrementally knitting that entity into the national collective.6 This aspect of the leader’s life-story offers a special instance of the coercive effects that are wreaked upon the autobiographical subject by autobiography, as in Paul de Man’s theory of the genre. In view of its conspicuous failure to achieve representational closure (in that past and narrating selves cannot coincide), de Man suggests that autobiography, which is necessarily a construction, instead reads itself back into the life in question: ‘acquires a degree of representation productivity’.7
Looked at more closely, the leader’s autobiography effectively sets in motion a process of reciprocal, even circular, legitimation. Nationalist values are enacted in the life-story of the leader, who is necessarily figured in that story as the pre-eminent, most trusty, typical or notable member of the nation. In turn, the achievement of national selfhood and independence acts to bestow pre-eminence upon him. (This applies, incidentally, not only to the subjects of personality cults, such as Kwame Nkrumah, but also to those protesting modesty and introversion, like Nehru.) In the life-story the leader’s birth represents one of the modern origins of the new nation. His dedication and possible suffering in the national cause connect with the people’s struggle while their pain and effort reciprocally amplify and explain his own. His route from provincial or rural obscurity and unselfconsciousness to the city, site of the achievement of modern nationalist self-awareness, traces the nation’s own historical path or even, as the case may be, demographic profile. And, importantly, his self-positioning as male gives legitimating form to what is across the board the predominantly masculine image of the new national leadership. The fact that the ‘shelf-life’ of the postcolonial leader’s autobiography in the public domain is usually relatively short, points up this overall constructedness as it does its occasional value: as the independent nation’s history unfolds, so the context-governed ‘representation productivity’ of the autobiography rapidly grows obsolete. (Due to their iconic global status the life-stories of Nehru and Mandela are exceptions to this rule.)

Philip Dodd has observed that the point of closure of male autobiography is conventionally the subject’s achievement of a vocation. 8 Emphasis in these texts is on the unfolding of a coherent self over time and on the singularity of the individual life. 9 In contrast, women’s autobiographical writings, certainly in Britain and the United States, tend to show greater awareness of the gaps, uncertainties and fictions involved in the construction of identity. Models of the self are less individualistic, more relational and group-based, if also often alienated (given that autobiographical writing is itself seen as a masculine tradition). 10 The theme of accomplishment in these writings rarely dominates: self-disclosure and the recognition of achievement are usually linked to some higher cause, family role, public purpose or personal ideal.

Against these two trends, and bringing together features of both, the postcolonial leader’s autobiography is distinguished by the linking of individual with national self-formation. Here it is essential at one and the same time to project an identifiable difference against the coloniser, and to configure a ‘typical’ national self, a sameness, to provide a model for the production of national citizens. As a leading spokesman for the African National Congress, Nelson Mandela is explicit concerning the heavily freighted symbolism of his walking into a white court of law wearing traditional Xhosa dress for his October 1962 trial: ‘I was literally carrying on my back the history, culture and
The male leader’s autobiography

heritage of my people. That day, I felt myself to be the embodiment of African nationalism, the inheritor of Africa’s difficult but noble past and her uncertain future.” As Mandela’s exemplary stress on embodiment and inheritance shows, the object of attention in the autobiography is at once the individual and the national past, where the leader’s experience, character and physical presence are set up as metonymic of the national. The demand, too, is for an end-directed cohesion, for a steady convergence of individual and communal historical paths towards the specific culmination point of national unity and independence.

Most of the autobiographies explored in this chapter almost necessarily conclude with that moment of independence, or with its strong anticipation. The implication is clear: the leader’s vocation is fully realised when the new nation is born. (Indeed, in that the publication of the autobiography is often timed to mark this event, market forces intervene in this area of postcolonial cultural production as in others, as discussed in chapter 9.) In these narratives the trajectory of the leader’s life is allowed to merge with, and be subsumed in, the nation’s, even as the leader is seen to carry the nation’s political destiny upon his shoulders. This is formally demonstrated where the narrative closes with a statement of vision, intent or retrospection, as appears in its most pronounced form in Awo (1960), the autobiography of Obafemi Awolowo, leader of Action Group in Nigeria at the time of independence. Across its latter half his life-narrative is almost completely paved over with debates about procedure and strategy, declarations of personal and nationalist belief quoted from contemporary documents and speeches, presumably mostly his own, and assessments of Nigeria’s global political position. In Jawaharlal Nehru’s An Autobiography, too, lengthy reflections on current debates and policy issues – the legacy of the Indian Civil Service, communalism on the sub-continent – are concentrated in the final third of the book. The preface to Albert Luthuli’s autobiography Let My People Go (1962) glosses the close knit between autobiography, nationalist involvement and the leader’s performance of his nationalist identification in this way: ‘I regard my life as one among many, and my role in the resistance as one among many. If I have anything to say, it is not because of any particular distinction, but because I am identified with those who love South Africa.’

