

Fictions of Autobiographical Representations: Joshua Nkomo's *The Story of My Life*

Maurice Taonezvi Vambe

Summary

The aim of this article is to critically analyse the problems of the ideologies of narrativity raised in Joshua Nkomo's autobiography *The Story of My Life*. When this Zimbabwean version of the book was published in 2001, there were speculations and "gossip" that its contents had been tampered with by the Zimbabwean editor. However, a close comparison with the contents of the first edition published by Methuen of London, revealed that there were no editorial changes that could have prejudiced the depiction of his public image published in Zimbabwe. *The Story of My Life* documents the details of Nkomo's life from the point of his birth to his life as an immigrant in South Africa, and then a nationalist guerrilla, up to the period of independence from 1980 when he was politically persecuted by Robert Mugabe. This article demonstrates that in attempting to tell the story of his life, Nkomo found himself forced to suppress some facts about the contradictions that he lived in his personal and political life. The article argues that although Nkomo details the pain he suffered in the hands of Robert Mugabe, he could not totally ward off the lure of the dominant ideology that inclined him to explain his political misfortunes in tribal terms. The article suggests that the "fictions" contained in autobiographical works such as Nkomo's story is that they lay claim to the authority of incontestable truth emanating from a single subject position. This perception that Nkomo's book promotes should be questioned because any account of the self is predicated on the suppression of some facts of "other selves". This irony at the heart of autobiographical writings suggests that the storyteller unconsciously suppresses certain memories which may not "sit" comfortably with the version of personal/national history that a story of self-inscription is forced to authorise.

Opsomming

Die doel met hierdie artikel is 'n kritieke ontleding van die probleme van die vertellingsideologieë wat uitgelig word in Joshua Nkomo se outobiografie *The Story of My Life*. Toe hierdie Zimbabwiese weergawe van die boek in 2001 uitgegee is, was daar bespiegeling dat die Zimbabwiese redakteur aan die inhoud gepeuter het. 'n Sorgvuldige vergelyking met die eerste uitgawe deur Methuen, Londen, het egter aan die lig gebring dat geen redaksionele veranderinge aangebring is wat afbreuk kon doen aan die beeld van Nkomo se openbare lewe soos weergegee in die tweede uitgawe wat in Zimbabwe uitgegee is nie. *The Story of My Life* bevat 'n

dokumentasie van Nkomo se lewe, van sy geboorte af tot sy immigrasie na Suid-Afrika, en later sy ervarings as nasionalistiese guerillavegter tot die tydperk van onafhanklikheid na 1980 toe hy polities deur Robert Mugabe vervolgt is. Die artikel suggereer dat Nkomo in sy poging om die verhaal van sy lewe te vertel noodgedwonge sommige feite aangaande die teenstrydighede in sy persoonlike en politieke lewe moes onderdruk. Daar word aangevoer dat, hoewel Nkomo uitwei oor die leed wat Robert Mugabe hom aangedoen het, hy nie volkome die aantreklikheid van die dominante ideologie kon vryspring nie. Hy probeer sy politieke teenspoed in stamterme verduidelik. Die artikel gee te kenne dat die "fiksie" in outobiografiese werke soos dié deur Nkomo daarin lê dat hulle op die gesag van onweerlegbare waarheid aanspraak maak. Hierdie persepsie wat deur Nkomo se boek bevorder word, moet bevraagteken word, omdat enige vertelling oor die self gegrond word op die onderdrukking van feite aangaande "ander selwe". Hierdie ironie, wat die wese van outobiografiese geskrifte uitmaak, dui daarop dat die storieverteller bepaalde herinneringe onderdruk wat moontlik nie gemaklik pas by die weergawe van persoonlike en/of nasionale geskiedenis van selfvertelling nie.

Interfacing Fact and Fiction

Autobiographies are personal histories and stories of one's life, which tend to lay claim to objective truth. However, the "migration" of a personal story from the individual to the community, from the local context of its production to the global arena of reception, is one that is fraught with contradictions. First, within the genre of autobiography what should be questioned is the claim to the subjectivity of a single voice that accesses a single objective reality. Second, autobiographies or accounts of the self are also in the words of Coetzee, "*autre*-biography [or] an account of another self" (Coetzee in Coullie, Meyer, Ngwenya & Olver 2006: 1). Third, an account of "another self" can manifest itself in autobiography, through what the storyteller has not included, or as a result of readers' perceptions that they bring when interacting with the autobiography as political and literary artefact. These different ways of writing the self in autobiography often collide with each other resulting in unstable identities being codified in autobiography. "Accordingly, auto/biographical accounts can function as sites of governmentality that produce normalized subjectivities as well as practices that hold the promise of emancipation and autonomy" (Coullie et al. 2006: 3). Autobiography can also "become the door through which the marginalized enter into the house of a non-familiar tradition of literature or culture, often irreparably modifying it in combination with other cultural forms" (Gready 1994: 165). But as Levin and Taitz argue, autobiography cuts across generic distinctions of fact, fiction, history and narrative, and this protean nature of autobiography makes it a "meta-narrative [that] critique[s] ... the process of narration and the implicit authority that events are endowed with through this act" (Levin & Taitz 1999: 163).

