

Autobiography as a
Writing Strategy
in Postcolonial
Literature

Autobiography as a Writing Strategy in Postcolonial Literature

Edited by

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Finally, I dedicate this book to my wife Nadia and my two sons Souhil and Nazim. I am so grateful for their unconditional support.

INTRODUCTION

BENAOUDA LEBDAI

If it is acknowledged today that autobiography is a recognised literary genre within mainstream literature, be it English, American or French, that was certainly never truly the case. Indeed, literary purists did not always perceive autobiography as belonging to the grand tradition of literature, judging it instead with some disdain as a report, at best a mere diary. Nevertheless, from Rousseau's confessions to modern autofiction, the genre has evolved thanks to the various expressions of the 'I' and the 'me', leading to a genre which has developed its own codes and its own particularities, and now having its own theorists, critics and specialists, among them the French critic Phillippe Lejeune. By theorising this genre, and thus producing sophisticated critical tools and stimulating concepts which help to define and analyse autobiographical texts, Phillippe Lejeune has demonstrated the literarity of autobiographical texts. The present publication attempts to further the theoretical discussion of autobiographical studies by postulating that postcolonial writings participate in the very rehabilitation of the autobiographical texts as literary. The five chapters in this volume, touching on the themes of 'autobiography and trauma', 'South African and American autobiographies', 'Women autobiographies', 'African autobiographies' and 'Autobiography/Autofiction', demonstrate that postcolonial African and Indian writers have advanced the development of the genre, thanks in no small part to the importance given to the individual, to what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has termed the 'subaltern'. The 'subaltern' tells his personal life to the rest of the world, within the specific colonial and postcolonial political and social contexts. It is our hope that the reader will discover, through the various levels of analysis the authors put forward, the evolution of the autobiographical genre within African, Indian and diaspora writings. The discussion of this evolution, which runs through the five chapters, underlines how such a genre has become so popular among postcolonial writers. By engaging this discussion, the authors provide clues to the reasons behind such a growing interest in the genre, an infatuation we might be tempted to say, reasons which have led to the production of an impressive corpus.

The five chapters in this volume deal with the analysis of the multiple expressions of the 'self' in Africa, India and beyond, in particular focusing on autobiography and autofiction written by postcolonial women. Through self-telling, these women clearly affirm and reveal their individuality, their personality and the reconstruction of their lives, all with a genuine impact on 'literarity' and politics. More than a mere representation of one's life, autobiographical writings are a powerful quest for identity, for self-knowledge and self-recognition, particularly meaningful in colonial and postcolonial times. What emerges from the studies in this volume is that autobiography ponders broader social and psychological issues in postcoloniality. What lays at the heart of the book as a whole is the question of autobiography as a search for one's sources and roots, one's belonging and territory, with particular emphasis on the understanding of how the colonial period, which started with the slave trade, had such an impact on the development of autobiographical writing. All the authors work at revealing that autobiography is a liberating genre in a different way from pure fiction, each tackling these strategies through a series of fascinating postcolonial autobiographies. If the 1960s were a time of decolonisation, a historical period marked by the liberation of energies, the postcolonial period has witnessed new forms of expressions and new themes. Postcolonial writers express themselves through the more traditional genres of the novel, poetry and drama, but they also give voice to their selves and their cultural contexts through self-storytelling, autofiction or autobiography. Given the flourishing of postcolonial autobiographical writing in Africa, in India and among a growing diaspora, the essays published here aim at providing the reader with timely and lively readings of this increasingly appreciated genre.

