

Nelson Mandela The Living Legend (1918-2013): Reflections On The Colonial State, Nation Building And Progressive Leadership

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Summary

This article is a critique of the autobiographical documentary, *Nelson Mandela the Living Legend (1918-2013)*, produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation to showcase the legendary hallmarks of former President Mandela's role in transforming South Africa from apartheid to democracy. Its central theme evolves from Mandela's portrayal as a prototype of the nefarious experiences of colonial bigotry under apartheid, a strategist in nation building and eventually providing archetypal leadership in the post-colonial period. Beyond disclosure of the underlying assumptions often associated with Mandela's classic biographical reviews, the article uses interpretative thematic frames to explicate how the autobiographical narrative epitomises the legend's astute creative intelligence in championing the transformative dialogue as an embodiment of the aspirations of South Africans. The article navigates both normative and ideological values incorporated in the content through a verbal-visual functional analysis of the main social and political actors as well as institutional contexts represented in the film. In conclusion it notes that, in addition to the content, form and organisation of the documentary, the producers successfully combined the erstwhile social, political and psychological milieu of the apartheid era with the post-apartheid democratic buoyancy. As a result, Mandela is represented as the biblical "Moses" imbued with the anointing to deliver the highly aspired "miracle rainbow" nation in the form of a democratic South Africa.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel is 'n resensie van die outobiografiese dokumentêr, *Nelson Mandela the Living Legend (1918-2013)*, wat deur die Britse Uitsaaikorporasie vervaardig is om die legendariese waarmede van eertydse President Mandela se rol in die transformering van Suid-Afrika van apartheid na demokrasie, uit te beeld. Die sentrale tema het ontwikkel uit die voorstelling van Mandela as 'n prototipe van die skandelige ervarings van koloniale verkrampteid, 'n strategie van nasiebou en uiteindelik die argetipiese leierskapsgeewing in die postkoloniale tydperk. Benewens openbaarmaking van die onderliggende aannames wat dikwels met Mandela se klassieke biografiese besprekings geassosieer word, gebruik die artikel interpretatiewe tematiese raamwerke om te verklaar hoe die outobiografiese vertelling die legende se skerpsinnige kreatiewe intelligensie verpersoonlik deur die herskeppende dialoog te steun as 'n vergestaltung van Suid-Afrikaners se aspirasies. Die artikel rig sowel normatiewe as ideologiese waardes wat in die inhoud geïnkorporeer is, deur 'n verbaal-visuele funksionele analise van die vernaamste sosiale en politieke rolspelers asook

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institusionele kontekste wat in die film uitgebeeld word. Ten slotte toon die artikel aan dat, afgesien van die inhoud, vorm en organisering van die dokumentêr, die vervaardigers suksesvol die eertydse sosiale, politieke en sielkundige milieu van die apartheid-era gekombineer het met die post-apartheid- demokratiese lewendigheid. Gevolglik word Mandela voorgestel as die Bybelse “Moses” wat vervul was met die salwing om die “wonderwerk-reënboognasie” wat nagestreef word in die vorm van ’n demokratiese Suid-Afrika, te lewer.

1 Introduction

For many people in the world, the name Nelson Mandela resonates with numerous versions of the saintly man whose life remains “the world’s favourite fairy tale” that mythologises South Africa’s transition to democracy (Gevisser 2000). This has led to the numerous accumulative collection of artistic expressions by a wide range of authors in an attempt to describe, interpret and celebrate his life in diverse, albeit convergent ways. This is evident in the autobiographical works authored by Southall (2011); Zagacki (2003) as well as book reviews by Walshe (1987); Campbell (1991); Pollard (1994); Henderson (1996) and Gevisser (2000) among others. In all these works, the authors present Mandela as the very symbol of black resistance against apartheid and a charismatic leader who delivered the “miracle rainbow nation” in 1994 when South Africa transformed from minority rule to democracy. As the world’s most famous political prisoner (Pollard 1994), Mandela’s autobiographers have reckoned how he emerged with “unbroken and unbowed” dignity and strength after surviving 27 years of incarceration. An examination of some of his personal writings such as *Long Walk to Freedom; The Struggle is My Life; Conversations with Myself*, and their accompanying analyses by scholars and journalists does confirm his exemplary leadership qualities. It is this legendary narrative and charisma that bestows on him the accolade of the “complex living symbol of revolutionary resistance and hope” of the South African people (Pollard 1994: 79).