In the political discourse of post-independent Zimbabwe, Joshua Nkomo is described as "father Zimbabwe" who in the story of his life is being

persecuted and “driven into exile from Zimbabwe by the armed killers of Prime Minister Robert Mugabe” (Nkomo 2001: 1).¹ In the first chapter of his autobiography, Nkomo writes that he has to explain how he got away and lived to tell the tale (p. 1), and in the introduction to the autobiography, he warns us that “this book is not a history – one day, if I am spared, I may contribute to the writing of one with a happy ending” (p. xv). This is the crux, the problematique of representing identities through autobiographies. The historical individual that is autobiography’s subject is representative of some larger collective. Nkomo’s story of his life may appear to be a uniquely personal account, but it is ordered and structured in a particular way. Its language is not neutral but politically contaminated so that it becomes a polemical text serving a particular political agenda. The end and purpose of the narrative is assumed before it begins and it refuses any other way of reading it, of seeing in it different interpretations other than those that the author wishes to promote. The irony of this process of self-inscription is that Nkomo is forced to appropriate and use discourses that will obscure some facts or fictions of his identities. At the same time he will unconsciously reveal the fractures within the reality of the identities he seeks to recover in an order of words. The literariness of Nkomo’s “tale” and the contingent nature of autobiographical representations expose the “tale” to infinite revisions of its meanings in the light of new interpretations and more sophisticated reconceptualisations of the fictions of what Hayden White describes as the “literature of fact” (White 1987: 121).

Political Autobiography as Fractured Memories of the Self

If we were to ask who Joshua Nkomo really was, and what the story of his life actually amounts to, we would perhaps be disabused of thinking and assuming that he is “father Zimbabwe”. The best way to do so is to look at the story of his life. Any story is only half a story: there is no evidence, empirical or scientifically verifiable, to suggest that when we tell our stories we do or should remember every detail; how we ate, were hurt, jilted others, stole cobs, fought for the land, betrayed as we fought, and fought back as we were also fought against. In fact, the stories – rather than story – that we call “ours” are as much a product of the teller’s imaginations as stories of us are a product of other people’s imagined perceptions of us. As we remember details of our stories, we suppress other details, dismember or disremember consciously or unconsciously only certain facts and deploy the words in certain calculated ways to elicit certain responses. Commenting on the existence of literary double as inherent in autobiography, Coullie and fellow

1. Subsequent references to *The Story of My Life* will be indicated by page number(s) only.

writers note that our notion of self is also constituted through the accounts others give of us. The coexistence of these two forces leads to a particularly interesting further way in which the “self is constituted, namely, in the contestations associated with aligning the autobiographical accounts we give of ourselves and the biographical accounts others offer about us” (Coullie et al. 2006: 3).

In *Nkomo: The Story of My Life* (2001) it is a fact that Joshua Nkomo was run out of Zimbabwe in disguise as the beginning of Nkomo’s story reveals and disguises. Joshua Nkomo evokes pathos in starting his story with the declaration that “[j]ust before dawn of 8 March 1983, I crossed the dry river-bed into Botswana, driven into exile from Zimbabwe by the armed killers of Prime Minister Robert Mugabe” (p. 1). The bad blood between him and Mugabe actually started in the struggle. It was Robert Mugabe, supported by Nyerere of Tanzania, who threatened to derail the unity of the liberation forces (p. 144). It was Robert Mugabe supported by Takawira, a man Nkomo describes as of a “nervous character of great personal ambition” (p. 144) who “fanned the fires of tribalism, and resentment against Nkomo, ‘Zimundevere’” (pp. 117, 142). Even Herbert Chitepo, whom Nkomo holds in high esteem, yielded to the temptation, so common among the ZANU leadership, to exploit tribalism in his own interest (p. 163). At Morogoro, over a hundred young ZAPU fighters died at the hands of the ZANLA soldiers (p. 165). In Nkomo’s story, ZANU adopted a policy of forced political indoctrination of the local population – in Shona they call it *pungwe*, meaning compulsory all-night mass meeting (p. 166). At the Lancaster House Conference, the ZANU delegation looked as though any money they had saved [was being spent] on whisky (p. 200).