Mandela’s Long Walk to Freedom, which is in several ways a rewriting and consolidation of the forms of ideology of the earlier biographies, interestingly gives markedly more space to personal reminiscence, what are called ‘family moments’, than they do. There is, for example, the humorous and now revealing account of Mandela’s attempt to give a ‘headstrong’ Winnie Mandela driving lessons. Long Walk to Freedom is of course the product of a more individualistic time, focused on the self, the personal and celebrity – a product that is moreover explicitly designed to appeal to an international audience. And in that Mandela’s personal life, like Nehru’s, was repeatedly taken over by political
activity, including long periods of imprisonment, the need for some light relief is palpable. His autobiography is not required to be a policy document in the same way as were the 1960s life-stories. Yet, even so, the personal reflections continue to be offered mainly as interludes within the busier, more public, and inevitably more historically important story of Mandela the ANC leader. As he spells out:

I have always believed that to be a freedom fighter one must suppress many of the personal feelings that make one feel like a separate individual rather than part of a mass movement. One is fighting for the liberation of millions of people, not the glory of one individual . . . [I]n the same way that a freedom fighter subordinates his own family to the family of the people, he must subordinate his own individual feelings to the movement.14

Aware of its status as public rhetoric, the leader’s autobiography tends, therefore, to forswear personal testimony unless this can be justified politically, or may be presented in such a way as to provide points of identification for the new national citizenry.

The syntax of nationalist life-writing

It is possible to isolate out of the postcolonial leader’s life-story-as-inaugural-history (in other words, as ideological form), a set of distinctive, interrelated tropes through which the new nation is conceived into being. In the second edition of his influential Imagined Communities (1991) Benedict Anderson speaks of nationalist imaginings in both colonial and independent postcolonial states as being organised according to a symbolic grammar generated and administered by the prevailing institutions of power, such as the museum. 15 Specifically, grammar to him signifies a bounded, rule-governed classificatory system, which can be flexibly repeated or serialised across different, often widely spaced contexts – contexts that then exist ‘in parallel’. Anderson tends, however, to confine the term largely to the description of totalising grids, as in systems of racial codification, which may delimit its potential productivity. To extend that productivity in a different direction I propose in this chapter to apply grammar to the configuration of form-giving metaphors of national experience in texts, here in particular in autobiography.

In this case, therefore, the nationalist grammar would typically include the trope of the national journey, one common to several of the autobiographies I discuss. This journey takes several definitive forms: travel to the city or back to a hometown/roots, or the trek around the nation still lacking official and independent borders, or a ‘journey’ of discovery into the national past. It may also involve a time spent in the ‘wilderness’ – Europe, the city, a prison, often in another land or province, a time that is self-proving if sometimes trying, that
may even reproduce in microcosm the history of national travail before inde-
pendence. In the autobiography of the eastern Nigerian leader Nnamdi
Azikiwe, called My Odyssey, a journey or pilgrimage figure is clearly signalled
as a structuring motif: his sub-headings include, ‘In Quest of the Golden

Figures such as these do paradigmatic work on their own, yet in texts as sym-
bolically weighted as early nationalist autobiographies they generally function
relationally, not in free-floating form, justifying the use of the term grammar
or even syntax on two counts. First, the tropes operate within the life-stories in
an interactive, patterned or even rule-governed way, as will be seen. Second,
they flexibly replicate across autobiographies from different geopolitical con-
texts, as well as within individual texts (such as in the rhythm of periods of
incarceration, or trips to Europe, which governs Nehru’s autobiography). The
autobiographical syntax can therefore entail the configuration as part of an
interconnected, flexibly repeating sequence of patterns (syntagmatic units) of
individual/national development, in which key metaphors (paradigms) of the
nation and the nationalist are then embedded.

To illustrate, almost without exception the autobiographies examined here
begin with a genealogy setting out the leader’s origins and socio-historical
context. This serves as an opening ‘clause’ from which the syntax of the later
life (in the form of, say, pilgrimage, conquest or some kind of overcoming)
develops, as I will show. This same figure has, significantly, migrated into a
form-giving national novel like Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children (1981), as well
as Monica Ali’s Brick Lane (2003) or Hari Kunzru’s The Impressionist (2002),
which begin with details of the hero/ine’s birth, and with stories of immediate
forbears. But the autobiographical grammar refers also to the modes of address
the leader adopts, such as the non-specific collective first-person pronoun,
which symptomatically resurfaces in autobiography after autobiography, in
particular Mandela’s, as well as to the gender marking built into the life-story
(an appropriately grammatical function). Male autobiography, it perhaps goes
without saying, will typically carry a masculine pronoun. Yet I would suggest
that it is the seemingly self-evident, often invisibly gendered syntax of the
leader’s life-story that is worth highlighting among other features in so far as it
helps inscribe and validate dominant gender roles in the postcolonial nation-
state. So, for instance, the prominent form-giving tropes which structure the
autobiography, such as the political journey or the educational quest, carry
‘masculine’ connotations of boldness, enterprise, single-mindedness, the pio-
neering spirit.

The second half of this chapter will look more closely at some of the salient fea-
tures of nationalist autobiographical syntax in order to exemplify how the leader
hero’s story might have contributed to shaping new nationalist imaginings,
including concepts of individuated, normatively masculine citizenship. Nehru’s own inaugural work in this area will be examined for its distinctive tropes of the nation as multitude and as Bharat Mata, arranged within a narrative of ‘mental development’ or self-examination in which he repeatedly reflects on his inner ‘conflict of ideas, desires and loyalties’. In particular, Nehru’s concept of nationalist thought as itself symbol-making will be investigated, especially in the light of his tendency to speak of India as Mother, and to view Gandhi as an embodiment of India. These images will be briefly compared with the nationalist ideas of Sarojini Naidu, the eminent Indian nationalist, poet and close colleague of both Nehru and Gandhi. Despite her interest in representing Indian women’s interests, and despite Nehru’s ‘advanced’ attitudes with respect to women, my suggestion will be that the progressive commitments of both were constrained by their traditional if nationalist ideas of the Indian woman.

