

Long Walk to Freedom and the Mutating Face of the Epic

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Summary

The encounter with Nelson Mandela's voluminous *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994) in a vibrant post-apartheid society that is effervescent with the "Rainbow" identity and the "Renaissance" spirit, easily beckons the critical examination of such a work to establish its exact value and relevance, if any, to this post-independence state, Renaissance South Africa. To ascertain the significance of *Long Walk* in present-day South Africa, this article therefore first seeks to establish the generic family of *Long Walk* before exploring its actual impact in the era of its epiphany. Using the hypothesis that *Long Walk* is not only an autobiography but is also an epic, this article employs a comparative approach to highlight the epic qualities of the text, first for literariness and then for comparison with similar "classical" literary writings in other societies such as England, Italy and Mali with the view to foreground the text's primordial social function. The aim is to canvass for the recognition of this autobiography as a typical African epic whose functional remedies can be applied to the very society from which it comes. The critical argument advanced in this article is that modern society can garner valuable models of human behaviour from the mirrors of societies found in literary texts of grandeur such as *Long Walk*, as literature continues to exhibit many tools that can be used to challenge the plethora of current socio-ethical ills. The pivotal point is the value of humanness and the role of responsible governance which great leaders of human history have always exhibited or encouraged to emulate in these literary expressions of note.

Opsomming

Nelson Mandela se lywige *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994) in 'n lewenskragtige postapartheidsamelewing wat bruis van die "reënboog"-identiteit en die "Renaissance"-gees lok 'n mens om hierdie werk krities te ondersoek om sy presiese waarde en relevansie – as daar is – vir Suid-Afrika in die tydperk na onafhanklikheid te bepaal. Om die betekenis van *Long Walk* in die huidige Suid-Afrika te bepaal, probeer die outeur dus eers vasstel in watter generiese familie *Long Walk* tuis hoort voordat die werklike impak daarvan in die era van sy Driekoningedag verken word. Die hipotese is dat *Long Walk* nie net 'n outobiografie is nie maar ook 'n epiese gedig, dat daar in die artikel dus 'n vergelykende benadering gevolg word om die epiese kwaliteite van die teks uit te lig, aanvanklik met die oog op literêrheid en vervolgens met die oog op vergelyking met soortgelyke "klassieke" literêre geskifte in ander samelewings soos Engeland, Italië en Mali, ter verskaffing van voorgrond

vir die teks se fundamentele sosiale funksie. Die doel is om voorspraak te maak vir die erkenning van hierdie outobiografie as 'n tipiese epiiese gedig van Afrika, waarvan die funksionele remedies toegepas kan word op die samelewing waaruit dit na vore gekom het. Die kritieke argument wat in hierdie artikel aangevoer word, is dat die moderne samelewing waardevolle modelle vir menslike gedrag kan bekom uit die spieëlbeeldsamelewings wat in literêre tekste soos *Long Walk* aangetref word, aangesien die literatuur steeds vele modelle bied wat gebruik kan word om die veelvoud van sosio-etiese euwels wat vandag voorkom, aan te pak. Die kern is die waarde van menslikheid en die rol van verantwoordelike regering wat groot leiers in die geskiedenis van die mens nog altyd geopenbaar het en wat hierdie belangrike literêre uitdrukkings ons aanmoedig om na te boots.

Introduction

In one of his famous statements, John Milton (1965) asserts that true heroism cannot be found in untested prelapsarian innocence, but that it lies in the acts of demonstrable bravery, disdain, trials, falls and resurrection from the ashes. Captured in his prose tract, *Areopagitica*, and advocating freedom of speech and liberation, Milton's conviction is that heroic virtue manifests itself in facing and overcoming danger. This type of ethos proliferated in the classical works of the past, especially the epic. Nonetheless, such prowess has not remained the monopoly of past centuries; modern writing has continued to proffer a similar kind of eminence in style, art and character. The intriguing echoes of the Miltonic heroism of the past can be observed in Nelson Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom* (hereafter called *Long Walk*). The reading of epic heroism (content) and modern autobiographical construct of form suggests a challenge in the appreciation of this autobiographical narrative. The epic features lauded by John Milton above invariably encourage us not to merely perceive *Long Walk* as just another auto-/biography or political biography, but rather to also engage with it as an "epic".