The morning after signing the Lancaster Agreement, Mugabe announced that ZANU was contesting it on its own, thereby scuttling and undermining Nkomo’s story which then ended the ZANU/ZAPU agreement to talk, “broken not by me but by Robert Mugabe and the leadership of Zanu. The national campaign of reconciliation that I dreamed of remained a dream. I, and the fighters and followers of Zapu, had been deceived” (p. 206). According to Nkomo, the 1980 elections were a massive fraud orchestrated by Mugabe, and about ZANU winning the elections to become the ruling dominant political party, Nkomo is convinced that “[e]ven the known and massive campaign of intimidation could not have achieved that. The people knew as well as I did that the election was a cheat” (pp. 216-218). After 1980, Nkomo is hounded by Mugabe, just because Nkomo does not agree with the new ZANU government. Nkomo is further pained because “Zipra boys got the worst, being unemployed because of the private deals (Zanu) ministers produced some results for their own Zanla people” (p. 224). On the other hand, Mnangagwa conspires with Mugabe and plants arms so that ZIPRA should be persecuted (p. 231). When the ZANU-controlled army moves into Nitram farm, ZIPRA war records are confiscated and as a result the history of ZAPU is lost and that of Zimbabwe written from the

perspective of ZANLA: “Among the party’s property removed from one Nitram farm were all the complete historical records of Zapu and of Zipra, in exile and at home, including all lists of our casualties. As a result, no name of the Zipra Dead are included in the Roll of Honour kept at Heroes’ acre outside Harare” (p. 235).

The confiscation of ZAPU property was a prelude to political persecution of ZAPU and Nkomo by ZANU-led government soldiers in 1983: “The perpetrators were young men in camouflage uniform with distinctive red berets, calling themselves the Fifth Brigade. In reality they were out to terrorise the people. They burned villages, slaughtered cattle, assaulted women and killed simply to instil [sic] fear” (pp. 243-244).

The new government, led by Robert Mugabe as prime minister, is depicted in Nkomo’s autobiography as intolerant of alternative ideas that the new political dispensation does not agree with. As a result, The Fifth Brigade depicted in Nkomo’s book is all too willing to kill those who have alternative ideas. Mugabe is portrayed as a leader who confuses “opposition to particular policies with general disloyalty” (p. 254). The Fifth Brigade’s *Gukurahundi* operation is depicted as targeting women and children to make them reveal the whereabouts of the “dissidents”. In Yvonne Vera’s *The Stone Virgins* (2002), women who failed to cooperate with the Fifth Brigade were raped, bayoneted and their remains thrown into disused mine shafts. The negative account of ZANU in Nkomo’s story summarised thus far can be rehearsed by anyone in the political opposition and even outside. To this extent, Nkomo’s story is potentially the story of anyone who opposes Mugabe in that this story is constructed as a critical dossier of the misdeeds of Robert Mugabe.

Is This Joshua Nkomo’s Mugabe Story or Mugabe’s Joshua Nkomo Narrative?

A question can be asked: So far, where is Nkomo’s story? Is it buried under or constructed by the same discourses that Nkomo attempts to undercut? There is no question that the issues of political persecution that Nkomo raises happened to him and the gallant ZIPRA forces. But one is left with a sense that Nkomo has told Robert Mugabe’s story. When Nkomo uses autobiography to answer to his political enemies, how much danger awaits his narrative when he argues, adopting the “reverse political platform” already saturated by the ideology of ZANU that Nkomo’s accounts attempt to dethrone? In seeking to deconstruct the image of Robert Mugabe by revealing the seamy side of the new prime minister, Joshua Nkomo’s autobiography has adopted the language of the spectacular. The language of the spectacle of excess relies for its sustenance on constructing reality in binary terms. In Nkomo’s story, Robert Mugabe is wicked, unreliable, a

Machiavellian politician and a ruthless dictator. Some writers have criticised Robert Mugabe's philosophy of "degrees in violence" (Blair 2002). Others have traced the chronology of decline of Zimbabwe's economy to mismanagement due to Robert Mugabe's pseudo-revolutionary policies which in the main self-preserved the leader who, for many Zimbabweans, has outlived his usefulness (Bond & Manyanya 2002).

In Nkomo's story, the piling of the most observable aberrations of Robert Mugabe's rule draws its strengths and validity from the moral law: Robert Mugabe does not care. But the question is whether this moral standpoint that Nkomo's narrative creates is able to dislodge the claims of the official narratives that represent Robert Mugabe as a leader without his own contradictions. Does Joshua Nkomo, a veteran nationalist politician, possess sufficient political language that can undermine his own identity as nationalist? Put differently, in Nkomo's story, what the autobiographer has achieved is not simply articulating his political grievances against a man who was once his secretary, but also against a man who has now become a political monster (Ngugi 2007). Nkomo's story has showed that it is possible, as well as in the interest of the nation of Zimbabwe, to interrogate the political "immorality" of Robert Mugabe's rule by military operations. Nkomo's story can then be said to have been brave enough to shatter the image of Mugabe, which, in Zimbabwe's official circles, is considered sacrosanct and unassailable. Ibbo Mandoza, the publisher of the edition of the book that I have used says that "even as incomplete as it might appear to those of us who yearn for a fuller account of this man's autobiography" (Mandoza in Nkomo 2001: xiv), the account of his life that Nkomo has given can make him both a hero and a villain.