Nelson Mandela: The Living Legend, as articulately stated in its preamble, is a documentary that reveals an extraordinary man through the eyes of the “actor” himself involving complementary recollections from both famous and ordinary people who formed part of his historic political journey. The two-fold part series documents Mandela from his oriental-formative years in the Transkei and his experiences of being raised by five mothers to escaping to Johannesburg where his political consciousness emerged. Mandela is portrayed ordinarily among other citizens through his boxing, dancing and intimacy endeavours, social elements that afforded him the avenue to internalise the untenable social and political injustices of colonial subjugation. It is at this stage that other people such as Walter Sisulu spotted him as a potential revolutionary and incorporated him into the network of anti-colonial activities. Lack of positive reciprocity from the white government and

experiences of prejudice, police brutality and racism compelled him and his compatriots to adopt a difficult decision to use violence to dethrone the government, a treasonous action that led to a life-time incarceration till 1990. The documentary further highlights the unbearable conditions of life in apartheid prisons including espionage, deprivation and loneliness intended to break the revolutionary's volition to advance the struggle (BBC Worldwide 2013).

In a series of exclusive interviews, Mandela is viewed through incepts with the former President of the United States of America and friend, Bill Clinton; the President he ousted, Mr F.W. De Klerk; long-time friend, Fidel Castro; Lenny Henry; Peter Hain; Graça Machel (his wife) and Zenani Mandela (one of his daughters from his marriage to Winnie). Furthermore, the documentary showcases Mandela on a trans-continental trip spanning six months as he went on his day-to-day errands in Europe, Asia, Africa and America. The film also juxtaposes how the revolutionary leader coped with his formal schedule including hosting meetings with highly esteemed politicians with the informal context where he partook in shooting televised campaigns and engaged in tourist adventures such as watching hippos in a safari camp with his close friend Mr Bill Clinton (BBC Worldwide 2013). The article illustrates how these events represent a significant historic, political and transformative period which the protagonist championed, by rising above racial, ethnic and the political divide to deliver the constitutional democracy that South Africa has come to be.

2 Qualitative Interpretative Framing

The article uses qualitative interpretative frames to critique the autobiographical documentary, *Nelson Mandela: The Living Legend (1918-2013)*. It uses thematic frames to explicate how the autobiographical narrative epitomises the legend's astute creative intelligence in championing the struggle and transformative politics of South Africa. Furthermore, it examines both normative and ideological values incorporated in the content through a functional analysis of the main social and political actors as well as institutional contexts represented in the film script. The approach appreciates how the film, in its two-part series, deals with Mandela's personal and public life endeavours by reporting them to the audience in different frames and perspectives (Kamalipour 2010). These frames are useful in highlighting the agenda setting perspective involved in the packaging process to produce the effects intended to influence the way audiences interpret the reality about Mandela's role. Thus, the paper critiques the documentary's construction of frames as the central organising ideas highlighted in the content. This helped to reveal the contextualised meaning of the documentary through use of

selective application, emphasis, and elaboration of key functional elements as the catalytic embodiment of the producer's intentions.

3 Reflections on The Colonial State, Nation Building and Progressive Leadership

The documentary is analysed in terms of how it reveals Mandela's formative years and experiences of colonial bigotry including the erstwhile futile attempts to dislodge white rule through violent means. It further focuses on Mandela's preoccupation with managing the transition to democracy, reconstruction and nation building efforts, and projection of the legend's personal acumen as an accomplished iconic international statesman during his brief years in office.