This daring reference to *Long Walk* as both epic (in content) and auto-/biographical (in form) is a critical indicator of the Janus-like character of Mandela's work; it is a reading which hazards the dilemma of strictly categorising a work of art into one specific genre or the other. The multifarious character of this text therefore demands of the ensuing discussion a two-prong approach toward addressing these nebulous and yet salient features of the two constituent genres – the auto-/biography and the epic – before undertaking any in-depth analysis of the text. The point at issue is that there can be no definitive classification of *Long Walk*, because, at face value, it presents as a typical post-apartheid auto-/biography and yet closer scrutiny reflects something more profound than the obvious. For this reason, it is as difficult to overlook the auto-/biographical features as it is hard to ignore the epic qualities of the text.

As an auto-/biography, *Long Walk* is a form of non-fictional writing devoted to recovering and interpreting real lives. Even more, as an

autobiography, the narrative is a record of others around the life of the biographer, making true Hamilton's (2007: 1) view that *Long Walk* is an idiography that writes the "self", in this case Mandela, as well as the nation, South Africa (p. 1). This makes the text a record of history which simultaneously recounts a tale of valour and bravery. The intertwined reflections of historiography, biography, idiography, documentary and the epic are the central issues the article deals with.

The Literary Features of *Long Walk to Freedom*

The literary attributes of *Long Walk* are observed in appraisal commentary of the *Sunday Telegraph*:

The autobiography succeeds because the vicissitudes Mandela has gone through in the course of his life are so dramatic that the reader cannot help responding to them as if to a *fairy tale or moral fable of some kind. No hero of legend ever went through such protracted trials in order to arrive at so improbable a victory.*

(Mandela 1994; my italics)¹

Desmond Tutu declares that *Long Walk* is "a fitting monument – a story of a people's victory. [It] will help us never to forget" (*The Tablet*). Further, Angus Calder states that this is "a work of literature as well as an important document" (*Scotland on Sunday*). Wole Soyinka calls it a "sociological treasure trove". From the foregoing we can see that *Long Walk* is perceived as one of the notable literary works of the twentieth century. The political stature of its author notwithstanding, the hero of the tale, the myriad of experiences that such a hero goes through and the nature of the theme, are all compelling evidence of the profound kind of an auto-/biography *Long Walk* is. It is thus not far-fetched to try and establish its value for post-apartheid South Africa. But before we explore the epic dimension of *Long Walk* it is important to first examine the text's biographical features to establish if there is any synergy between these two apparent incommensurate genres, the epic and the biographical novel.

Writing the Self in *Long Walk to Freedom*

The central tale of *Long Walk* emerges as more than one man's personal account. It is the life history of every individual that Mandela makes

1. This and other comments that follow are review statements captured in the preamble pages of the Abucus edition of *Long Walk to Freedom* (Mandela 1994). These notable reviewers include: Angus Calder, G.D. Corrender, Dan Jacobson, Desmond Tutu and Wole Soyinka.

mention of; it is the life story of political organisations; it is a historical account of South Africa that starts almost at the beginning of the struggle for liberation. This is more than an account of the life history of an individual – as conventional (Western) autobiographies tend to be. In the auto-/biographical tradition of black South Africa this is easier to understand as the auto-/biographer writes through the “self” for the “many”, the nation. It is in this vein that we appreciate the point made by Jean Starobinski (in Pilling 1981) on “the style of autobiography” as reflective of versions of self, and of metaphors of self as seen in “the art of life”, “the art of self”, “the voice within” and “autobiographical acts” all being notes toward a definition rather than attempts to enunciate rules wherein the history of imagination is “oriented outwards and not inwards” (Pilling 1981: 4). It is this very act of the narrating of self that is “a declaration of immense personal and group pride in physical and psychological survival. We can thus appreciate the group hero in *Long Walk* whose primary voice is Mandela.

Ngwenya affirms the notion of a mass or group hero in his 2006 interviews of notable South African auto-/biographers like Dennis Brutus and Chubani Manganyi. Brutus confirms that there is a high degree of integration between the writer’s art, life and politics. These autobiographies are not merely about the self, they are also part of mass activism (Coullie et al. 2006: 154). Brutus further states: “What I was experiencing was being experienced by many others. I write, ‘I speak their wordless woe’ ... I am more a voice of community, rather than asserting any kind of uniqueness” (p. 154).