CHAPTER ONE

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND TRAUMA

SALMAN RUSHDIE / *JOSEPH ANTON*: DECONSTRUCTION OF THE FATWA MIRROR

BENAOUDA LEBDAI

Salman Rushdie's reputation is notorious for the quality of his literary work but also for his condemnation by the Ayatollah Khomeyni who claimed *The Satanic Verses* a blasphemy against the Muslim religion and the Muslims. The novelist received his 'fatwa' on Valentine's Day of the year 1989, and to a question asked by a BBC journalist on how he felt he replied: "It doesn't feel good"¹. Deep down he thought: "I'm a dead man"². But, he did not realise how much the 'fatwa' was going to revolutionize his life. That day, he did not change his schedule but after a TV interview, Scotland Yard ordered him not to return to his house in Central London. He never did and thirteen years later he published an autobiography entitled *Joseph Anton*, in which he revealed the life he led throughout those years. I propose to analyse how Salman Rushdie deconstructs that period of his life through a 'fatwa mirror', using a fictional fatwa character. In parallel, I will study the very structure of Rushdie's post-fatwa narrative in order to deconstruct the discourse of his recollection of events and thoughts, showing in fine his deep trauma and the way it appears in the text. This study will also underline how writing on such a disturbing experience can heal deep wounds, can help the victim to move on in life and give such a postcolonial autobiography a literary and political assignment. This will lead to examine why the character of Joseph Anton becomes a useful 'mirror' reflection, not only for Salman Rushdie, but also for all those artists who receive a fatwa from a fundamentalist ideology, which has become a devastating characteristic in these postcolonial times.

The Satanic Verses is a central novel for the Indian origin Salman Rushdie who, as a typical postcolonial migrant, dreamt of becoming a great novelist. After *Midnight's Children*, he was eager to find 'the' subject, which could confirm him as a genuine writer. *The Satanic Verses* was that novel, but it took an unexpected turn. To understand but not justify the fatwa, one has to stop on the key issue. The novel questions one verse of the Koran, which refers to three male angels, who were females in

the original version. Salman Rushdie discusses through fiction why such a transformation occurred, writing that those who inscribed the final version of the Koran changed the sex of the angels on the argument that Satan was responsible of the very first change, so the true message of God had to be restored. Interestingly, the title of the novel, *The Satanic Verses* is inspired by the verse which incriminated Satan, that is in Sura 22: “Never have We sent a single prophet or apostle before you with whose wishes Satan did not tamper”³. So this verse justifies the change of sex of the three angels, but Rushdie’s novel goes further into his fictionalised explanation stating that social and historical reasons were behind such a rewriting of the verse, having female angels would give too much importance to women. This questioning and interpretation angered the fundamentalists. In his *Joseph Anton*, Salman Rushdie justifies his freedom to discuss such an issue, explaining that he is not a stranger to the Muslim culture, that he has the right to question the Sacred Text from a secular Muslim point of view. Secular is surely a “devil”⁴ term for the Fundamentalists. The critic Homi Bhabha clarifies and explains Rushdie’s position in these terms: ‘he touched on early Islamic history in a critical, imaginative and irreverent fashion but with deep historical insight’⁵. Salman Rushdie declares with irony through his mirror image, Joseph Anton, how the latter has become “a bad person, an apostate traitor, an unscrupulous seeker of fame and wealth, an opportunist whose work was without merit, *an attacker* of Islam for his own personal gain”⁶, which he contests implicitly. This shows the complexity of the whole issue. So, the first international fatwa was issued through the ‘Foundation 15 Khordad’⁷, a pro-Iranian government Foundation which offered three millions dollars to anybody who would assassinate the novelist⁸. The “good story”⁹ of *The Satanic Verses*, as he says, the one meant to give him a literary aura, put him in fact in an awkward ideological dispute, which he never imagined. The consequences on his private life were disastrous over almost twelve years.

The autobiography *Joseph Anton* deconstructs those years, in the sense that deconstruction is “the critical operation by which oppositions can be undermined, or by which they can be shown to undermine each other in the process of textual meaning”¹⁰. Salman Rushdie’s memoir works on these lines, portraying the shock of the ‘fatwa’ by intermingling unconscious and deliberate reactions, giving to the text its force and its weakness as well as its literarity. Jacques Derrida argues: “what one can not speak out should not be hidden but written”¹¹. So, in Derridean terms Salman Rushdie put pen to paper to express the tensions and instabilities of his life, because speaking about those years through interviews was not possible for him. Interestingly, the memoir is not written as a diary, in

