

‘THE HISTORICITY OF TEXTS AND THE TEXTUALITY OF HISTORY’: A NOTE ON WHY READING ZIMBABWEAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY SHOULD BE HISTORICISED

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ABSTRACT

Historical consciousness has always been at the centre of autobiographical narration and, through historical consciousness; the public experiences of narrating a subject are brought into the private act of narrating the self. There is, therefore, a thin line dividing history and fiction in autobiography and this demonstrates how autobiography is situated in history. This article argues that the demarcation of history and fiction by traditional scholars has to be revised in the wake of the realisation that the historian also makes use of metaphor and point of view in writing what is supposedly an objective ordering of events. Given this argument, the article proposes that the reading of Zimbabwean autobiography should be a historicised undertaking since the location of the autobiographical subject in the historical and political spectrum of Zimbabwean national experiences is critical to our understanding of the relationship between narrative and the context of its production. It further argues that the telling of one's story in autobiography is a performance of historical identities, which makes the historicity of autobiographical texts central to our understanding of autobiographical subjects. It concludes that apprehending the historicity of a text and the textuality of history are necessary since autobiographical subjects congeal around history and the discursive background matters.

Keywords: autobiography, life-narrative, discursive, history, autobiographical subjects, Zimbabwe

1. INTRODUCTION

This article seeks to argue for a historicised reading of life-narratives in Zimbabwe, given the fact that the literary-historical dichotomy informs much of the theorisation of autobiography. In *Novel Histories*, Green (1997, 15) argues that

the general neglect or dismissal of historical fiction by historians, no less than the often cavalier deployment of historical material in fiction, suggests a clear demarcation between these two forms of discourse. The line between them has, however, not only been challenged from a variety of perspectives by both literary theorists and historiographers, but perhaps more fundamentally, is demonstrably a shifting one.

Green's argument obviates the need to understand the historicity of texts and the textuality of history. This article takes as its point of departure the fact that the story of the autobiographical narrative has to be related to historical consciousness as well as the fact that apprehending the dialectic between historical truth-telling and fiction in the reconstruction of the autobiographical subject's historical past is crucial to any reading of autobiography. The article argues that the autobiographical space is where the imaginary, the fabulous and the fantastic contest the real; the same space where it is crucial to determine how the autobiographical subject engages in the precarious pursuit of balancing narrativity and historicity.

2. HISTORY, THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ACT AND THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SUBJECT

When one reads autobiography, one expects to be undertaking a synchronic reading of personal and national or world history narratives. Again when autobiographers set out to narrate their life-stories, it is evidence that they have acquired a historical appreciation of their existence. Historicity and historical circumstances or specifications mediate our understanding of autobiographical subjectivities.

Commenting on the significant rise of the cultural function of autobiography at the beginning of the nineteenth century in the West, Weintraub (1975, 821) posits that 'the growing significance of autobiography is thus a part of that great intellectual revolution marked by the particular modern form of historical mindedness we call historicism or historicism.' Notwithstanding that, the normal argument is that autobiographies are a peculiar Protestant form of conversion narrative and began in the seventeenth century. Weintraub's observations foreground the relevance of relating both the production of autobiography and autobiographical subjectivities to the historical experiences of the autobiographer and the historical times that form the discursive background or horizon of the narrative though this discursive background also affect the autobiographer and his or her work. The autobiographer and his or her text are both social and historical constructs. In this way autobiography assumes its ideal form when it is viewed as a form

with a discernible and powerful historical dimension. Weintraub (1975, 835) further argues that 'autobiography can have a very special function in elucidating history – and in helping us understand life as a continuous process.' The reason why history should be elucidated by an individual experience is that, in autobiography, the public and the private come together. Weintraub (1975) also emphasises the fact that the autobiographer cannot possibly give his story without also giving the story of his own world and that the autobiographer is enveloped in a cultural-historical skin. The narrating subject's personal life is best apprehended by perceiving it in its historical dimension. History therefore enables readers of autobiographical narratives to understand individual subjectivity on its own terms.

3. THE CONJUNCTION OF HISTORY AND NARRATIVE

In order to appreciate the point of conjunction for history and narrative, it is appropriate to understand what is meant by history and what the brief of historians is. The historian, according to Chennells (2009, 106) is defined by his or her '[accumulation of] a great deal of archival material and indicates its provenance with accurate footnotes and these together with similarly acknowledged, published sources provide the context of academic debates to which the new book or article contributes.' This is, however only a claim by historians of what they purport to do in order to give the appearance of objectivity to their work. There are contradictions within the so-called objectively written histories as pointed out by Olney (1972) and White (1987). Olney (1972, 38) describes history

as the exercise of an imaginative cultural or racial memory that is quite analogous to, and has the same powers put to the same uses as, personal memory in the act of autobiography or poetry; the memory in either case is fused with the pattern-making creativity of the individual historian cum cultural autobiographer cum poet.