3.1 Formative years, Colonial Bigotry and Resistance

Some authors have argued that Mandela's years in prison "transformed him into a much more reflective and influential kind of leader" after the realisation that "law and not war was the basis of his hopes for his country's future" (Gevisser 2000: 3). Contrary to this view, other scholars have attributed this virtue to his early experiences in rural South Africa where he learned moral lessons from legends of historic warriors through observing and internalising his people's customs and rituals which remained deeply embedded in his psyche (Berg 2014). Indeed, a careful analysis of the documentary spots how Mandela's formative years predictively curved him into the selfless person whose "notions of leadership were profoundly influenced by observing the regent and his court" (Berg 2014, the moral qualities that he articulately exuded during the talks towards democracy.

3.2 Surviving the Apartheid State and Its Injustices

The documentary in question's functional aspects lie in its ability to not only provide insights into Mandela's private life, but essentially in giving thought provoking political manoeuvres and outlining the revealing aspects of the struggle for freedom in South Africa. It uses Mandela's optimism and resilient character to survive the harsh socio-economic challenges of the South Africa of the mid 1940s, to portray the vulnerability of thousands of young desperate youths who saw the City (Johannesburg) as the only haven of hope against the backdrop of life in their impoverished rural communities. Mandela's love for wisdom and subsequent ambition to study law under the tutelage of his mentor Walter Sisulu (a lawyer) helped him to circumvent the route that many of his uneducated peers followed. It is this pursuit for education that further

enlightens him about the plight of his people's prejudiced working conditions in the mines, farms and their masters' domestic habitats. Further, it is during this period that he made friends with a number of like-minded political activists from whom he learned the language of the struggle as informed by African nationalism and other proletariat-inclined ideologies including Marxism. Arguably, this period of intellectual exposure left indelible marks of dutiful persona that birthed the strong sense of his wisdom and love for justice, thoughtful precision, critical appreciation of other people's views and sense of public duty (Henderson 1996), as the utmost attributes that characterised his tenure as chief negotiator and president of democratic South Africa.

3.3 Militancy, Ideological Equilibria and Justice Persona

Contrary to the approaches that characterised the liberal route adopted in the latter years, the documentary features Mandela as being instrumental in the formation of the ANC Youth League, ultimately making it the militant "brains trust and power station" of the organisation (Henderson 1996; BBC Worldwide 2013). Although this resolve to take a more militant mode in the struggle shook up the conservative leadership of the ANC, Mandela emerges as a stronger nationalist ready to straddle ideological paradigms including courting the communists in order to achieve freedom. Following a series of contacts with the police, courts, and prison, Mandela and colleagues embraces these encounters, as "a badge of honour" (Henderson 1996), prompting them to further intensify their focus on the struggle. After thorough consultative meetings and counter arguments within the movement, Mandela is given the green light to form *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, as a pragmatic stance to resist violence with violence. This leads to actions of sabotage, nomadism, conviction and an ultimate life imprisonment jail term. The emphasis given to this "composition" of events is exploited by the producers of the documentary to create the "balance" which they celebrate in a "flash-back" mode in Part Two of the series that purveys Mandela as a symbol of both moral integrity and political influence.

Although Mandela tried with great effort to use the treason trial as an opportunity to brand the ANC as an organisation based on common history, principle and virtue, his oracle falls on deaf ears. Nonetheless, he demonstrates, through the court proceedings, that despite him being the prisoner, he remains the symbol of justice, and that the government of the day comprised "the criminals" that were supposed to be prosecuted. Faced with the livid arrogance and unrepentant approach of his enemies, Mandela adopts a mild strategy that saw the beginning of private negotiations for change, meanwhile clandestine communications with inmates and those in exile sustained the struggle (Henderson 1996; BBC Worldwide 2013). This application aesthetic, showcases Mandela's political and moral maturity coupled with realistic

reasoning as the main tenets that led to reconciliation and eventual circumvention of the inevitable carnage during the early 1990s.