The coupling of the idea of "hero and villain" in Mandoza's description of Nkomo is interesting not only for its assumption of the fallibility of Nkomo's narrative. Having adopted the polemical stance of a political autobiography, Nkomo's narrative is forced to fire salvo upon salvo on Robert Mugabe. At this point, Nkomo's voice is appropriated by the discursive official apparatus for which vilifying Robert Mugabe has become a lucrative industry for Robert Mugabe and his critics. In the "swallowing up" of Nkomo's voice that presages the swallowing up in the 1987 Unity Accord of ZAPU and ZIPRA by Robert Mugabe's ZANU to become ZANU-PF, the reader is regrettably blocked from accessing Nkomo's story that could have survived the lure of Mugabe-phobia: Nkomo is therefore forced not to tell his story but Robert Mugabe's. He is forced not to reveal the complexity of ZAPU and ZIPRA that the reader so much wished to read about when Nkomo ends up writing ZANU politics. Njabulo Ndebele has written about the "entrapment of resistance in an unreflective rhetoric of protest" which happens when subaltern voices are articulated to the dominant voice in ways that make the dominant voice complacent so that it can survive moral criticism from its political opposition. Gareth Griffiths understands how such dominant ideologies can sanitise the values of

political opposition by allowing opposition to talk, albeit from the standpoint partly constructed and sponsored by those in power. Griffiths notes with concern, and this can apply to Nkomo's story, that "even when the subaltern appears to 'speak' there is real danger as to whether what we are listening to is really a subaltern voice, or whether the subaltern is being spoken to by the subject position they occupy within the larger discursive economy" (1992: 75). The political forces that threaten to deactivate Nkomo's voice do not fully succeed in appropriating his voice of resistance, but those same forces have to some extent managed to weaken the force of that voice of protest in Nkomo's narrative. The further question to be asked then is: where and how can one locate the source of the contradiction in Nkomo's autobiography?

"All Autobiography is *Autre*biography": Locating the Contradictions in Joshua Nkomo's Story

In the rest of the essay I attempt to locate the source of the incompleteness of Nkomo's story of his life. I have read Joshua Nkomo's story in the Zimbabwean version published by SAPES Books, Harare, 2001, alongside the version published by Methuen, London, 1984. This I did in order to ascertain whether or not anything was excised by the Zimbabwean publishers, because there is a perception that the Zimbabwean version was politically sanitised of radical content. This perception is unfounded as the two versions look alike in almost every detail except for the preface by Ibbo Mandoza of SAPES. I also took the trouble to compare the editions to find out whether or not there were parts of material left out from one version that are present in another. Such an exercise was necessary because publishing houses are also driven by certain ideological agendas.

The possibility or temptation of cultural implantation in the production and publication of individual and collective identities of prominent nationalist leaders is no longer a matter of speculation. Cultural industries have the power to implant preferred meanings, which is why in critical discourse one is able to talk of the phenomenon of "authorised biographies". The position of publishers as "cultural enablers" (Gready 1994) suggests that their participation in producing a book can actually end up as an ideological intervention that can twist the tale due to the processes of editing in order to make the autobiography fit the imperatives of the moment, which can either be conservative or revolutionary. To state it this way is not to imply that Nkomo's autobiography was "overdetermined" by its producers although readers may never come to know what Nkomo considered inconsequential and therefore did not include in the tale. Life determines autobiography but what is chosen, what is left out and how reality is

produced by the fictive imagination and consciously arranged in an autobiography remain contentious issues.

In other words, although the essence and meaning of Nkomo's story can rest with how different interpreters interact with the two versions, it was necessary to cross-check and dispel the myth that anything written by opposition and in the case of the present context of Nkomo's story, carries the complete historical "truth" of the Zimbabwean nation. In each of these two versions, Nkomo's story is credible and stands out as a detailed cry, an angry voice against betrayal. But, as pointed out earlier, Nkomo's life has no other context than the political life of ZANU, and the personality of Robert Mugabe. This has impoverished Nkomo's account as he is never allowed to become the subject of his own autobiography.

"Abandoning" the Conventional Autobiographical Mode

There are brief exceptions to Nkomo's obsession with ZANU, especially in the earlier chapters of the autobiography, where he details his growing up, moving to South Africa and meeting with Mafuyane. These sections capture the essence of the conventional genre of autobiography, and they are not only captivating but actually read like a story of a real person. This individual narrative, which Nkomo subordinates to the political narrative, reveals some aspects of his life which those who read him from a different culture might find controversial. For example, Nkomo tells us that Mafuyana, who became his lifelong wife, is actually the sister of the woman that his father married after the death of his mother. In Shona culture, Mafuyana would be considered a "small mother" and it is a taboo to marry your father's wife's sister (p. 38). But then, this detail might have more value in showing the diversity of Zimbabwean culture than in showing it as an aberration. In the text, Nkomo's warm relations with the railway workers, his refusal to be treated differently from the workers, are bound to endear him to any reader of his story (p. 450). However, these real moments of human communion with the people from the "lower depth" are severely undermined by his political narrative which is more concerned with answering to ZANU's historiography than telling the reader about the challenges that ZIPRA often faced as a fighting force.