The section following the discussion of Nehru comprises a collage of diagnostic observations on autobiographical texts by a group of west and southern African nationalist leaders-at-independence, some of whom have already been introduced: Nnamdi Azikiwe and Obafemi Awolowo (Nigeria), Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana), Kenneth Kaunda (Zambia) and Albert Luthuli (South Africa). These are combined with an authorised biography of Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya) that bears signs of being ghosted by the subject himself. Most of the autobiographies were published within a decade of one another with Nkrumah’s autobiography the first to appear, in 1957, and Azikiwe’s, a long and retrospective account published in 1970, the last. The focus will rest in particular on the presence in these nationalist autobiographies of the structuring tropes of genealogy and ideological patriliny, of national mapping-by-travel, and of the exemplary nationalist hero.

Where appropriate the discussion will refer to Nelson Mandela’s Long Walk to Freedom because, as anticipated, it participates in and highlights the patterns and preoccupations of the 1960s, the era of African independence. The 1960s also represent a key decade in Mandela’s own life: his long imprisonment began in 1962, and the autobiography itself was undertaken as a reflection back on the events leading up to that fateful year. Long Walk to Freedom emphasises in particular the convergence between the individual life and the story of the coming-into-being of the nation, here specifically the story of anti-apartheid resistance. This convergence indeed confirms the convinced view of South Africans and non-South Africans alike that Mandela or Madiba (‘old man’, a customary term of respect) is in fact an incarnation of the nation. Despite – or perhaps because of – this close identification, Mandela’s life-story noticeably lacks the strenuous tones of self-justification of the past, a shift due also to the nation-building and coalescing force of the long struggle against apartheid, and of the consolidating effects of the subject’s own incarceration. Throughout, no matter how divided by apartheid, language or colonial history, the
South African nation is for Mandela a reality that he speaks of as unquestioningly serving and loving long before the watershed moment of 1994. This national faith is strongly reminiscent of Nehru's sense of India as spiritual force in *The Discovery of India*. Ironically, however, Mandela is the only leader examined here to have openly advocated militancy and the use of arms.

Questions will rightly be asked about the absence of women's texts. The absence, it should be clarified, was dictated not only by the normative male-necessity of independence discourse, but also, practically, by the fact that, as far as Africa is concerned, there were no women leaders of African nation-states or prominent nationalist movements at independence. (This is as opposed to iconic figureheads or spiritual leaders such as Nehanda in Zimbabwe.) Luisa Diogo, Prime Minister of Mozambique since 2003, is the first African woman to achieve political premiership. The African life-narratives, in short, could not be anything but gender-specific. With respect to India, although Sarojini Naidu became in 1947 the first Governor of the large Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, and played a prominent role as spokesperson for women in the independence movement, she did not write a formal autobiography, confining her thoughts and reminiscences rather to private letters. In fact, as with Nehru, in her comments on the nationalist movement she more or less takes for granted that masculinity, if ‘soft’ rather than tough, is normatively associated with the new nationalist leadership – and this despite her asseverations concerning the strength of traditional Indian femininity. Indira Gandhi, Nehru's daughter and to date India’s only woman Prime Minister, did not preside at independence, although she did controversially identify with the nation as mother. As for the belated postcolonial case of 1990s South Africa, as anti-apartheid resistance gave way to democratic elections the country witnessed the welcome publication of a number of life-stories and part-autobiographical narratives by women leaders or women prominent in their communities: Ellen Kuzwayo, Sindiwe Magona, Mamphela Ramphele. These narratives however, though they merit a fascinating study on their own, give predictable insights into the at-times-critical yet also broadly supportive relationship of South African women to the always male-led nationalist liberation movement, in which national freedom was prioritised over women’s rights.

Across the board, therefore, the leader’s autobiography examined in this chapter has no reason to contest the masculine pronoun. In the act of writing his autobiography the male nationalist leader validates his role as the chief and representative son of the nation, and then – as he and the nation reach political maturity – as its father. He confirms, in other words, his pre-eminent, even dynastic, position in the national family drama. From this it is already clear that, for the literate middle classes at least, the ‘hero’s’ autobiography operates as an important vehicle in the articulation and authorisation of the dominant gender both of anti-colonial resistance and of nationalist self-imagining.
Significantly, though *Long Walk to Freedom* may have been published in 1994, it speaks of oppression in South Africa as the experience of ‘the black man’. Mandela and his advisors chose for whatever strategic reason to keep hold of the central subject of 1960s Civil Rights discourse and of the 1970s Black Consciousness movement.

**Jawaharlal Nehru: narratives of national destiny**

Like Gandhi, Nehru did not see leadership in macho terms, often representing himself as vacillating, conflicted, uncertain, ‘sensitive’, ‘weak’ and ‘introverted’ in his political inclinations and personal tastes. In *An Autobiography* he bemusedly reports against himself a newspaper article in which his ‘smileless’, reflective public demeanour was compared to that of a ‘Hindu widow’.24 However, while he may thus have been exploiting as leader what Ashis Nandy, expounding his theory of the colonial psyche, describes as the androgynous ‘Indian consciousness’, Nehru in his relationship to India, ‘the beautiful lady of our imaginations’, always identifies specifically as male – as son and heir.25 The ‘Hindu widow’ persona, he observes, had needs to take on more ‘active’ and ‘aggressive’ qualities.