which daily events and thoughts are faithfully reported. It is structured on thematic terms. The organisation of the 'memoir' is constructed upon ten chapters and a prologue, in which facts, explanations, justifications, reflections and opinions are expressed through realistic or poetic tones. The singularity of this text is that Salman Rushdie does not use the autobiographical 'I' as defined in *Le pacte autobiographique*¹², but it is written almost like a novel with a character, Joseph Anton, whose story is told through a heterodiegetic narrator, Salman Rushdie. Both the narrator and the character are in a kind of schizophrenic relationship as they are 'one', as the 'I' becomes 'another', to use Philippe Lejeune's title *Je est autre*¹³. Such a writing strategy provides some clues about Salman Rushdie's state of mind. He clearly could not write his personal experience in the first person singular 'I', as one would expect. Instead, he decides to tell the story of his other self, Joseph Anton. It turns to be perhaps his best alternative to take some distance with himself, to get out of his inner self. The gap created between Salman Rushdie the narrator and his heterodiegetic character Joseph Anton is surely a subterfuge, which reveals his difficulty to face those hard times. Besides, if he were the 'direct subject' of his own story would have been a point of attack of his detractors. He would have been accused of being a selfish author, with an immense ego. It happens that *Joseph Anton* proves nevertheless that his ego is indeed developed. But reflecting further on this point, one can argue that Joseph Anton helps him not to be within an overpowering self-centred 'I' and to take some distance with the events, using Joseph Anton helps him to avoid living once more directly the nightmare of the fatwa. By telling the story of Joseph Anton, by using the third person singular 'he', he says more about his dark side too. This writing strategy proves a deeper trauma than he would admit. From my point of view, the deliberate absence of 'I' works surely as a healing process. Joseph Anton becomes a necessary fiction for Salman Rushdie who can at last look back into that past, thanks to this mirror in which Joseph Anton, his double, plays his part.

The reality is that this paper character did exist during those fatwa years, as he was a man of straw for landlords, bank managers, and airlines lists. Joseph Anton is both real and fictional. The creation of Joseph Anton was suggested by Scotland Yard who urged Salman Rushdie to get a false name in order to become anonymous to blur all attempts of murder as the narrator writes: "He did not exist. Only Joseph Anton existed; and he could not be seen"¹⁴. So we can see here the difficulty of such a strategy where he is at times Salman Rushdie and Joseph Anton in the same line. The novelist chose Joseph for Joseph Conrad and Anton for Anton Chekov, two first names which were reassuring for him, as they could

maintain his link with the literary world, psychologically important as he was out of the literary world by the will of the fatwa. This conscious choice has created an uncomfortable sensation, that of becoming even more anonymous, but also because it was a White man's name. He felt that he was losing his 'indianity', another identity loss and trauma, a consequence of the fatwa. The disappearance of his own official identity was disturbing as his self-perception and his self-esteem were greatly damaged. The character of Joseph Anton plays therefore a major role in reconstructing a shattered life, full of that "plague of murderous birds"¹⁵ a metaphor from Alfred Hitchcock's film, which is used by the narrator.

The deconstruction of the fatwa years operates through the naming of events and memories, which become traumatic experiences precisely because they are not forgotten. The burning of his books, the burning of his effigy in England, Pakistan, India, South Africa and America are shocks for him, transforming the fatwa from an abstract concept to a very disturbing reality. The most difficult psychological impact is the total absence of his person in the public space, as decided by Scotland Yard. The British Government refuses him to give any sign of his whereabouts. His banning from the city life of London, where he used to sign books, give conferences, participate in media debates, creates frustration and a sense of being dead. Not allowed to move about as he used to, to travel or to respond to any invitation, is more than he could bear. He is forced to be invisible, to become a non-person. His rare trips in police cars are a real disturbance, as the cars have to avoid being followed which gives a sense of being continuously in a thriller's film. All these events develop into traumatic experiences. The autobiographic text shows the construction of his integration of the idea that this post-fatwa life is forever until death comes. There is despair in the post-fatwa texts as life stops, transformed into a kind of "Groundhog Day"¹⁶ as said rightly by the narrator. His consciousness of the fatwa grows within him as time goes by. The successive shocks push him to vanish because the protection of Scotland Yard is heavy, day and night. The narrator stresses Joseph Anton's rejection of such an imposed life. The daily promiscuity with the police is a serious issue as it becomes maddening because the police always rate threats high. He has to adapt to that traumatising life as when he hides because a cleaner, an electrician or a postman enters the rented houses. Hiding, wearing wigs, learning not to exist are not the life he has dreamt of. A great sense of paranoia runs through the 636 pages of this memoir. The text shows that the victim is right at the heart of a physical and psychological prison. An enormous deep personal solitude with huge disarray transpires. Salman Rushdie tries to get out of this extreme