Nkomo's struggle to acquire an education both in Rhodesia and South Africa (p. 34) could have been used to explore how his ideological values and attitude were formed. The reader understands from Nkomo that initially there was no African-based political party in Southern Rhodesia that wished to militarily engage in colonialism. The failure of multicultural talks seems to have pushed nationalist parties to adopt radical forms of nationalism. This means that both ZAPU's and ZANU's politics of militant nationalisms were more reactive than emerging from the strategic planning of the Africans. This line of reasoning credits colonialism with dictating the *telos* of African

nationalism even when colonialism came to an end mainly due to political and military pressure by Africans. Nkomo is frank and his humanist philosophy is evident when he suggests that although he believed in change, he “preferred the peaceful road to freedom that was open to practically all the other former British colonies in Africa” (p. 101). But the irony in Nkomo’s narrative is that he believed in peaceful means at a time when the British made him know that they were not ready to cede independence to Africans (pp. 95, 101).

The political power and advantage of this narrative genre of conventional autobiography is that Nkomo’s life is lived “outside” the ever-probing gaze of the coloniser. This conventional narrative is political, not in the sense of venerating visible forms of nationalism, but in the sense that it insists on wanting to carve out a political and spiritual space that is not totally patrolled, controlled and patronised by colonialism or by Robert Mugabe and his ZANU political party. The moment Nkomo’s voice in his autobiography is drawn into the vortex of ZANU’s argumentation, that is when his narrative begins to argue on a terrain that is not his – one that is set with ideological landmines – that would undermine the potency of Nkomo’s conventional genre of his autobiography. Once the literary voice in Nkomo’s autobiography enters ZANU’s treacherous political discursive space, Nkomo’s narrative is forced to be defensive and not to show the reader how its protagonist sought to chart his alternative political direction for himself and ZAPU.

Problems in Privileging Political Autobiography

One reads, for instance, Nkomo commenting on The Lusaka Agreement of 1974 that his

[o]wn party, Zapu was the only component of the African National Council to fulfil its terms. The agreement specified that Zapu, Zanu and Frolizi would merge their organs and structures into the ANC. In reality neither Zanu nor Frolizi had any organs or structures. As political bodies they simply did not exist. Their leaders left the country rather than face up to this The Lusaka agreement came to nothing largely because the leaders of the other nationalist movements feared that if elections were held I would emerge as leader.

(p. 156)

First, it is difficult to understand and believe that parties such as ZANU that are said not to have had “organs and structures” were able to launch the armed struggle just after 1975. Second, one wonders why Nkomo was almost certain that he would be the leader of Zimbabwe. Third, one is less persuaded when Nkomo presents ZAPU as a political party hardly blighted by the problems associated with the conflicts affecting other African parties

in Rhodesia. It is not being suggested here that interparty conflicts are a precondition for a political party to be described as genuine and authentic. It is possible to even suggest that Nkomo's account of ZAPU as free of internal divisions based on ideological persuasion among its cadres, or any generational conflicts like those that Kriger (1995) found within ZANU reflects on his capacity as leader to hold his party together – something that ZANU often failed to do – as is demonstrated by the persecution of the Nhari and Badza faction in the war.

However, these comments aside, one would have expected that if Nkomo's story had detailed challenges within his party, then one could approximate how much political damage and destabilisation ZANU caused ZAPU, and one would also figure out how much of ZAPU's woes during and after the war was of its own making. As described and represented by Nkomo, his own political career and that of ZAPU members are filtered through to the reader using a single-factor explanation as political strategy to blame some parties. There is, in fact, little self-reflection by Nkomo on the difficult organisational and operational strategies of ZAPU. Consequently, his story has not respected the "autobiographical pact between writer and reader – the pact that says that, at the very least, the reader will be told no outright, deliberate lies" (Attwell 2006: 214), so as not to subordinate the "truths" of his story to the "fictions" created by the desire for political point-scoring that disadvantages Zanu.