In his preface to *An Autobiography*, in words that could also be applied to the more historical yet equally personal *The Discovery of India*, Nehru writes that the book represented an ‘egotistical’ process of ‘self-questioning’, yet was written with an explicitly Indian national readership in mind. The concept of the Indian nation as a united if diverse people, defined by a distinct yet numerous quality inhering in the many cultures of the subcontinent reaching from Cape Cormorin to the Khyber Pass, is, unsurprisingly, more clear-cut in *The Discovery of India* than in the earlier book. *An Autobiography* effectively records Nehru’s process of self-interpellation as a modern Indian at once through the introspection of the prison cell, and through his political identification as a leader with the masses – a process which is then confirmed in the opening chapters of national self-affirmation of *The Discovery of India*. As his daughter Indira Gandhi was to write in her 1980 preface to the latter book, *An Autobiography* gives an ‘insight into the making of the mind of new India’.

In both texts, however, Nehru is concerned to narrate how he, the ‘cold-blooded’ only son of a prosperous Kashmiri family, prone to view the masses dispassionately (*A 324, 374*), learns to discover fellow feeling in their ‘thousands of eyes’ (*DI 37, 61, 67*). Via an incrementally unfolding syntax of self-identification extending across both books, he simultaneously transforms his holistic though materialist understanding of Indian freedom (political, economic and social) (*A 137*), into an appreciation, too, of the country’s age-old ‘special heritage’ and ‘depth of soul’: the ‘it’ of India gradually becomes a ‘we’. The country’s ‘continuity of cultural tradition’ quickens in him increasingly
more profound and characteristically nationalist feelings of reverence and respect (DI 36–7, 59):

India was in my blood and there was much in her that instinctively thrilled me. And yet I approached her almost as an alien critic, full of dislike for the present as well as for many of the relics of the past that I saw. To some extent I came to her via the West, and looked at her as a friendly westerner might have done. I was eager and anxious to change her outlook and appearance and give her the garb of modernity. And yet doubts arose within me. Did I know India? . . . surely India could not have been what she undoubtedly was . . . if she had not possessed something very vital and enduring. (DI 50).

It is significant that although his appreciation of India’s unifying vitality is described as a process of discovery, for which he deploys the suggestive metaphors of palimpsest and archaeological dig, the essential identity of India is at the same time something that must be struggled towards. It requires a ‘thousand hand-written pages’ to be fully comprehended (DI 35, 57, 59, 562).

Nehru is inspired by his sense of the nation as signified by an immemorial history and a vast multitude – all in all as an immense spiritual entity anthropomorphised against his better judgement as female (DI 59–61). Like his African counterparts, however, he is at the same time conscientious about identifying his ideological genealogy as a nationalist in strictly filial terms. These named personalities, he is concerned to emphasise, have shaped his core political mind. By contrast, his socialism, including his strong beliefs in industrial modernisation and central state planning, he attributes to internationalist contacts, many of them nameless, made in the Soviet Union and Europe, as in the League Against Imperialism (see A chapter 23). At base his nationalist filiation comprises two dominant influences: ‘My Father and Gandhiji’, to quote the title of chapter 18. Motilal Nehru, moderate, constitutional, initially Anglophilic, later a reformist nationalist, is the son’s primary career mentor, and Gandhi, always identified as India’s chief leader, stands as his foremost spiritual guide, if at times a frustrating one. Indeed, while Nehru is not as conscientious about plotting intricate networks of influence as are some of the African leaders, long chapters of the 1936 autobiography resemble an unresolved debate about the content of Indian nationalism with these two figures, especially Gandhi, ‘the master figure in India’.26 Time and again, as Gandhi unpredictably takes decisions of which Nehru disapproves, such as proselytising for the ‘non-political’ issue of khadi, or fasting against untouchability in 1933, the younger man betrays uncertainty at his vast influence, and incomprehension at his ‘intuitive’, ‘metaphysical’ and potentially revivalist approach.

If viewed as unfolding across both An Autobiography and My Discovery of India, the grammar of Nehru’s narrative as Indian Prime Minister-in-waiting describes an oscillating rhythm between binary states. This predominantly
takes place between the introspective stasis of his nine terms of incarceration, and the otherwise ceaseless activity of political campaigning; but also between his Ahmedabad home and the rest of India, and, occasionally, between India and Europe. Overall, the governing trope that brackets together these cyclical movements and imparts a sense of unilinear purpose to the whole, is, as elsewhere, that of quest or discovery, a quest that cumulatively traces out the shape of the subcontinent, as Kaunda’s later will for Zambia (DI 61–4). Yet, unlike for the African leaders, for Nehru the object of his quest is not so much the achievement of national selfhood, as an understanding of the legendary quality of maternal India, as he finds out during his debate with himself concerning his residual yearning for faith (yet another oscillation). It is symbolically fitting, therefore, that while on ‘national pilgrimage’ Nehru meets crowds chanting ‘Victory to Mother India’.

The image of India ‘veiled’ and mysteriously beckoning, at once evasive and enchanting, identified in camp terms as a ‘hysteric’ ‘lady with a past’ (DI 562–3), yet also as a symbol from popular legend, allows the westernised Nehru to gain conceptual hold of the nation’s many paradoxes, its distinguishing indeterminacy. If, in general terms, the nationalist leader’s mission is to configure a modern nationalist identity and to project an essential otherness distinct from the coloniser’s culture, Nehru, beginning from the standpoint of a Europeanised modernity, chooses to prioritise the latter aim and does so in typically traditional terms. Bharat Mata or Durga was after all the female embodiment of India also for the Bengal Renaissance from the 1880s and for the 1905–8 Swadeshi movement.