However, in an autobiography, authors can only recreate a particular version of the self. It is possible that the “other” selves remain buried under the unsaid. It is also true that the selves that an author might give form to, can be in conflict with societal values. In other words, there is no guarantee, let alone any need to assume that what the autobiographer writes must correspond with society’s views point by point. This understanding of self-writing therefore complicates our reading of *Long Walk*. The notion of the private sphere can tell a great deal about the public and vice versa. Hence, in South African auto-/biographies there are those individuals whose personal troubles are a resplendent mirror of the public issues of the day such as seen in the biographies of Albert Luthuli, Z.K. Matthews, Es’kia Mphahlele, Walter Sisulu, Desmond Tutu, F.W. de Klerk, Chris Hani, Miriam Makeba and Steve Biko. Evidently, the place of political auto-/biography in South Africa seems to be that of consciousness raising and history recording rather than celebrating an individual’s life story (Ngwenya 1996: 13). Although not mentioned in Ngwenya’s analysis, Nelson Mandela’s *Long Walk* easily fits the profile of the above-discussed South African historical auto-/biographies.

Exploration of Auto-/biographical Features in *Long Walk*

The foregoing debate on the generic nature of *Long Walk* is typical of the auto-/biography genre in which the critical question of the nebulous authoritative description of this genre has persisted for decades. This is primarily because even without the added complexity of the “epic reading”, the auto-/biography genre complicates matters by manifesting in subgenres such as memoirs, historical writing, confession, apology, diary, journal, the novel (which takes its life from the facts of its author’s life) (Pilling 1981: 2). It is thus an ill-defined genre. The argument about theme and form in auto-/biography is as old as the genre itself – a genre characterised by continued debates on the notion of truth that partakes of design and its purported embodiment of truth. Mediating for a more accurate category distinction between the two seemingly conflicting genres (the epic and auto-/biography), several critics bring to rest the views of seminal discussions on the auto-/biography as reflected hence.

According to Olney (1972: 44-55),² there are numerous views on the definition of this genre. For instance, Frye sees the auto-/biography as a novel; Lejuenne argues that an autobiography is an act of self-writing while Elizabeth Bruss believes that this is an “act” more than a “form”. In agreement with Bruss, Eakin cautions that more emphasis should be placed on the relationship between self and language when seeking a definition of this genre. Finally, Olney himself adds the point that the act of autobiography and the act of poetry are acts of creation as well as reaction in self-portraiture. Autobiography and poetry are both definitions of the self at a moment and in a place. Autobiography thus involves defining the writer in the present, at the time of writing. The self is both imitated and created, which presupposes that such a work is an artistic expression that can assume any form at completion.

The Silences in *Long Walk to Freedom*

A critical scrutiny of the faithfulness of Mandela’s *Long Walk* to the truth, to histories and to the political landscape he sets out to record is very selective in material presentation. “Silences” on some issues in this text are observed. It may be surmised that *Long Walk* does not capture the myriad of voices within the South African totality of life. Nonetheless, it is still within the auto-/biographer’s rights not to admit all “data” in his text as he re-creates the past in the moment of recasting it into a contained artistic entity. Auto-/biographers have the poetic licence to choose what events to inter-

2. Olney presents a collection of brief commentaries on the autobiography from different notable critics such as Bruss, Eakin, Frye, Lejuenne and Olney. The comments reflected here therefore are these critical views.

pret, to excise, to reorder and to recast, depending on their reasons for writing and who their imagined audience is. This process of selectively choosing segments from a person's/people's life, memories, the repression or overemphasis of certain experiences is all part of what is known as the subjective manipulation of "truths", incidents and self-portraiture. We can justifiably question the logic of events, the (de-)emphasis of incidents and their interpretation by the first-person narrator, but this is his prerogative.

Critics may find it difficult to force the hand and mind of the artist to design and capture what they perceive as "edited silences", hence they are likely to point out that Mandela's memories of himself and the struggles are selected and ordered in a particular way which privileges some meanings and not others. There is no single memory of the South African struggle; there are multiple. Hamilton (2007: 27) observes that works such as the autobiography have an agenda (conscious or not) which is laudatory or critical, whether recording an individual's actions or his reflections. Therefore there is tension between commemoration and critical interpretation. Olney (1972: 35) argues that this type of writing is a metaphor that mediates between our internal and our external selves; between your experience and mine; between the artist and us; between conscious mind and total being; between a past and a present self; between ourselves formed and ourselves *becoming*.