situation in order not to fall into madness. But, Joseph Anton loses his sanity as he refuses to feed himself, to change, wearing the same “green tracksuit”¹⁷ for weeks, turning round in his rented house, drinking too much, getting fat, and not looking the same anymore. He loses interest in his appearance by letting his beard grow to the extent that he sometimes does not recognise himself in the mirror: “he is suffering from a great weariness, a kind of nervous exhaustion”¹⁸, the narrator says. A deep trauma is expressed through these significant signs.

The memoir is full of deaths. Learning about the number of people who keep dying because of *The Satanic Verses* makes the “apostate” feel bad. His Japanese translator is shot dead in Tokyo; bombs are placed in his publishing houses, London, Denmark, Norway. These external events, including the demonstrations against him, in London, in Bradford, in India, in Pakistan and even in America surely create Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms, because he can not stop thinking about the never-ending events. The critic Cathy Caruth explains how such signs are indeed significant: “there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts, or behaviours stemming from the event along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance) stimuli recalling the events”¹⁹. Joseph Anton is in that very situation as he becomes “schizophrenic”²⁰, which emphasizes his symptomatic trauma disorder, as when he phones his son as agreed, and when the latter does not answer, he goes with the police to the house where he finds the door wide open, panic starts as he imagines his son shot dead. Any event takes an amazing proportion. Joseph Anton counts the fatwa deaths. The memoir underlines the continuous presence of death from beginning to end, including the temptations of committing suicide. In the bleak times of the fatwa, the constant presence of the police helps him not to commit suicide. These disorders are expressed through Joseph Anton’s accounts of factual events, through strong and often shocking expressions but also through the unsaid, the implicit, through various metaphors and absences. For example, the textual absences are expressed when he describes in length the deaths of members of his own family including his first wife Clarissa who died of cancer, his friends, and also those unknown people who die because of him. The presence of death is devastating in the circumstances of his condemnation. All these deaths, due to cancer, like those of Edward Said or Susan Sontag, become strongly symbolic of the whole post-fatwa period, which is perceived as a postcolonial illness: deaths, rottenness, disarray represent the victims as the ones of Algeria where many post-

fatwa autobiographies are published. Joseph Anton refers to all those Algerian fatwa victims such as the novelist Tahar Djaout, making the situation more sombre, but convincing him that the problem is worldwide.

Deconstructing *Joseph Anton* shows a new phenomenon, that is the psychology of the fatwa victim/prisoner. Religious madness and intolerance creates Joseph Anton's prison, a psychological one, which is so traumatic that the narrator speaks of "solitary confinement"²¹. The consequence of the fatwa is that he finds himself always alone, as nobody must know where he is. So, the prison is real because the victim is surrounded day and night by the police and that he cannot go out without an authorization from Scotland Yard or without being accompanied by the police as the "security is the art of making nothing happen"²². Joseph Anton reacts with these words: "a comfortable prison was still a prison"²³. The shock is greater as he has not committed any real crime. Joseph Anton shows how the fatwa succeeds indirectly to apply its law as discussed by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of a Prison*²⁴. Joseph Anton's psychological prison ends when Scotland Yard has decided that the threat was low. The relief takes place the moment he walks out of the Halcyon hotel in London without the police "stucking out an arm to hail a passing cab"²⁵. The sad irony is that with the publication of *Joseph Anton* a new fatwa is issued.