The writing of history is thus framed within individual historians' points of view or historical narratives in which Olney (1972, 36) insists they impose 'their own metaphors on the human past' and in which the historian is revealed. Olney's thesis blurs any distinctions that had formerly been made between history as an objective enterprise and autobiography as an imaginative venture. White (1987, ix) corroborates this in his argument that 'history itself consists of a congeries of lived stories, individual and collective, and that the principal task of historians is to uncover these stories and to retell them in narrative.' Storytelling is always inflected by the logic of tropes and tropes are the hallmarks of literary narratives. Therefore the literary is also to be found in the supposedly objective and factual historical narrative. Earlier, White (1966, 112) had attributed the oppositional politics between historians and artists to 'the nineteenth century belief in the radical dissimilarity of art to science [which] was a consequence of a misunderstanding fostered by the romantic artist's fear of science and the positivistic

scientist's ignorance of art.' Historians insisted on events that could be located in specific time and space as opposed to 'imaginative writers – poets, novelists, playwrights – [who] are concerned with both these kinds of events and imagined, hypothetical, or invented ones.' White's point, which I found particularly valuable, is his remark (1985, 121) that what should be interesting is 'the literature of fact or "the fictions of representation" [and] the extent to which the discourse of the historian and that of imaginative writers overlap, resemble, or correspond with each other.' His remarks point to the significance of the zone of convergence between history and life-narrative, a zone that foregrounds the purely discursive nature of both historical and imaginative writing.

Sandberg (n.d., 35) in discussing the telling of history/histories in autobiographical writing and testimonies of the Holocaust posits that 'the relationship between history and literature, or historiography and works of fiction, has been at the centre of an on-going debate within literary and historical studies for some decades.' Historians with their insistence on objectivity could not see the relevance of literary texts to their field of study. Thus Sandberg (n.d., 35) notes that 'historians and literary critics occupied different territories with few points of contact.' The development of a more mutually respectful relationship between history and literature can be attributed to New Historicism. According to Montrose (1989, 20) cited in Sandberg (n.d., 36) 'New Historicism insists on the "historicity of texts" and the textuality of history.' Sandberg adds that 'seeing a culture as a text, [New Historicists] acknowledge the crucial role that the study of discourse plays in any historical period while also insisting on the historicity of the text itself, fictional or non-fictional.' They therefore define their field by advocating the interpretation of texts by locating them more deeply in context. Gallagher and Greenblatt (2000, 12) argue that:

The house of the imagination has many mansions, of which art [...] is only one. But the new historicist project is not about 'demoting' art or discrediting aesthetic pleasure; rather it is concerned with finding the creative power that shapes literary work outside the narrow boundaries in which it had hitherto been located, as well as within these boundaries.

The interdisciplinary approach to literature and history has, according to Sandberg (n.d., 37), 'allowed this special kind of fictional works, i.e. those based on documentary experiences, to contribute to contemporary history, and especially [in her case] to the Holocaust, in a more specific way.' Sandberg (n.d., 38) refines her analysis of New Historicism in relation to autobiographical and testimonial writing by concluding that 'when many contemporary authors use autobiographical techniques to tell their stories, it is because they want to emphasise the authenticity of their experiences and to contextualise them historically in the political and socio-cultural forces of the time.' Therefore New Historicism is interested in cultural constructs which are formations of any era. This notion is related to the concept of historically specific models being available to autobiographers and how they are reflected, in their multiple forms, in a given work.

Carr (1991, 3) in a contribution to the philosophy of history posits that 'in a naïve and pre-scientific way the historical past is there for all of us, that it figures in our ordinary view of things, whether we are historians or not.' This assertion highlights the ubiquity of history in our perceptions of the world around us. Carr (1991, 3) also suggests that 'we have what the phenomenologists call a non-thematic or pre-thematic awareness of the historical past which functions as background for our present experience, or our experience of the present' is evidence, if extended to the production and interpretation of autobiography, that historical consciousness is a critical ingredient in both cases. Dilthey (1968) (in Carr 1991, 4) had earlier argued that 'we are historical beings first, before we are observers of history, and only because we are the former do we become the latter. The historical world is always there, and the individual not only observes it from the outside but is intertwined with it.'

4. ZIMBABWEAN HISTORY AND THE CONSTRUCTION AND READING OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

These observations add support to the argument for the relevance of history in both the construction and reading of life-narrative in Zimbabwe. The history of Zimbabwe; the history that largely informs most Zimbabwean autobiographical narratives, is the history of British imperialism, the Zimbabwean resistance to this and the aftermaths thereof. Therefore, this history and its relationship to the Zimbabwean autobiographical text cannot be ignored and finds resonance with any endeavour to study these texts.