4 Transition to Democracy and Nation-Building

Despite the unbanning of all political organisations and subsequent release of Nelson Mandela, numerous hurdles stood on the way of the transition to democratic change in South Africa. This challenge presented a “multiple trope of resistance, compromise and deliberation” (Doxtader 2001), for Mandela as the protagonist in as much as it was for the rest of his constituents. Thus, the transition unfolds in a double-thronged fashion to promote peace and reconciliation as well as buttressing a basis for reconstruction and nation-building.

4.1 Promotion of Peace and Reconciliation

In the documentary, Mandela’s resolve and quest for peace and reconciliation is explicitly captured when he took a giant leap to embrace his former foes including the widow of the apartheid architect H.F. Verwoerd and his former callous prosecutor Percy Yutar, who wished him death at the gallows during the Rivonia treason trial in 1964. While this projected him as a modest person at a personal level, the producers’ choice to highlight this gesture is in no means motivated by projecting Mandela playing to the gallery nor the desire for public sympathy, rather it is presented as part of a reconciliatory strategy that towered him as a role model for national reconciliation which culminated in the formation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Gevisser’s (2000) review of *Strange Bedfellows: Mandela, De Klerk, and the New South Africa*, also noted how Mandela’s long incarceration played a major role in producing “his almost inhuman lack of bitterness and desire for reconciliation in the intensely controlled environment in prison”. The functional benefit of this experience was used by the former captive (Mandela) to transform his captors’ insensitivity to human suffering and how he exploited this to allay their fears and insecurities due to rising nationalism and demands for democracy.

In many ways, the producer’s selective emphasis of Mandela’s handling of Chris Hani’s death through the televised statesmanship speech, against the volatile setting, demonstrated that he was already the leader, and the protector of peace in South Africa (Sampson cited in Zagacki 2003). In this scene, the producer uses this excerpt to show how Mandela’s “charm” helped to dispel the vile and anger of revenge that characterised the black population’s frustrations, thereby avoiding the possibility of a bloody catastrophe that could have scuttled all attempts towards democratic change. While this event possessed all ingredients to place the country in the brink of civil war, bearing in mind the mistrust that had developed among ANC militants who saw their

president “in league with their enemies” (Zagacki 2003), his rhetoric yielded a sense of restraint that calmed down the animosity among the warring constituents. Mandela raised Hani’s profound character as the voice which epitomised a united force and rose above the demur of identity politics and class struggles. During this period, Mandela’s charismatic leadership is shown as the prototype of the envisioned democracy scattering fears fuelled by oppositional politics, particularly the threats by Inkatha Freedom Party and Afrikaner Right wingers’ overtures of exclusive states.

4.2 Reconstruction and Nation-Building

Upon announcing his release from prison, the producer’s deliberate focus on Mandela’s reconciliatory stance is wittingly evident. The film presents the roadmap towards both reconstruction and nation-building through a process of negotiated dialogue to transform the injustices of the past on the basis of social-political organisation and a modality of constitutional governance (BBC Worldwide 2013). This stage precisely highlights the diplomatic skills that Mandela possesses to create a balance between “past legacies of animosity and a future of hope ...” (Zagacki 2003), without inducing fear that could further foment deep divisions, particularly from conservative parties. Despite its controversial nature, non-racialism remained a stumbling block to Mandela’s envisioned democratic South Africa. The film casts his personal restraint and democratic treatment of his former enemies as a personal validation that he was committed to “an elected government of the people, by the people and for the people” possibly inclusive of the conservatives and reactionaries (Zagacki 2003: 726). Essentially, the film focuses on how he successfully mapped and represented not only the aspirational hopes of his own people, but also the multitude of sympathisers across the whole world who shared his vision for a free South Africa.