Throughout his autobiography Nehru is strongly aware of the symbol-making power of nationalism; of that way in which national movements are constituted out of compelling images. Gandhi, for example, he writes, became by way of his identification with the peasant masses of India ‘the idealised personification of those vast millions’: ‘Almost he was India’ (A 253, 289, 403, 508). The ‘National Flag’, too, is a symbol to be honoured and treated with respect (A 333). Even the ‘patron animals’ of a nation, such as ‘the lion and bulldog of England’ or the cow of India, Nehru goes so far as to assert, have the power to mould national character (A 359). He will not have been unaware therefore of the potent symbolism of representing his ‘discovery of India’ as taking the shape of a quest for a beguiling if evasive woman. This is especially the case in so far as he heads up his quest narrative with an opening chapter recounting the death of his wife. His loss of Kamala, the implication seems to be, the ‘Kamala who is no more’ as the epigraph to An Autobiography describes her, has freed him to devote himself to the highly feminised ‘thought of India . . . that possessed me’ (DI 49).

Interestingly, the gendering of the nation and the national leader shifts subtly across the two texts in question. While in An Autobiography Nehru concentrates
on positioning himself as a son in relation to his male mentors, in *The Discovery of India*, where Bharat Mata presides, he is not only cast as a child, but, recognisably, as a lover – a potential ‘spouse’, and future leader, of the feminised nation. In the opening chapter about his wife he describes how bazaar photographs depicted the two of them as an ‘ideal couple’, however far from the truth this may have been (*DI* 44). His political commitments and long periods in gaol, he confesses, imposed many constraints on his marriage. How much more important it then was to make a success of his symbolic relationship with this second idealised female presence, India itself, to whom he fittingly devotes the rest of *The Discovery of India*. Curiously, despite his open-handed support for ‘women’s right against the tyranny of men’ (*A* 240), Nehru’s image of the nation in the more ‘feminine’ second volume of his autobiography is narrowly gendered, even overdetermined as a kind of teasing siren.

Yet Nehru’s pro-woman colleague Sarojini Naidu, too, though since 1914 the champion within Congress of ‘women’s struggle for freedom against man-made laws’ (*A* 274), and an architect of the All India Women’s Conference, consistently based her image of women’s place in the nation upon highly traditional images of Indian womanhood. It is helpful to be reminded of this – and, more generally, of the strong pull towards such gendered symbolism within nationalism – in relation to her colleague’s apparent reliance upon stereotype. A supporter of ‘Female Education’, Naidu urged in speech after speech that women were central to the nation-building project in India, yet the women she had in mind, as she made clear, approximated to the devoted Savitri or Sati of myth. India in her nationalist poems and statements is always cast as Mother, statuesque and iconic. The country did not need a ‘sex-focused’ feminist movement, she often asserted, as Indian men and women needed but to revive these powerful ancient images ‘to regain our lost inheritance’. Predictably, therefore, Naidu’s references to actual women in the nationalist movement are often instrumentalist: women are the ‘sustainers’ of leaders normatively defined as male.

**Genealogy, patriline: the African autobiographer as praise-singer**

More prominently than in Nehru’s case, one of the first moves generally made by the African leader-autobiographer in presenting as a model national subject is to position himself within a tightly woven *genealogical network*, that is, to claim pedigree. This takes the form either of drawing out a more or less conventional family tree (often of the ‘begat . . . begat’ variety), or a network of ideological inheritance plotting important precursors and mentors. In that the invocation of such connections is a widely observed device in traditional praise-singing in west and southern Africa, the leader could thus be said to turn himself, through the medium of the text, into his own modern praiser.
simultaneously positions himself at the transformative point of intersection between his own past history, often rural and traditional, which the book narrates, and the story of the new, modern nation that the autobiography projects into a still virtual future. Throughout, his first-person pronoun is, as it were, at the point of becoming collective.

Albert Luthuli, the 1950s ANC leader and winner of South Africa’s first Nobel Peace Prize, begins his life-tale in heroic style with a potted history of KwaZulu-Natal, the province of his birth. The history tracks back to the legendary rule of the great King Shaka and then moves forwards in time to merge into his own story. Nnamdi Azikiwe includes pages of an imposing network of familial contacts which, distinctly biblical in its detail and rhetoric, comes to a culminating point with his own birth. For Awolowo, father to his Yoruba Action Group party, genealogy has an almost prophetic and again dynastic relevance. He writes that ‘the Oracle declared that I was the reincarnation of Granny’s own father’: as a result his grandmother calls him father.31

Within the wider network of the national family, however, for a leader to claim his rightful place requires more than simple inheritance, or biological and parental connections. Not too long into their texts, most of the African autobiographers, more explicitly than Nehru, make efforts to name key role models, inspirational figures and personal heroes. The greater majority of these, other than their mothers, are male: in fact, in so far as mothers are ‘family’, and their naming as important influences customary, it can safely be said that all such ideological role models are male. In the boldly declarative Zambia Shall Be Free Kenneth Kaunda admits more than once to having been influenced by the Indian nationalist movement and the example of non-violence and self-help set by Gandhi.32 Significantly, the inspiring example of India’s anti-colonial leaders carried force throughout Africa at this time. It was evidently the case that to cite India’s successful deployment of passive resistance in a political climate that was becoming ever more militant and polarised was a powerful strategic move vis-à-vis the colonial (or in Mandela’s case, internally colonial) power. Mandela as well as others in the ANC Youth League, he explains in Long Walk to Freedom, resolved in the late 1940s to embark on a programme of mass action ‘along the lines of Gandhi’s non-violent protests in India’. Kenyatta refers to Gandhi as a model (and is accordingly represented by the Kenyan writer Ngugi in A Grain of Wheat (1967) as an African counterpart to Gandhi). Nkrumah, too, whose autobiography is itself paradigmatic for the other African leaders’ texts, justifies policy, such as his campaign of Positive Action, with reference to Gandhi.