How history and the memory of history are put to use by autobiographers has implications for ways in which subjectivities are constructed. Muchemwa (2005, 196) demonstrates how 'Zimbabwean fiction consistently makes use of biographical and autobiographical modes' and how writers not only 'use fiction to interrogate facts found in historical narrative; they also seek to collapse boundaries of discipline and genre that separate history and fiction. This argument highlights the inseparability of history and life-narrative, as well as establishes the connectedness of storytelling and its relation to historical time.

Identities, especially cultural identities, are not only discursive, but also historical due to being situated in concrete temporal and spatial co-ordinates. Smith and Watson (2001, 10) argue that 'some people read autobiographical narratives as historical documents, a source of evidence for the analysis of historical movements or events or persons.' This explains why autobiography has been and is being used to give focus to studies such as African and African American studies, whose foundational texts are more often than not historical renderings of the African and African American experiences and subjectivities in literary and more precisely autobiographical form. Chennells and Veit-Wild (1999) corroborate this view by noting that the autobiographical act has further implications for the understanding of the discipline of African literature since it is within this literature that the 'African image' has been given definition by African writers. The same has

been the case with the African American image; much of it has been configured through slave and post slavery narratives that are often cast as autobiographical narratives. The outstanding examples of these are Douglass's *Narrative of Frederick Douglass* (1845), Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901) and Wright's *Black Boy* (1945) to name a few.

Commenting on Depelchin's decolonisation project in African literature and society, Senayon Olaoluwa (2010) says the former motions for the incorporation of art and literature in the reinvention of African history. Depelchin's project, in a way, is useful in underwriting the interpretation of Zimbabwean autobiography from the perspective of history. Depelchin (2005) in Olaoluwa (2010, 55) proposes that

African historical scholarship needs an overhaul, because of its colonial orientation through which it adheres to the sanctity of facts, thereby eliding crucial elements of African indigenous history which, among other things, includes a synthetic blend of history and other art forms for the articulation of human travails.

His argument is that the dignity of the African was compromised by representations of the African personality in African history; a representation marred by reduction of African history to the written form. Olaoluwa (2010, 57) observes that 'on account of the relations of power... the reduction of African history to a written form, as sanctioned by the West, informs why so much is lost on the real condition of the continent.' This observation again foregrounds the relevance of why the historical should be found in the literary and vice versa.

According to Smith and Watson (2001,10) 'the complexity of autobiographical texts requires reading practices that reflect on the narrative tropes, sociocultural contexts, rhetorical aims, and narrative shifts within the historical or chronological trajectory of the text.' Therefore, a historical appreciation of the times of the narrating subject (and the times of the audience's interpretation of the text) can methodologically be employed to apprehend the subjectivity of the autobiographical subject.

Smith and Watson (2001: 10) also observe that:

When life narrators write to chronicle an event, to explore a certain time period, or to enshrine a community, they are making 'history' in a sense. But they are also performing several rhetorical acts: justifying their own perceptions, upholding their reputations, disputing the accounts of others, settling scores, conveying cultural information, and inventing desirable futures among others.

Autobiography can thus be the history of an autobiographer's individuality and the history of an individual age. It can also provide a textual record to interact with other textual records. The two histories are inextricably linked. In this way autobiographers will be responding to historical discourses, cultural scripts and sanctioned social discourses.

Smith and Watson (2001, 11) argue that '... autobiographical narrators are at the centre of the historical pictures they assemble and are interested in the meaning of larger forces, or conditions, or events for their stories' adding 'in the details of the immediacy of the lived lives of ... autobiographical narrators, the political and cultural contexts of the historical past become vivid and memorable.' Postcolonial studies corroborate Smith's and Watson's submissions. Boehmer (2005), in writing on postcolonial literature, traces its history and makes critical observations that are useful to review for their significance for this section and for how history and historical discourses are fundamental in understanding the interplay between history, autobiographical acts and subjectivity. Boehmer (2005, 14) notes that 'in diary descriptions of new lands, or by carving their initials on trees and stone tablets, colonialists declared their intention to make a home, to begin a new history' with the intention of '[erasing], either wholly or in part, the signs of other lives which had unfolded in that particular space.' The history of conquest forms the backdrop against which early settlers narrated their life stories and the same historical backdrop carried with it a dominant model of a specific culture configuration, which is among several factors that shaped early settler autobiographical subjectivity in Zimbabwe. A sense of pride in being subjects of a history of imperial conquest becomes a real foundation of autobiographical subjectivity. The history of imperialism inspires certain kinds of subjectivities for both the agents and subjects of imperialism and is deployed by narrators to project particular subjectivities.