Put differently, Nkomo is being extremely subjective and economic with the truth of the war and his party when he paints ZIPRA as angels and the Robert Mugabe-led ZANLA as devils. For Nkomo, "Zanla, in fact, operated as a political force, while Zipra had to behave in a strictly military way" (p. 166). Brickhill (1995) argues the other way round: ZIPRA was always subordinate to the political wing which was in turn subordinate to the grass roots. ZANLA was always a military organisation with a top-down command structure. The internecine wars within ZANU in the late 1970s were a product of betrayal of comrades, political treachery, authoritarianism of the nationalist leaders and general lack of a cohesive ideology (Samupindi 1992). Ironically, this admission of the conflict-ridden nature of ZANU makes the party a distinct liberation movement driven by mortals who joined the struggle for complexly conflicting reasons. Nkomo's story closes the doors in the face of a reader who might want to understand the complexity of the ZIPRA army that had assumed conventional status. There are no contradictions, conflicts, or even petty jealousies within ZIPRA. Besides, was there always consensus within ZIPRA? Were ZIPRA struggles within Zimbabwe's liberation struggle immediately political and revolutionary as Nkomo depicts them? Sole (in Gready 1994: 185) notes that nationalist popular symbols and individual identities are open to a variety of political ends. Nkomo's regrets manifest when whites are killed by blacks in struggle (p. 174), and when ZIPRA are killed by ZANLA, and not when ZANLA are also killed by whites and sometimes by ZIPRA.

Nkomo raises the genre of autobiography to political polemical writing when he suggests that the chief weapon that ZANLA used to lure people to its side was solely coercion. Manungo's study of peasant-guerrilla interactions in areas where ZANLA operated emphasises a smooth relationship. On the other hand, Kriger shows the deep-seated conflicts between guerrillas and the masses, among guerrillas, and between generations of Africans supporting ZANLA. Jocelyn Alexander (2000) and her fellow researchers argue that although in some cases ZANU cadres used force, force alone could not guarantee acceptance by the masses. Moore initially suggests that ZANU leaders had a monopoly of violence from the very conception of the war, but, more recently, and in the light of new knowledge of ZANLA tactics, Moore ([2008]) has revised his stance and writes that in the war and after it, ZANU never succeeded in imposing its hegemony on the people. These perspectives suggest a more complex picture of ZANU than the one represented by Nkomo in the story of his life. Perhaps Nkomo fails in his book to distinguish between ZIPRA and himself.

Autobiography and the Politics of Literary Opposition

The power of Nkomo's story of his life as captured in his autobiography lies in his ability to imagine, to pre-empt and to oppose the values propounded in official literature that emphasise external enemies as the bane of postcolonial Zimbabwean politics. Nkomo observes, for example, that his statements about the need for peace in post-independence Zimbabwe were often "distorted or ignored by the press and the broadcasting organisation" (p. 244). Further, Nkomo writes that when the new ZANU-led soldiers descended on Nitram farm, "completed historical records of Zapu and Zipra, in exile and home" were removed and most of these records destroyed. For Nkomo, "[e]ven [their] national history [was] distorted" (p. 235). In other words, Nkomo is aware that narration of one's history is implicated in power relations. Facts can be slanted in ways that favour rewriting of history from official perspectives and this is a process that excludes other literary voices to be heard within the nation. To this extent, Nkomo's autobiography stages a literary rebuttal of the official history of Zimbabwe and, particularly retrospectively, of Robert Mugabe's *Inside the Third Chimurenga*, a very coercive piece of writing attempting to reduce every contradiction in Zimbabwe to the land issue, and thus channels people's ideas to a unilinear understanding of the history of Zimbabwe.

Nkomo's work polemically situates itself in the centre of the politics of literary opposition as his narrative and modes of narrating against the new ruling elite of Zimbabwe seeks to revise the notion of the image of the African leader as benevolent. Chenjerai Hove confirms Nkomo's under-

standing of the power of narration in having the potential to create a one-sided understanding of national history. Hove writes:

The birth of the sycophant, the praise-singer, the hanger-on, is a culture of those who do not want to risk their lives through sincerity and honesty. In the end they are usually the ones who are best positioned to write the biography of the nation's leader, and so the praise-singer at the Chief's court goes on *ad infinitum*, forward to the century of chieftaincies and feudal lords, in this age of technology and critical thinking.

(Hove 1993: 70)

The immediate context of Nkomo's political criticism in his autobiography is Robert Mugabe and his negative policies on both black people (pp. 245, 259) and white Zimbabweans (p. 69). However, Nkomo's critical evaluation of Robert Mugabe as leader is also used as a metaphor of brutal leaders in Africa, so that he succeeds in generalising his critique to make his autobiography a critique of postcolonial African leaders. He writes in his book that

[t]he new African rulers who came to power at independence have all too often claimed the same unquestioned authority as their traditional and colonial predecessors. Instead of welcoming debate as the necessary means for improving government, they have confused opposition to particular policies with general disloyalty. Constructive criticism is brushed aside, and suggested improvements are described as attempts to undermine the state.

(p. 254)

Instead of accepting "constructive criticism", the ZANU nationalist leadership is portrayed in Nkomo's narrative as meting out what Mbembe (2001) describes as systematic application of pain to those citizens who are viewed as questioning the values of the leaders. Here, Hove agrees with this and also with Nkomo when he writes that "Africa has the misfortune of being ruled with more brutality than persuasion" (Hove 1993: 71). To this extent, the politics of literary opposition in political autobiography is its capacity to be read as an act of repossession and reconstitution of the voices of the selves that reflect on the voices of the collective. Nkomo also succeeds in his autobiography to merge the personal and the political, affirming the capacity of autobiographical genre to integrate the two successfully.