The detailed enumeration of contacts and influences is perhaps most pronounced in Azikiwe’s My Odyssey, though Nkrumah is also conscientious in mentioning important connections and big names. Both these leaders present highly individualised accounts, which accord with their role of self-made and
to some extent self-appointed nationalist pioneer. Yet, even as they single themselves out by presenting a list of the men who have made their own lives fruitful, they are at the same time, significantly, situating themselves within a wider spiritual family of specifically black African or African-origin activists, leaders and politicians. Azikiwe claims as his contacts and mentors George Padmore, W. E. B. Du Bois, Simeon Bankole Wright, Dr Aggrey, Jomo Kenyatta and Nkrumah himself, while the ‘mottos’ and ideas of the Jamaican Marcus Garvey, he tells us, also ‘captivated’ him. Although of different ideological stripes and geographical locations, all those named are committed nationalists critical of colonisation. In a revealing conclusion to his mini-narrative of interconnected influence, Azikiwe writes: ‘I resolved to formulate my philosophy of life, so far as was practicable, towards the evangelisation of universal fatherhood, universal brotherhood, and universal happiness’. The ideological patriliny, or male line of nationalist influence, is to be repeated upon the future. Expanding a very similar, indeed form-giving network, Nkrumah in his Autobiography notes that he learned politics and African history from meeting people like Dr Aggrey and also Azikiwe, and, later, the West Indian radicals C. L. R. James and George Padmore. The constructedness of these accounts of influence may not be immediately apparent in that the writers are in many cases presumably describing actual meetings or contacts at a time characterised by intensive interaction among anti-colonial elites, and visits by African intellectuals to academic institutions in Europe and America. What is significant, however, is the way the meetings are literally placed to the fore in their texts, often to the exclusion of more personal encounters. Especially where, as in West Africa, it was not possible to lay claim to a self-proving experience of resistance struggle or colonial incarceration, the leaders are intent on presenting their credentials as public nationalist figures and as legitimate inheritors within their own particular black African lineage. (Awolowo and Azikiwe, it is also relevant to note, represented rival, ethnically divided political parties in Nigeria.) At the same time, the citation of masculine influence also underlines the specifically gendered, if not parthenogenetic, inception of their careers (and, therefore, life-stories). Biological mothers or grandmothers, and on a different level Mother Africa figures, briefly play nurturing roles, but their area of influence is restricted and chiefly symbolic. Once the hero’s adult life gets underway they tend to fade out of the picture.

As far as wives are concerned, the textual space allotted to them, too, is limited. Especially in the 1960s autobiographies, but even in the case of the young Winnie Mandela, solicitously watched over by her husband during her first political protest, leaders’ wives by and large inhabit a separate sphere of domestic, maternal, generally non-national activity. His wife, Kaunda notes, is not able to identify fully with the all-important task of national self-making.
Although he respected her attempts at self-politicisation and involvement in protest marches, Nehru, too, pictures his (often physically ailing) wife Kamala in these contexts as taking on challenges too demanding for her.

Dedications to both wives and mothers admittedly appear as epigraphs to the leader-son’s story, as happens in both the Luthuli and the Nkrumah autobiographies, as well as in the Nehru. Yet these same symbolically elevated wives and mothers, like women in general, are rarely invoked within the autobiographical syntax as full subjects, despite the fact that women carried out important roles in nationalist struggles in Africa as in India, as both Mandela and Nehru do to an extent recognise. The ANC Women’s League headed by Lilian Ngoyi, for example, played a key part in organising passive resistance to apartheid in the 1950s. Mandela’s warm acknowledgement of this fact, however, does not penetrate through to the form of his work. For this reason the 2003 biography of Walter and Albertina Sisulu by their daughter-in-law Elinor Sisulu, which foregrounds the symbiosis of their political contribution, signifies an important new departure. For the rest, it is almost exclusively the case that father figures and brother-comrades pass on political inspiration and words of guidance to the new national leaders. The patrilineal genealogy that their interrelationships build undergirds the male dominance of the wider national family network. In this regard the characterisation of Azikiwe’s mother is emblematic. My Odyssey pictures her as involved in a perpetual conflict with his father over their son’s education and plans. In a carefully staged episode, which explicitly alludes to the reconciliation scene with Volumnia in Coriolanus, it is his mother who goes to Ghana to persuade Zik to return home after he has stowed-away on a ship to the United States (via the Gold Coast) in pursuit of further education. She appears under an equivocal light: she is a determined and devoted emissary of the homeland, yet she also complicates and physically retards Zik’s plans. By contrast it is the father who is seen sending him off to America with his unqualified blessing and the message to ‘sail in quest of the golden fleece of knowledge that is guarded by the dragon of ignorance . . . as Jason did’.