Because an autobiography is more than a history of the past and more than a book currently circulating in the world, it is not a monument of self, it is rather *becoming* a metaphor of the self at the summary moment of composition. Therefore, it will not record all that was because it is a metaphor of an entity in *process*, Olney reminds us (1972: 35). Keeping this in mind, as readers of *Long Walk to Freedom* we are acutely aware that writing about one's life is also the recreation of history wherein the representation of truths and reality are freely marshalled by the writer. This process of self-inscription necessitates a preliminary critique of the very same values contained in the version of South Africa that Mandela has authored. Hence, even the "silences" that may be observed in the text may not necessarily be slips of design, because autobiographies do not only repeat past experiences but also reconstruct such experiences.

***Long Walk to Freedom* and the Epic Tradition**

In Western literature, an epic is traditionally in poetic form and not a prose narrative. Furthermore, great epics in world literature focus on mighty kings or rulers whose valour is recounted by professional bards. The stories in these poems depict both the triumphs and defeats of the subject by illuminating the attributes of the hero. In some Anglo-Saxon epics like *Beowulf*, for instance, the kingship of the Danes is depicted as that of the *rulers of people* and not of *countries* because the most important duty in that

communalistic lifestyle was accountability to the subjects for their welfare. Ngara (1982: 124) offers the overview that “an epic [could be] a composition of strong national significance as we see in the *Aeneid* by Virgil, a nationalistic epic *par excellence*, seeking to give a heroic account of the mission of the founder of Rome and to glorify Rome”. Similar qualities of magnitude and excellence can be observed in various epics in world literature,³ such as John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, the Protestant epic of the English Renaissance era. In the declaration and introduction of this epic, Milton explains that the chief purpose of *Paradise Lost* is to seek to justify the ways of God to man. In true epic tradition, this poem also recounts a multitude of episodes of spectacle, danger and prowess through poetry and narrative.

Almost the same views on the epic are found in Africa. For example, among the Nguni political courts of pre-colonial times good governance was lauded and poor leadership admonished. This is reflected in several heroic poems such as the criticism of the Zulu king (King Dingane) who failed to protect his warriors. In this case the “praises” of reprisal of this king ironically referred to him as:

UMashikisela!
Umashiy'impI yakhe!
[Man of big strides!
He who abandons his army!]⁴

Similarly, the encouragement of protection of warriors is observed in the praises of Swaziland’s King Mbandzeni (late nineteenth century), where the self-sacrificial act is praised:

Wena lowadzel’ emandanda
Wayawutseng’ emajaha!
[You who had to forego the ornamental cloth,
But chose to fortify the regiments!]⁵

Manifestly, in the case of the Nguni, these praises were used to urge courage and endurance (Visser 1977: 52), thus reflecting the order of

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3. This brief portion on epic tradition first formed part of the author’s earlier research on African poetry and was part of the discourse of an article published in the journal *South African Folklore Studies* (1994).
 4. These praises have been transmitted orally over many generations, but a collection of Zulu kings’ praises has been made by Nyembezi Sibusiso (see Reference section).
 5. Similarly, Ginindza has published a collection of another oral body of knowledge in the anthology reflected in the Reference section.

behavioural norms in this society that cowardice in male leaders is not to be tolerated, as was the case in most ancient societies of the world. A bad king was one who pillaged and squandered the hard-earned wealth of the nation. He was the violent tyrant who was deaf to admonition and therefore a bad steward for his people. As Cleomes (1994)⁶ observes, the battlefield and the royal court were the two most essential seats of power, the spheres of rule that disseminated law through carefully formulated language pronouncements. All in all, Cleomes's account endorses the fact that the epic is a repository of the values of primeval society that transcends time and culture.

The point at issue is that the culture of epic composition is universal. It is not confined to Europe and Asia. For instance, various countries in Africa are renowned for their fascinating epics. One of the oldest written epics in the continent, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (Niane 1994), is from West Africa. This thirteenth-century epic relates the life and exploits of the great Sundiata, the founder of the ancient Empire of Mali. Even closer home we find epics of Mazisi Kunene (like *Anthem of the Decades*, 1981) which recount the history and origins of the Zulu in English. Other African writers like Ghanaian Ayi Kwei Armah (*Two Thousand Seasons*, 1979) wrote epic accounts on the whole of Africa's experiences. However, these epics deviate from the European model of poetry as their epic material is presented in novel form. Of particular relevance here is the presentation of the epic in prose form.