4.3 Progressive Leadership

Although the documentary presents Mandela more as an activist than an intellectual, this is fitting because these were the qualities that earned him the position of ANC Military Wing (MK) Commander in Chief, a tactical responsibility that became handy when he had to deal with impatient combatants from exile during the *talks*. Since his shift from the war and violent approach, Mandela had to learn to be a “regal and intuitive leader rather than a judicious one” (Gevisser 2000: 176), as a requisite personal quality of statesmanship. Despite his personal shortcomings as a husband, father and leader of a broad organisation, the documentary selectively highlights his immense moral influence and political appeal in the context of world public opinion.

4.4 Constitutionalism and Entrenchment of Democratic Values

Although Mandela was born into a segregated society and suffered one of the deadliest experiences of incarceration, the film portrays him as a man who stood firm by his belief in democratic values. This was validated through the enactment of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa in 1996, renowned for its ardent commitment to upholding human rights and promotion of good governance (RSA: Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996). Thus, his leadership style stands in sharp contrast to other nationalist leaders, particularly in Africa where experiences of prejudice and incarceration have been used as justification or entitlement to acquire exclusive privileges and to develop unfettered access to state resources. Undemocratic as this may be, the narrator (voice over) implicitly deplores this tendency and how it creates a shift from the founding imperatives of the struggle for freedom. Here, Mandela is ironically juxtaposed against some leaders who abandon the collective version of democracy and plunge their nations into a state of oblivion characterised by hopelessness and desperation. While acknowledging the inherent influence that international capital and international agenda have on third world leaders (Henderson 1996), the film explicitly rejects this philosophy, by categorically projecting leaders of Mandela's calibre as driven by conscious transformative politics "where the people represent the core of the struggle" (Campbell 1991: 10). Mandela's astute leadership qualities are showcased when, at the brink of the collapse of talks towards the formation of a democratic society, he could not adopt a "straight jacket" model to deliver the new non-racist, non-sexist inclusive South Africa he espoused. Poignantly, producers of *Nelson Mandela the Legend*, ideologically framed the protagonist onto a global inspirational pedestal for "the politics of self-emancipation beyond leaderism" (Campbell 1991:10 that embodies internationally espoused human rights and democratic values.

4.5 Iconic International Statesmanship

Despite the end of the cold war era, Mandela is presented as the "bridge" that could withstand the pressure to maintain the balance between historically acclaimed antagonistic ideological forces. The producer of the film succeeds by imbuing him (Mandela) with the capacity to sustain the friendships of Mr Bill Clinton, the former President of the USA and Cde Fidel Castro, the former President of Communist Cuba as a vivid gesture to show the world the prospects of a new world order associated with new statesmanship, rising above ideological patronage. The analysis therefore focuses on how the film presents Mandela's thrust towards entrenchment of democratic values and display of progressive leadership. Against the common individualist paradigms synonymous with political conquest and suppression of dissenting

voices on which most undemocratic states are built, the documentary uses Mandela's transformation model to stress how inclusive political change can yield desirable results premised on compromise rather than confrontation. The approach underscores the need for leaders to aspire to overlook their narrow political interests and embrace collectivist-dialogic approaches to problem-solving as methods that resonate with the general public's aspirations.

5 Conclusion

Nelson Mandela the Living Legend personifies the complexities within which the South African social, political and psychological milieu transpired through a man who dedicated his entire life to the struggle and liberation of his people. The documentary successfully showcases the convolutions attendant to the poisoned political context within which the qualities of Mandela's leadership and courage had to be tested. Concealed in his great vigour, stature and virtuous calibre, Mandela meticulously championed and reconfigured the nefarious dynamics of the apartheid state and succeeded in harnessing the divergent and largely narrow aspirations of various political formations against deep-seated colonial bigotry and its accompanying pre-judices. The film can be viewed as a monumental form of art that contributes to shaping the history of the South African struggle and serves as a benchmark to the broader international community to guard against cultism, *leaderism* and elitism that often leads to divisive politics. In the end, the producers of the documentary succeeded in projecting Mandela as the symbol of the dialectic of resistance and transformation politics not only in the South African context but for the entire humanity.

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