Being psychologically imprisoned is a trauma expressed through a great need for love. The fatwa is based on hatred, rejection and death, which leave the victim completely lost and empty. There is an urge for friendship and love expressed in this memoir. Such feelings are expressed with great force to the extent that it underlines paradoxically a great loss of confidence in oneself and a loss of confidence in many people who were friends but turned out to be traitors because of fear and cowardice. The need for love is shown through the relationships he develops with the members of the police, with his close family, with his publishers, with his friends in America such as Susan Sontag, Arthur Miller, in Algeria with many intellectuals, in South Africa with Nadine Gordimer, J. M. Coetzee, André Brink, and Nelson Mandela. In this context, the metaphor of the pampas is symbolic as it underlines that need for love and friendship, a search for purity and faithfulness. Those years would have been disastrous like those described Borgesian fields which become a great symbol of those dull years: "a photograph of the pampas showed nothing more than a large field ... an unending void"²⁶, to be filled by love. This cry for love helps Joseph Anton to show at times a great resilience as discussed by Boris Cyrulnik for whom trauma can be overwhelmed in specific circumstances. Despite the fatwa, Joseph Anton develops that necessary

'impact strength' which becomes of great help in such worldwide event as the fatwa. That strength is expressed through the struggle he embarks on to publish *The Satanic Verses* in paperback. He knows that in such circumstances, a paperback edition would give his *Satanic Verses* a longer literary life, and confirm his literary art, a battle, which he wants to win against the fundamentalists. Details are provided throughout the text confirming his strong desire to prove that he is after all a novelist, an intellectual and not a politician or an ideologue. He tries to bring back into the debate that he has written a work of fiction and not a historical account or a pamphlet.

The construction of Salman Rushdie's memoir stresses Joseph Anton's position of weakness, often in despair with his doubts, but also his strength, his courage and great self-assurance. If the text deconstructs the fatwa mirror, it nevertheless reveals trite information on his sexual life, giving disturbing intimate details, as when he presents an intimate relation with the daughter of the famous French Minister of culture Jack Lang. Such an account is not smart to reveal, as it diminishes the political value of such a text. Or, is it a need to prove that he can still be attractive? The work is made of contrasts. Within such sufferings and within the hard world around him, Joseph Anton evokes in contrast his childhood memories, his happy years in Bombay, his mother, his father and his sisters. This is without doubt an indicator of the traumatic postcolonial fatwa experience. There is clearly a need from the part of Joseph Anton to tell about those happy moments in the Indian sub-continent when tolerance was a reality. He tells of his relations with his family in Bombay, which is a place of acceptance of the 'Other' even if his father decides to move to Pakistan in order to live his religion peacefully. It is certainly a glance back on those years, without forgetting his Oxford years when he believed in the future, a future of progress and democracy. The bygone days symbolise a paradise lost when everything was possible, when England meant liberty.

Joseph Anton is a literary hallmark within the post-fatwa autobiographical texts. *Joseph Anton* marks a thematic genre in postcolonial literature, thanks to its literary quality, which is high in terms of language and symbols. What this memoir underlines and emphasizes is that a post-fatwa trauma is not only a consequence of a physical wound but rather of a psychological backlash, a boomerang as Cathy Caruth analyses. She writes that one can refer to trauma when a victim is "precisely ... obsessed by an image or event"²⁷. Through the mirror character of Joseph Anton, this memoir proves without doubt Rushdie's obsession with the fatwa and with death. The whole discourse is about the fatwa and its consequences at

large, as its traumatic effect is expressed within a mirror where Joseph Anton plays the role of Salman Rushdie. The act of writing about it and telling the world what living under a fatwa means becomes an act of courage and commitment. The condemned artist fights back as he does not accept his condemnation. The post fatwa autobiography bears the symbol of the freedom of speech. Such a memoir plays a major role in terms of therapy, as a text, because as it provides a way out of paranoia and fear. Ironically the postcolonial novelist V. S. Naipaul defines the fatwa as an “extreme form of literary criticism”²⁸, which shows implicitly that the Muslim fundamentalists have understood the importance of literature, but their criticism is devastating, life threatening, anti-democratic. Salman Rushdie proves through this major genre, the autobiography, that culture and freedom of expression cannot be silenced.

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- ² Salman Rushdie, *Joseph Anton*, *ibid*, 3.
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- ⁴ Salman Rushdie, *Joseph Anton*, *ibid*, 275.
- ⁵ Homi Bhabha, *The location of Culture*, London : Routledge, 1994, 323
- ⁶ Salman Rushdie, *Joseph Anton*, New York: Random House, 2012, 74.
- ⁷ Salman Rushdie, *Joseph Anton*, Paris: Plon, 2012, 339.
- ⁸ The reward for Salman Rushdie’s assassination was 3,3 millions dollars (see *L’Express* 18th Septembre 2012 « Cinq choses à savoir sur la fatwa contre Salman Rushdie ». If a parent or a friend of the novelist killed him, he would receive 2 million dollars more.