From the beginning of the diachronic process of leaderly self-realisation, therefore, the influence of the father or of fathers is paramount. For Nkrumah in particular, women are irrelevant to the ‘real’ work of preparing for national power. His anxiety over the distracting influence of women is unambiguous, at times puritanical if not openly misogynistic: ‘if I allowed a woman to play too important a part in my life I would gradually lose sight of my goal’. Significantly, these words mark the Ghanaian leader, no doubt unconsciously, as the product of a colonial and mission education in which, as is well documented, western structures of male dominance reinforced traditional patriarchal hierarchies. As in India, colonial schools and colleges across the African continent concentrated mainly or in the first instance on the manly education
of boys. It was predictable then not only that political elites at the time of independence were almost exclusively male, but that they would have conceived of nation-making as a strenuously male exercise from which female company would be a distraction.

Mandela’s 1950s and 1960s networks of mentors and friends, too, are made up of men only – predictably once again, as the ANC leadership was itself exclusively male at this time. So it is revealing and prophetic that when Winnie Mandela offers her husband stoic support on the night before his secret departure on a 1962 African trip, handing over a suitcase she has packed, she is described in positive terms as behaving ‘as much like a soldier as a wife’. The term of praise, ‘soldier’, is clearly intended to give her womanly, supporting role a masculine edge of authority and self-control. In other words, only when the woman’s contribution is wholeheartedly, if not self-sacrificially, identified with the mission represented by her husband (and/or if she cross-dresses), is it spoken of in a way that approximates her role to that of a man.

National journeying

In his autobiography the spatial movements of the nationalist leader as bearer of his movement’s vision and ideals, too, help to give imaginative outline to the new nation. As in the case of Nehru, the grammar of his travels, a progression or circulation through significant symbolic ‘stations’ or moments that may repeat several times across his narrative, meshes his life-story into the geographical space occupied by the nation.

Most protagonists in the African leader-autobiographies chart a progressive journey away from the rural village to the city (often followed by further moves to a foreign metropolis). Prevalent also in African novels of the period (as in Achebe’s No Longer at Ease (1960) or Soyinka’s The Interpreters (1965)), the journey is particularly significant for linking together two conventionally opposed sites within a single-stranded narrative of national coming-into-being. The reader sees the hero succeed in both rural and urban spaces; both are shown to hold national significance. This is perhaps especially important in nations where not only national boundaries but also legislation governing the distribution of land and migration to the city were by and large the creations of the European colonial process.

Kaunda’s Zambia Shall Be Free probably offers the most elaborated example of the national hero’s city-oriented pilgrimage as authorising the transformation of colonial space into national terrain. (The autobiography was interestingly one of the first five books published in the Heinemann African Writers Series, along with Achebe’s Things Fall Apart (1958).) Kaunda’s ‘life’ begins by mapping a journey leading from his rural village to Lusaka, the capital around which the new Zambia will organise itself. He then, significantly, spends time
in white-ruled Southern Rhodesia, hostile, oppositional, non-national land, where not surprisingly he is badly treated, goes hungry, and is made to feel like a stranger and prodigal son. Thereafter, in the course of many political missions and campaigns, he tracks his way around his 'own' land, plotting different routes between the city and the villages, and between villages in both mining and agricultural areas, discovering in so doing, as he says, 'myself and my people'. Almost literally mapping the shape of Zambia as he goes, Kaunda validates that space as national, investing it with his attention, time and experience, including various symbolically loaded encounters with lions (as possible emblems of British power). Applying the syntactic terminology introduced earlier, the *diachronic* progression of journeying eventually produces the spatial *paradigm* of the national map. The achievement is crucial given that Zambia, formerly part of the Rhodesian Federation, did not exist as a discrete, bounded geopolitical entity before its independence.

Operating underground as the so-called 'Black Pimpernel' prior to his long imprisonment by the apartheid state, Mandela in the 1960s, too, travelled the length and breadth of his nation on a journey again styled as a process of getting in touch. His activity of 'moving through townships in different parts of the country' was obviously aimed at introducing and defending the ANC's still controversial decision to abandon its policy of non-violence. But it also traced the lineaments of a wished-for democratic South Africa, the nation embracing different classes, racial groups and regions that Mandela was seeking to bring into being, especially in so far as this 'country' was in fact coterminous with the apartheid state. In his narrative he is therefore concerned to enumerate a wide variety of encounters and the different kinds of role-play he practised en route, such as, 'I was with Muslims in the Cape, with sugar workers in Natal, with factory workers in Port Elizabeth'. And: 'I stayed in a doctor's house in Johannesburg, sleeping in the servant's quarters at night, and working in the doctor's study during the day . . . I lived in a hostel and posed as an agricultural demonstrator'. He effectively performs the diversity of the nation-to-be.

A particularly interesting feature of Mandela's underground journey in its later stages is that, on a far wider scale than Kaunda's, it expanded on to an international, specifically Pan-African, stage. In February 1962 Mandela secretly left South Africa on a 'mission' to establish contact with what would become the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) at their conference in Addis Ababa, and also to raise political and economic support for the ANC's new military campaign. Following time spent in Ethiopia, which he regards as the immemorial seat of true Africanness and African resistance, the journey he describes embraces several capitals of the continent's newly emergent nations, meetings with its important leaders, and a trip to view the treasures of ancient Egypt in Cairo. Mandela thus raises his travels into a romantic, mythic
dimension, setting classic symbols of African nationhood within a continent-wide, Pan-African frame. In a process of simultaneous reinforcement, his mission establishes him as an African leader recognised by much of Africa, even as he at the same time achieves recognition as a specifically South African statesman in waiting.