However, in rewriting the history of Zimbabwe through autobiography, Nkomo sometimes adopts a coercive narrative strategy in which his voice alone should be heard as constituting the "truths" or fictions of the nation. If it is understood that writing is an act of self-definition, then that "creative process involv[es] selection and omission, exaggeration and fabrication around a desired purpose" (Gready 1994: 166). From a literary oppositional point of view, the very attempt by Nkomo to represent his story with its

formal coherence is, ironically, an attempt to manage and force coherence upon a diversity of his own potential subject positions. Furthermore, the certainty of his ideological convictions verbalised in the autobiography necessitates a preliminary critique of his poetics or politics of literary opposition.

For example, the most deafening silence in Nkomo's story is his reluctance to or ignorance of the role that South African secret services played in training and arming the so-called dissidents. Peter Stiff (2002), one-time Rhodesian policeman, devotes significant space (chapters 6-14) in his own book to modify the picture of ZIPRA as victims of ZANU machinations at all times. And yet, in Nkomo's autobiography, the Ndebele people are depicted as what ZANU describes as dissidents and they are then persecuted, whereas the Shona people are not (pp. 245-246). The Catholic Commission for Peace and Justice (CCPJ) has shown that while the majority of the people who died during *Gukurahundi* were Ndebele, Shona people in Matabeleland and the Midlands also bore the brunt of Robert Mugabe's war of attrition in the 1980s. There were also some Ndebele and Shona people in Matabeleland and the Midlands who cooperated with the Fifth Brigade and they were spared. Thus, one can argue that "something unhinges" (Marechera 1978) to some extent, when Nkomo, without at all differentiating the civilian victims and collaborators of *Gukurahundi*, writes that "many thousands of refugees [were] driven across the border from Matabeleland by Robert Mugabe's operations against the civilians" (p. 249).

It is true that civilians suffered torture and that close to 20 000 people lost their lives, and Nkomo, who was described by others as "father Zimbabwe", was humiliated in "parliament when the "new ... prime minister called him "father of dissidents" (p. 237). However, when ZANU perpetrators of genocide in Matabeleland describe their war against ZAPU, they point to ideological differences, and not to ethnic differences as Nkomo's autobiography tends to portray the situation. To say this is not meant to minimise or to condone the massacres that happened in Matabeleland and the Midlands but to suggest that ideological differences that were also at play in determining the cause and the course of the killings have not been sufficiently theorised in Nkomo's autobiography. One of the possible reasons for this undertheorising of the Matabeleland debacle is certainly the ZANU government that declared as taboo any talking or writing about the subject, until the CCPJ broke the silence. Another reason which becomes evident through Nkomo's autobiography is that there was an attempt to vanquish the Ndebele as an ethnic group. While in postcolonial Africa ethnicity has proven to be a source of violent conflict, especially when there is evidence of realities or perceptions that one "ethnic" group is monopolising resources, ethnicity by itself is not sufficient to help in understanding the Matabeleland issue. It is also on this point, when Nkomo emphasises the ethnic and personal dimensions of the hatred between him

and Robert Mugabe that led to *Gukurahundi*, that Nkomo's autobiography further becomes brittle, vulnerable and incomplete, particularly when placed alongside recent historical records (Alexander, McGregor, & Ranger 1993).

It is, however, fair to acknowledge that Nkomo has told us that his book is not "a history" (p. xv), a fact that makes his autobiography refuse to grow in stature when it is compared to verifiable historical records. Nkomo's book is a "tale", and as with tales, it contains history, facts, and fiction. The fictive dimension of the book forces it to change some aspects of Nkomo's real life. His story, then, is based on selective but tragic memories. It is unfortunate that Nkomo died before writing a tale containing memories with "happy endings" (p. xv), one without the disappointments from his "former colleagues in the liberation struggle" (p. xv). Perhaps, here too, Nkomo's autobiography is constructing a naïve identity of the storyteller, for a conflict of the magnitude of a national liberation struggle cannot fail to produce conflicts among fellow comrades. However, Nkomo scores an important political point interrogating the image of the guerrillas when he writes and rues that his woes were not invented by "far-off colonial rulers" (p. xv) but by his colleagues in ZANLA who made life intensely unbearable for him in postcolonial Zimbabwe. This understanding of Nkomo's predicament rejects the notion popularised in Zimbabwe's pulp fiction (Mutasa 1985) and political essays coined and published by Government officials keen to depict the marriage of the Ndebele and the Shona people, of ZANU and ZAPU as one of conviviality at all times (Mugabe 1989).