⁹ Salman Rushdie, *Joseph Anton*, New York: Random House, 2012, 45.

¹⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory, an Introduction*, Oxford: Basic Blackwell, 1985, 132.

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²¹ Salman Rushdie, *Joseph Anton*, *ibid*, 207.

²² Salman Rushdie, *Joseph Anton*, *ibid*, 207.

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‘PIECES OF MY LIFE’:
THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY
IN ES’KIA MPHAHLELE’S
DOWN SECOND AVENUE

TLHALO SAMUEL RADITLHALO

Exordium: The Temporality of the Problematic Self

A nineteenth-century North American intellectual, W.E.B. Du Bois, once suggested that a major bone of contention in the twentieth century would be the issue of the “color line - the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea” (1903:54). It was as though Du Bois had foreseen the way in which race and racialism would define the world, giving rise to so many of the twentieth century’s problems and struggles. But, significantly, Du Bois posed a timeless question when, with reference to black people he asked: “How does it feel to be a problem?” (1903:43). The same point is inflected differently in the contemporary world when Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak bemoans ‘the problematic self’. Indeed, it would appear that South Africans who penned down their life writings early in the century experienced a compelling need to say something about the racial nature of the society in which they found themselves. Defining one's self made it imperative to speak of the Other and its place in the universe, the re-enactment of the Enlightenment template in relation to the problematic palimpsest.

Es’kia Mphahlele’s autobiography *Down Second Avenue* (1959) grapples with the idea of ‘the problematic self’ in attempting to arrive at a fully integrated subjectivity. And in this manner his dilemma is historically determined by the circumstances of being born and growing up in a divided society which opens up a unique situation when the racism of the country is considered. To be a ‘problematized self’ is thus to find oneself in a temporal space in which one starts life with a burden, and leads one to seek dis-encumbrance. These issues reveal how Mphahlele’s

quest for identity might be seen as distinctly postcolonial as the process anticipates a dis-encumbered self, free of labels imposed on it. Defending himself at a conference on Negritude and Literature, Mphahlele rigorously points out:

Yesterday I was personally attacked by someone who, because of my views against negritude, associated me with colonialism, precolonialism, and imperialism. He charged me, in effect, with hindering or frustrating the protest literature of negritude its mission. If I had not exiled myself from South Africa five years ago, after having lived for thirty-seven years in the South African nightmare, I should either have shriveled up in my bitterness or have been imprisoned for treason. My books have been banned in South Africa under a law that forbids the circulation of literature that is regarded as 'objectionable, undesirable, and obscene.' So, you see what things I have been called in my life; my body itches from the number of labels that have been stuck on me! (Mphahlele, [1963]).

It is precisely this riposte that the autobiography documents in minute detail. Autobiographical studies have stressed the importance of narrative to the construction of identity itself; how, in Paul John Eakin's words, "narrative is not merely *about* the self but rather in some profound way a constituent part *of* self" (quoted in Holden, 2008:6). That is, the speaking subject here is cognisant of the fact that it is conflated with gross historical processes that radically changed African subjectivities and that to be associated with exactly what it seeks to free itself from is thus injurious to its dignity. And in this regard, it is important to acknowledge that in colonial and apartheid South Africa assigning names and identities was the very basis upon which the society was ordered. This is brought out in the following observation by Mala Singh:

[A]partheid was a powerful allocator of identity. It assigned identity through legislation and other sanctions. It suppressed identity - through centralising race and ethnicity at the expense of other markers of identity. It facilitated identity through unifying its opponents in a common assertion of non-racialism and anti-racism (1997:120).

What Singh points to is the almost schizophrenic motivation of apartheid in constructing 'otherness', and the equally tenacious struggles to prove such constructions wrong. The battle for non-racialism embodied in the texts studied herein shows the adherence to the recognition for a common humanity by South Africans. For some critics, particularly those not directly concerned with twentieth-century African self-writing, autobiographies are more fictional than real. It is this factor which allows

for a critical appraisal of issues of identities in South African autobiographies.