Incidentally, it is this "deviant" style of epic rendition that encourages some African novel critics to adopt a flexible approach to critiquing the classical African novels of, for instance, both Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Mongo Beti (Ezeigbo 1992: 614). This is the analytical view that identifies certain epic features in novels like *Mission to Kala* (Beti 1979) or *Petals of Blood* (Ngugi 1986). Accordingly, the critics are encouraged to consider epic features in critiquing the African novel instead of only using a linear Western formalistic approach that has been practised in the modern realist model of prose critiquing. Iconoclastic views such as Ezeigbo's encourage one to think that the generic presentation of the epic need not be strictly poetic. It is therefore not far-fetched to advance the notion that twentieth-century South Africa can give birth to an epic. As such, if Africa has the proclivity to use the prosaic model to render the same epic thesis as is conventionally borne by the poetic, perhaps the novel and the narrative poem are not the only genres that can house the epic. It is thus possible to read even an autobiographical composition as an epic, as I read *Long Walk*.

The presence of epic features in prose is explained by Bakhtin (1990) as a process through which the old genre (epic) is transposed into the new and developing (novel), in so doing, giving continued life to the old and

6. This is a précis of Cleomes's open lecture at the University of South Africa in 1994.

complete genre of ancient times. Because it is new and still evolving in the family of genres, the novel is organically receptive to new forms, and because it has no canon of its own as do other genres, the novel is a highly adaptable genre “that easily parodies other genres, squeezes out some genres and incorporates others into its own peculiar structure, reformulating and re-accentuating them” (Bakhtin 1990: 3-5). Since it is a developing genre (p. 6), the novel is therefore not fossilised in form and content. It is this very permeability that makes the mutation of the epic effortless in the novel as can be seen in *Long Walk*.

The epic is therefore not foreign to Africa nor are its constituents foreign to the novel. Hence, its attributes can be freely appreciated in Mandela’s auto-/biographical work without initiating any negative corollary. Rooted in oral tradition, epics are an amalgam of myth, history and fiction as they present a great mass of material. Furthermore, epics feature a hero who is a mythical or historical figure and man⁷ of national importance. The subject matter recounts heroic deeds that include battles and long journeys; the verse style is usually elevated, and the action an intermixture of supernatural elements or figures with human traits. Naturally, the setting of the epic is worldwide and can even be cosmic in scale. Epics have a generic nature that is more comic than tragic as the hero eventually succeeds in his exploits. Noteworthy is the sublime language and magnitude of theme. Ngara (1982: 122) explains that epics should convey a central theme of strong national significance.

All of these qualities of the epic tradition outlined above seem to be present in Mandela’s *Long Walk*, which suggests that the epic is still a genre for the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. This assertion makes one wonder if a literature of such magnitude and grandeur continues to play as strong a role in asserting nationhood as its kindred did centuries ago. My own view is that it does not, as the citizenry is probably unaware of its virtues. People today presumably look for accounts of their heroes in newspapers and or listen to the news reports and these have taken the place of the heroic national narratives related by griots or bards or *timbongi*.⁸ *Long Walk* therefore reminds modern society of the key attributes of responsible leadership in the Renaissance man.⁹

7. Characters that featured centrally to stories of the times were usually male.

8. SiSwati for praise singer or bard. SiSwati is one of the Nguni languages spoken in southern Africa.

9. This seeming gender bias is not an indication of register insensitivity in this article; it is merely the parlance of the epoch that forms the bulk of this research, the English Renaissance era.

Long Walk and African Renaissance

The universality of the epic also reflects in temporal space in that even though over the centuries it seems to have been overshadowed by newer genres such as drama or the novel, the epic has quietly continued to survive across cultures and within some of those newer genres. Also central to the epic is the hero whose attributes are found in the so-called renaissance man. Clarifying this dynamism of genre, Gracian points out that

the nature of the epic changed through the centuries tracking changes in the character and status of the hero. The classical hero was of noble birth [But] by contrast, the medieval and Renaissance hero could be a commoner It is noticeable that in both cases the ideal hero was as wise as he was courageous This characterization of the hero was continued throughout the Renaissance [sic] ...

(<http://www.camrax.com/symbol/Epopeeintro.php4>)

It is this rare combination of genre and persona that provides the epic's dynamic tool of national significance that is applicable across culture and transcends time.