The hero as model

From Nkrumah through to Azikiwe a key element that exemplifies the operation of the nationalist autobiographical syntax appears at those moments in the narrative where the leader-autobiographer uses his own experience as a model or object lesson. As in Mandela’s account of entering court in a traditional *kaross*, the leader offers episodes from his own life-story as a parable for the new nation, as an illustration of national policy, or as directed towards a specific goal, in particular national self-formation (so confirming yet again his symbolic status). The individual story of national emergence is repeatedly made to throw up signifiers of the national good. This typicality is incidentally something that the self-doubting Nehru forswears in *An Autobiography*, yet must willy-nilly succumb to simply by writing his story.

As a lad of 14, Azikiwe tells us, he derived a moral from his job of carrying ‘burnt bricks’ at school: ‘man should make some sacrifice for the welfare of his fellows’. Early on in *Zambia Shall Be Free* Kaunda constructs himself forthrightly as the bearer of the parable of his own life. He notes that a boyhood beating taught him the value of non-violence, and working for his school money he learned the importance of self-help. He also points out that he and his nationalist friends invested in watches in order to be on time for political meetings. The careful noting of this detail establishes it as a particularly instructive moment, one that works simultaneously as self-validation. Entering into and learning to manage the homogeneous, measured time of the modern nation, as described by Anderson, the friends mark themselves out as leaders who merit a following, and as exemplary modern citizens of an independent Zambia. The greater influence of the Christian mission school in Africa than in India may offer another reason, in addition to Nehru’s self-doubt, for explaining why this tendency to generate improving tales from the individual life is not in evidence in the same way in the Indian leader’s autobiographical writing.

As well as its didactic force, the leader’s embodiment of the best of the nation has other political uses, such as that of helping to elide ethnic or tribal boundaries. By encouraging identification with the leader as model citizen, the autobiography places emphasis on oneness, on national unity and masculinity, in favour of a ‘feminine’ plurality that might encourage disunity. Leader-as-model examples also serve the purpose of grounding the personal history in
the present and giving it immediate relevance to a national audience: it is in the here and now that the model must be actuated, that the new nation waits to realise itself.

A special case of the exemplary life occurs when, as intimated, the autobiographer embeds in his text documents he has authored, that have played some part in the nationalist cause. The autobiography consolidates its authority by a kind of self-doubling, by backing itself up with reference to important or exemplary texts its 'hero' himself would have had a hand in producing. The trend towards such 'thick' documentation begins with the Nkrumah autobiography. By the time of Zik's account it is de rigueur: in parts his life-story comprises more citation than narrative. In Nkrumah references to formative events are interleaved with quotations from his political writings and illustrative official documentation (the pamphlet 'Towards Colonial Freedom', his 1948 Removal Order, the six-point programme for the Convention People's Party). Mandela's autobiography from time to time, too, draws on excerpts from letters to the press, ANC leaflets and his own 'political testament' as read out in court. This feature of the nationalist grammar appears to gain in intensity with serial repetition, emphasising over and again that the individual life is crosshatched with national history. Textually the effect is to enact the leader's complete involvement in national concerns.

Their deployment of a nationalist grammar thus illustrates how postcolonial male leaders use autobiography to confirm their pre-eminent, form-giving and even dynastic position in the national family drama. In sum, the leader's iconic dominance as alpha male in the nationalist tale demonstrates a powerful way in which normative masculinity in the new nation is inscribed. Especially as national transformation is conventionally associated with maleness, in particular with a dominant brand of maleness, with virility and potency, the national leader-hero masterfully aligns his lifeline with that of the new nation and claims for himself the part of true son and servant to the national mother. Even as the nation's history is made to converge with his own, the son progresses in the national genealogy to the position of father: his story tells how helped sire a nation.

Notes


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*Stories of women*


15 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, pp. 163–85. Anderson intriguingly ends the revised edition with the acknowledgement that nations like individuals need ‘biographies’, within which narratives significant individual’s lives may be read symbolically. He does not, however, develop the idea. See pp. 204–6.


This section will supply a counterpoint therefore to the discussion of the young Naidu as 'Oriental' poet in chapter 9.


For discussion of how the nation is conceptualised as a family drama, see chapters 1 and 5.

Nehru, *An Autobiography*, p. 207. In this particular section references will be cited in the text together with the abbreviation A. Page references to *The Discovery of India* will be cited together with the abbreviation DI.


Nehru, *An Autobiography*, pp. 375–6, 573. For his internal debates with Gandhi, see, for example, chapter 15 'Doubt and Conflict'; chapter 61 'Desolation'; chapter 62 'Paradoxes'.

Nehru was incidentally imprisoned by the colonial authorities more frequently than Mandela, though the African leader’s final prison term was of course far longer than any of Nehru’s.


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33 Azikiwe, *My Odyssey*, p. 35.

34 Nkrumah, *Autobiography*, pp. 12, 18–19, 36–7 and 41, respectively.
36 Luthuli's epigraph dedication, for example, reads: 'To Mother Africa, so long in fetters . . . And to two noble women of Africa: . . . my mother, and . . . my wife'.
37 Azikiwe, *My Odyssey*, pp. 60–1, 72.
38 Nkrumah, *Autobiography*, p. 34.
39 Kaunda, *Zambia Shall Be Free*, pp. 31–2, 114
43 Kaunda, *Zambia Shall Be Free*, p. 6, 9–10, 45, respectively.
45 Of the many other examples that might be quoted, see Azikiwe, *My Odyssey*, pp. 48, 56, 184; Kenyatta, *Suffering without Bitterness*, pp. v, 35–8, 76–7.