Thus, in Nkomo's autobiography, literary opposition to established official accounts of independence in Zimbabwe is akin to political opposition. His use of the genre of autobiography enables him to capture the literary-ideological palimpsest that allows him and the book to maintain distance from the values of ZANU leaders while at the same time suggesting the possibility of scaffolding agency. However, and as noted by Gready, the central challenge of political autobiography such as Nkomo's book is how to situate an individual life and achievement with reference to an ideology and/or institution that has given prominence to the individual. This central dilemma of political autobiographies that seek to oppose the authoritarian assumptions of the ruling classes is, according to Doherty (in Gready 1994: 164) a "tendency to weaken the force of a revolutionary critique made through the prism of personal experience In essence autobiography will give prominence to the ideologue at the expense of his/her ideology" (Gready 1994: 164). The sticky issue is whether or not Nkomo is also able to rise above his avowed ideological convictions that he represented peace and stability during the struggle and after it in his autobiography.

In *The House of Hunger* (1978), Marechera ridicules the assumption of the image of Nkomo as unproblematically that of "father Zimbabwe". In the novella, Marechera writes that "someone mistook Harry's song for a political one: and began to join in with "*Tsuro tsuro woye ndapera*

basa!Tsuru tsuro woye naNkomo (p. 37). In this short song and in the novella, *The House of Hunger*, Marechera constantly subverts the authority of Nkomo as nationalist guerrilla. There are inferences from this short song that Nkomo was a “terror” to white Rhodesians, ZANLA guerrillas and possibly to comrades within ZIPRA during the struggle. Marechera refuses to accord Nkomo an unblemished identity of one who could reconcile his personal and political identities as he portrays himself in his autobiography when he writes that “[i]n all my dealings with people I have acted trustingly, and have found out too late when I have been betrayed. My comfort has been to trust in and be trusted by the masses (p. 8). On this point, Nkomo’s autobiography fails to fulfil Marechera’s understanding of the important role of African art that is to critique the “African image which we ourselves were constructing” (Marechera 1990: 80-81) in art and also criticise his values and those of ZAPU and ZIPRA as the new representative of political opposition to ZANU whether during the struggle or after 1980.

Marechera’s *Black Sunlight* (1980) portrays an African tyrant, more or less the picture of Robert Mugabe, that Nkomo’s autobiography depicts. In the same book, Marechera depicts an opposition political movement that in its efforts at dislodging the tyrant, is itself developing authoritarian tendencies. In *Black Sunlight*, Marechera alerts us to the inescapable reality that political opposition, of which Nkomo’s autobiographical story is an example, should have its political values and manifestoes critiqued, accepted or rejected before and not after its leaders have gained political power which enables them to suppress dissenting other voices. In Zimbabwe Veit-Wild (1993) uncritically venerates only work praising persons in political opposition to the establishment, which is how canons are created. If there are ultimate lessons to be derived from Nkomo’s autobiography it is that political leaders belonging to the establishment should be criticised so as to make them accountable to the people. However, by an irony of the very nature of narrative, narration, power and control, Nkomo’s autobiography also suggests that the political morality informing those in opposition, such as Nkomo, should also be subjected to criticism. Put differently, if political analysts and literary pundits had exposed Mugabe’s machinations during his rise to power in the struggle instead of valorising everything he did because he was in opposition to Smith, perhaps we could be having a different “version” of Zimbabwe. The country lacks this culture of critiquing opposition politics (Hove 1993, 2002) and this allows new leaders to get into power and repeat the violence that they had fought against before they became leaders.

This is why when reading Nkomo’s story in his autobiography it is important to bring to the surface questions that may have been covered by a thick mulch of sympathy towards him. Nkomo’s story reveals that he was a great man who fought for personal and collective freedom. However, the instabilities in his narrative suggest that sometimes he was politically naïve

in dealing with his fellow comrades. Also Nkomo's "obsession" with personalising inevitable historical conflicts, and reducing almost every conflict of his with Mugabe to the Ndebele versus Shona people dialectic carries with it a coded language that tribalises Zimbabwean politics even as he "accepted" the description given to him as "father Zimbabwe". We point out these inconsistencies and torsions in his autobiography whether some people who loved him and still cherish memories of him want to hear it or not. It is our best way of paying homage to Nkomo the hero but human being with moral strengths and also political slippages. Nkomo's autobiography is a complex merging of elements of a conventional autobiography with its insistence on details of his birth and growth, all welded to political autobiography that enables him to represent the ruptured elements of his political career. This amalgam of the conventional and the political aspects of autobiography reveals that every narrative is constructed on the basis of some facts which could have been employed but have been excluded consciously or unconsciously (White 1987). Thus, the fictions of autobiographies are not that what they say have no truths, but that they sometimes claim to speak with the authority of uncontested truth emanating from a single subject position. As I argued in this chapter, this is not possible with autobiography and indeed, with any narrative, whether symbolical, historical or fictional.

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