The above point attests to the mutation of *form* but not of *function*. For instance, the epic hero of pre-renaissance times bears very close resemblance to the renaissance hero, particularly in his being an all-amazing multi-talented and nearly superhuman embodiment of excellence. For example, the English Renaissance citizen was one who exhibited prowess, erudition in classical knowledge, bravery, leadership, reaching out to new challenges and total self-regeneration in the changing times of nationhood (Lloyd 2000: 86-87). This type of human lived in a highly spirited society, a society that exuded newness of being, initiated new discoveries and had made a clean break with the past. Out of such an ideal emerged the configuration of heroes who were the perfect warriors, hunters, statesmen, scholars, scientists and husbands. They portrayed a picture of near-perfect gentlemen according to the standards of the time. Although shifts in value systems may have occurred, the image of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century renaissance "man" reflects that of the English society six centuries ago in which writers like John Milton lived, propagated and interrogated such philosophies. Their writings were largely shaped by the ethos of the renaissance that advocated the (re)birth of national pride in their fellow citizens (Lloyd 2000: 21).

There are clear parallels between the renaissance of old and that of present-day South Africa. For instance, the spirit that has swept post-independence South Africa is that of a renewed sense of identity seeded by the second State President in the proclamation of the African Renaissance age. Even if we could concentrate on valour and heroism against insurmountable odds and pay lesser attention to the epic as a poetic genre, *Long*

Walk would still reflect features of the epic in many ways. In support of this hypothesis Gorender of the *Caribbean Times*¹⁰ says *Long Walk* is “[one] of those masterpieces, perhaps the greatest of the 20th century autobiographical literature, which is a sharp, poignant, elegant and eloquent counter to the prevailing cynicism about the rottenness of politics”. Granted, Gorender is validating the text as autobiography, but the description of the art as “eloquent” and “elegant” highlights the text’s excellence of language and narration.

In support of Bakhtin regarding the dynamism of genres, Honko (1990: 31) reminds us that literature is not without traditions. These traditions are, in fact, responsible for the diverse expectations we have of different literary genres (such as an epic being cast in a poetic jacket). The reader who opens a novel does so with different expectations from the one who begins to read a volume of lyrics or the spectator who takes a seat in a theatre. In fact, there is no guarantee that their expectations will be fulfilled; the author is free to stick or not to stick to the rules of the genre. “Our literature is mainly individualistic, and the rules of tradition are there to be broken ... there are infinite possibilities for different manifestations of tradition, be it of language (style) or storytelling (genre)” (Honko 1990: 31). This perspective underpins the motivation to view *Long Walk* as a twentieth-century epic, despite the fact that it is not presented in the “traditional” generic form of poetry but in the prosaic form of an autobiography. In fact, in the same vein Bakhtin raises some salient observations about the novel being the new conduit of the epic. He argues for the “reproductive” effect of the younger genre (novel) on the old (epic). Bakhtin further states that the epic has concluded its growth and development while “the novel is the sole genre that continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted and whose generic skeleton is still far from having hardened ... [thus], we cannot foresee all its plastic possibilities” (Bakhtin 1990: 3). This mutation phenomenon is therefore seen in “the transposition of other genres into this new and peculiar zone for structuring artistic models, a zone of contact with the present in all its openness and a zone that was first appropriated by the novel” (pp. 7, 11). This is testament to the function of the prose narrative as an entity that is open to transmogrifying other genres. This novelisation of the epic should not imply its subjection to an alien generic canon but should rather imply “[the epic’s] liberation from all that serves as a brake on [its] unique development ... into some sort of stylization of forms that have outlived [the epic as a genre]” (p. 38). It is therefore my view that this mutation from epic to autobiographical novel should herald the epic’s liberation and ensure a continuation of its existence and relevance in the modern era.

10. See 3 above for source of reference.

Long Walk as a Regenerative South African Epic

As pointed out before, *Long Walk* is set against the milieu of the intrusive Western religion, culture and imperial philosophy that seek to disrupt and annihilate the age-old African socio-political ethics, whereupon ensues the longest and toughest battle between justice and freedom against the forces of the evil system of apartheid. The text of *Long Walk* is a tautly woven tapestry of an eclectic narrative style; it presents an immense and diverse setting in which operates a central persona¹¹ whose kaleidoscopic stature is unrivalled by no other character in the narrative. The text embodies a myriad of themes central to which is the megastory of South Africa.