The decades immediately following the Second World War were a period of marked resistance to imperialism in its varied forms and this is the historical context that inspires some of the early autobiographies by black Africans in Zimbabwe. New nationalist projects were coming into being. In Zimbabwe, then Rhodesia, early agitators for black people's freedoms began to mobilise against colonial occupation and oppression. The rallying point for early and latter nationalists was an appeal to the validity of a negated indigenous culture and also to the experience of colonial oppression. Early writings by the likes of Stanlake Samkange, Solomon Mutswairo and Lawrence Vambe bear testimony to this historical moment of resistance couched in cultural nationalist terms. Spencer and Wollman (2002, 99) summarise the tendencies of cultural nationalism by claiming that 'cultural nationalism looked elsewhere for its justification, finding it not in reason but in emotion, not in the present but in the past, turning inwards, to the imagination, to tradition, to history and to nature.'

In the same way that the imperial adventure was birthed and sustained by texts, and was experienced textually, the historical moment of indigenous resistance to colonial oppression found its own dramatisation in narrative. The historical moment of resistance therefore provided an impulse for narrating the self and consequently for the construction of subjectivities reflecting that historical and cultural moment. The narrative promoted the resistance cause and narrative was also turned into a textual artefact to symbolise that resistance. Boehmer (2005, 183) observes that 'a host of biographies and autobiographies by or about national figures appeared at this time.' Prominent examples of such texts

across the African continent include Kwame Nkrumah's *Ghana: An Autobiography* of Kwame Nkrumah (1957), Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya* (1965), and Kenneth Kaunda's *Zambia Shall Be Free* (1963). In such works it was taken as self-evident that the experience of the writer or subject – usually the leader of a mass nationalist movement – was in some way typical. 'His (almost invariably his)', Boehmer (2005, 183) argues, 'development captured in cameo form the emergence of the self-conscious nation.' The titles of the texts also captured the conflation of individual and collective national experiences. Implied by the title of both Nkrumah's and Kaunda's autobiographies is that their personal histories are intertwined with the histories of their respective nations. The historical moment of resistance can thus be considered the moment of individuation so critical to the formation of subjectivities for early African nationalists in Zimbabwe in particular and Africa in general. Boehmer (2005, 188) adds, 'Historical atonement, the account of a community's coming-into-being, was fundamental, too, in the process of nationalist self-making or self-imagining.' Boehmer's observations testify to the fundamental role of history in the construction of a subject position and subjectivity; history shapes the ways in which autobiographical subjects perceive themselves and their place in the scheme of things. Through examples drawn from history and lived experiences, one can grasp how this subjectivity is constituted. Thus, black narrating subjects implement a nationalist decolonising practice of interrogating the discourse of colonialism and articulating their own history. What is important then, is the historical location from which the autobiographical subject asserts his or her authorial voice and performs, in the process, his or her autobiographical identity.

4.1. The historical performance of autobiographical identities

Smith (1998; 108) notes that:

everyday, in disparate venues, in response to sundry occasions, in front of precise audiences (even if an audience of one), people assemble, if only temporarily, a 'life' to which they assign narrative coherence and meaning and through which they position themselves in historically specific identities. Whatever that occasion or audience, the autobiographical speaker becomes a performative subject.

Implied in this view of the performativity of the subject is that 'autobiographical telling is not a "self-expressive" act.' This notion disputes the autonomy of the autobiographical subject as was often posited by early critics of autobiography; a notion inspired by Enlightenment thought. Olney (1980: 20) complains that:

Prior to the refocusing from bios to autos there had been a rather naïve threefold assumption about the writing of an autobiography: first, that the bios of autobiography could only signify 'the course of a lifetime' or at least a significant portion of a lifetime; second, that the autobiographer could narrate his life in a manner at least approaching an objective historical account and make of that internal subject a text existing in the external world; and third, that there was

nothing problematical about the autos, no agonizing questions of identity, self-definition, self-existence, or self-deception – at least none the reader need attend to – and therefore the fact that the individual was himself narrating the story of himself had no troubling philosophical, psychological, literary or historical implications.

The problematic nature of autobiographical writing suggested by Olney in this critique points to the fact that autobiographical narration is a performance of identities that are marked by philosophical, literary and historical discourses. Autobiographical storytelling is a cultural performance and what are performed are the cultural and historical identities. The performance is thus historically situated, which makes the point that historicity is essential to the reading of Zimbabwean autobiography even more cogent.

5. CONCLUSION

The discussion in this article draws conclusions that the experiential histories of narrating subjects always inflect autobiographical subjectivities. The article has shown why historical consciousness is central to the construction of autobiographical subjectivities. It can thus be concluded that there is an inseparable unity of discourse, history and imagination in autobiographical thought. This inseparability again proves that both the historian and autobiographer resort to using the same tropological mechanisms in their attempts to craft images of reality and thus history needs to inform a reading of Zimbabwean life-narratives.

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