In the early part, when the author is still a young rural boy steeped in rural culture, the narrative is light, reflective and appropriate to the recollection of glorious near-perfect days; it is clearly a journey of nostalgic recollection and thus tinged with a strong romantic tone of the hazy-good-old days. The progress of the central character is reminiscent of the oral-lore hero of rags-to-riches tales. This is followed by the Johannesburg urban setting in which the hero resembles the once popular “Jim-comes-to-Jo’burg” hero of the 1950s/1960s literature. In this setting Mandela is depicted as the urbane lawyer of the convivial Sophiatown, combating apartheid and the unjust laws through a burgeoning legal practice. Heavily steeped in legal battles, the prototype reflects Miltonic heroic qualities as embodied in the famous quote where cloistered virtue deserves no praise, bringing to light the Miltonic test of virtue. Within this social setting is depicted a very romantic Mandela involved in one of the memorable romances of the time, sometimes ironically likened to the legendary Bonnie and Clyde story.¹² This persona of the lover in Mandela is the second best, only rivalled by the philosopher and the freedom fighter who emerges later in the narrative. Mandela the philosopher is very profound. By the end of the narrative, the persona has undergone a near-complete change in anger but certainly not in pursuance of justice at own personal cost. Here the style is more lyrical and rhetorical while the persona appears more pensive and tolerant but still uncompromising in his desire to establish justice for all.

Traditionally, epics are characterised by the ever-present antagonistic force like the dragon which shoots hostile flames, and forces like fire, battle

11. The persona is the author, Nelson Mandela. There is no fictional alter ego in this autobiography.

12. In my opinion, this comparison is at such variance with that of the young Nelson and Winnie that it does not merit similarity with the outlawed escapades of Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow whose bullet-riddled bodies brought much-needed relief to the police of 1934s West Dallas. It is perhaps the magnanimity of the love Nelson shared with Winnie that evokes the Bonnie and Clyde comparison.

and danger. *Long Walk* extends this metaphor of the antagonistic force to present such negative attributes in the embodiment of all the characters that represent the unjust regime – crime and prison. Mandela’s narrative becomes even more interesting when one looks closely at the type of hero that sustains the narrative’s scale of heroism. The profile of the central character appears as an embodiment of two heroic archetypes from the Western literary tradition, the Promethean and, to some extent, the Miltonic hero, with a slight qualification of the latter. Like Prometheus is remembered for his self-denial and stealing fire from the hostile gods to save humankind, an act for which he suffered cruel imprisonment, the persona’s act of self-sacrifice for the ideal of humankind’s liberty is similarly seen in *Long Walk*’s hero.

Mandela, the one-time lowly lawyer of rural upbringing gradually transforms into a daring freedom fighter, the founder and commander-in-chief of uMkhonto weSizwe, the liberation army of the African National Congress. He is incarcerated at Robben Island for twenty-seven years. Despite all his suffering over such a long period of time, the hero remains firm in his cause. *Long Walk* therefore depicts the ideal persona, as a virtuous man, who is not merely a prelapsarian angel but one who faces his adversary directly, assuaging his own internal ire and replacing it with a spirit of reconciliation. Furthermore, the persona of *Long Walk* fully embodies a character whose walk of virtue sees him sallying out a number of times, facing and contending with his adversary, staying in the race even in bleak times lasting over bleak decades, but eventually emerging a hero purified by these very trials to advocate reconciliation. Keeping in mind that Milton’s description of heroism was largely influenced by the notion of the English Renaissance as demonstrated earlier, it becomes even more interesting to pursue the concept of the hero of *Long Walk* against his position in the African Renaissance scene.

***Long Walk* and the New Concept of Heroism**

Mandela’s *Long Walk*, a narrative of profound national significance, tells the all-necessary story of a great society and its titanic battle against many life-threatening challenges on the way to liberty. This is more than one man’s personal account – as conventional autobiographies tend to be. In the fashion of epics, *Long Walk*’s executive summary of content as well as its epic question¹³ postulated in the concluding peroration states:

13. An “epic question” is an epic convention which is part of the elements of style like “the invocation”, “the epithet”, and the climactic confrontation between two forces. It is a feature of the epic by which the poet strategically posits the key thematic concerns on which he or she builds some of the key debates in the epic.

I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one often finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance that I have come. But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom come responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my *Long Walk* is not yet ended.

(Mandela 1994: 751)

This excerpt from *Long Walk* redefines the contradictory values of a new hero whose historical vocation is to regenerate society. Not only does Mandela rise to the summit, but on arrival he discovers that there are numerous similar challenges to face. Acknowledging the contradictions that confront human existence, the narrative voice confesses that in the process of struggle mistakes are made, misjudgements can happen. Man will confront and fight adversity, he will get threatened by it and sometimes will even fall, but in the end he will triumph over natural as well as manmade problems, as John Milton asserts in *Areopagitica*. Therefore it can be deduced that what defines the complex hero is precisely the amalgam of the virtuous possibilities opened by the acknowledgement that man can err and still rise up to the level of heroism. This reading of *Long Walk* in fact reflects epic heroic attributes in its protagonist and thus underscores the epic dimension of this autobiography despite the fact that the form and epic language of *Long Walk* do not resemble the inaccessible reverence that exists in the epic canon of ancient times. To accentuate the different heroic nature of the post-epic protagonist, Bakhtin agrees with Mandela's stance that the hero of the novel should not be "heroic" in either the epic or tragic sense of the word: he should combine the negative as well as the positive features, low as well as lofty, ridiculous as well as serious, he should not be portrayed as an already-completed and unchanging person but as one who is evolving and developing, a person who learns from life and yet, still the novel should become for the contemporary world what the epic was for the ancient world (Bakhtin 1990: 10). This is the sum of what the hero of *Long Walk* is.

In the excerpt above Mandela advises that arriving at the top of the hill is not the end of the journey. The mass hero, South Africa, must know that the struggle against apartheid and its legacies is one of several immense challenges and dangers which neither Mandela nor the South African people can afford to forget. The journey motif, which is a metaphor for continued struggle does not end at the attainment of freedom "but [South Africa] can rest only for a moment, for with freedom come responsibilities, and [she] dare not linger, for [her] *Long Walk* is not yet ended" (Mandela 1994: 751).

Like a true epic, the narrative in *Long Walk* excels in its ability to give unity and form to this vast mass of material – an admixture of myth and faction. *Long Walk* is a writing of strong national significance – a biographi-

cal epic. This is the point which Cook-Gumperz's "Institutional Memories" (in Quashtoff & Beker 2005: 245) elucidates even more succinctly by pointing to the dual nature of this autobiographical epic; that it is about social and collective remembering, a shared frame of reference that has located the story in time and located the dramatis personae in social space. The irony is that remembering that same struggle is a highly subjective process and that not all people will arrive at the same form and content of what is to be remembered about the struggle. That *Long Walk* suggests this conflict in memories makes the text anticipate the complex reception of the text by different readers. Therefore, although the biographer's task is that of providing a sense of coherence in a narrative by establishing not just common reference, but a set of themes that coheres around a common ideology, this process is not free from political manipulation at both the points of production of the text and its reception. In short, in *Long Walk*, Mandela had to reconstruct past events and create narratives that decontextualise past experiences from original contexts and recontextualise them into a new communicative context after 1994. Mandela's biographical epic concludes with advice, a challenge and caution that address both himself and his fellow kinsman. In this address the concept of heroism inheres in the individual as well as in the collective hero. A hero becomes a hero when she or he struggles through tribulation and also when her or his deeds impact on the larger society.

Conclusion

This article has sought to investigate the epic attributes of *Long Walk* against the obvious tradition of the prose autobiography in which it is cast. The aim has been to establish the text's literary function in the social landscape of South Africa against the backdrop of the re-emerging renaissance. Having established that *Long Walk* bears similar features and functions to other classical epic writings, this article's core argument has been to foreground the virtues of the epic hero as the ideal model to emulate in any society, and specifically in modern-day South Africa. The heroic qualities of selflessness, bravery, humanness and responsible leadership that are mirrored in the epic provide a good model for a young nation like South Africa, particularly after the proclamation of its regeneration identity. The link between literature and life is evident here. Because literature by its nature reflects and influences human behaviour, it is expected that modern societies would continue to emulate their predecessors whose examples are captured in both historical and literary accounts. Such emulations would assist in the reclamation of the space which literature is fast losing to the plethora of present-day information knowledge, high-tech discourse and other sciences which seem to underplay the role of the human sciences. This

article has sought to demonstrate that literature can make an impact in a variety of social discourses to direct the course of human life.

The diversity of literary resources taken from cross-cultural backgrounds has shown that the form and function of *Long Walk* makes it a granary of major national significance, and places it in the same league as many epics of a canonical stature. Perceiving the alter ego, Nelson Mandela, as a national hero and the text, *Long Walk*, as an autobiographical epic is not too far-fetched a conjecture, as the analogies are visible. The epic thus lives in the postmodernist era and is still a viable commodity although some of its components, like form, have transformed in response to the demands of the ever-changing seasons of human existence. Put differently, literature reminds us that a true hero is one who, though weak at times, is disdainful of danger and perseveres to the end. Additionally, a hero is one who perceives him-/herself not as an individual but as a salient component of the collective, the nation. This is what inspires us in reading *Long Walk*.

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