Forging and resisting identities in South African autobiographies

Investigation into the evolution of African self-conceptualisation makes it clear that the colonial baggage carried by people of African descent has deeply affected the processes of self-representation, self-formation, and identity. Many autobiographical texts from South Africa grapple precisely with this: self-presentation of a character against the backdrop of a larger canvas of the challenges of growing up and maturing in a (then) divided country and society. Life-writing attempts to portray a life – being *lived* and reflected upon – as the subject understands it. In many instances this is a kind of justification of a life whose narrativity becomes exceptional, whose contours and parameters the autobiographical act seeks to recount as justifiable and justified. The design of autobiography may be a quest to bear testimony to the imagined, constructed self fashioned out of the act of writing. But what this act of construction deploys as its *raison d'être* is its witness to truth in the details of the 'narrative'. Unlike fiction, the autobiographical act, at its core, places 'truth' as its underlying motive, particularly since the reading public may make it a point to check for factual accuracy (or inaccuracy). The subject operates on the assumption that what it *discloses* is believable and germane to the interests of itself and the reader. Hence it is this self that constructs meaning, thereby locating itself discursively as a site of meaning. Thus autobiographical acts of writing are seen as literature. And yet it is important to read these texts not as transparent historical documents (which would defeat the aims of the texts as literature). A caveat by Linda Gilfillan here is appropriate:

The writing of autobiography at such a moment has a variety of functions, including the following: it tells black people 'who they are, and where they come from, and what they should be doing about [their oppression]' (Mphahlele 1981b:44); it 'documents' black people's 'physical and human settings in stark, grim detail' (Mphahlele 1987:54). However, it would be inappropriate to the present task to read these autobiographies as transparent historical documents or anthropological source-books, texts non-Africans, desiring to discover some putative 'truth about black Africa', might mine (Gilfillan, 1995:13).

The use of Mphahlele's autobiography as an example is used herein as a means of illustrating in minute detail aspects of resistance and the forging of alternative, counter-hegemonic identities. The function, therefore, of bearing witness is utilised by this autobiography, forming what Gilfillan theorises as "affirmative deconstruction" (1995:13). More to the point, in constructing counter-hegemonic identities, the autobiographers nullify the cherished apartheid ideology that the 'natives' need time to develop by using the 'technologies of self' in tandem with the 'technologies of power' to contest the very modernity the state sought to deny them. Holden observes that

[m]odernity was a battleground in the colonial world, in which the colonized elites drew on indigenous resources, and indigenized others taken from the colonial state and, through connections frequently forged in the colonial metropolis, from other societies struggling to emerge from colonialism. Yet it was a process in which new communities were forged or older ones were remade in reaction to the technologies of rule; it was a narrative that people told themselves and saw their lives as participating in, with its denouement always over the horizon of the future (Holden, 2008:29-30).

If we theorise literature as a social institution, then it is important to understand how literature can be seen as "a field of institutionally regulated textual uses, functions and effects", and not as "a formally unified set of practices of writing in need to be explained socially but as, precisely, a specific region of sociality" (quoted in Ogude, 1998:3). Literature has to be understood, in this instance, in the context of changing social practices with which it is contemporaneously coexistent. Thus it opens itself to intertextuality and dialogic engagement between itself and other "adjacent zones of institutionally regulated practices" (quoted in Ogude, 1998:3). If we see, as has happened in South Africa, racism as an institutionalised social practice, then 'life-writing' as literature seeks a systemic and systematic *engagement* with that institution which proscribes the self's humanity. This strand of identity construction and interrogation of the self assumes a teleologic understanding of itself and its world. Starting with Peter Abrahams's *Tell Freedom* (1954), Es'kia Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue* (1959), Albert Luthuli's *Let My People Go* (1962), and including Mark Mathabane's excoriating *Kaffir Boy: The True Story of a Black Youth's Coming of Age in South Africa* (1986) and *Kaffir Boy in America: An Encounter with Apartheid* (1989), South African autobiographers could not fashion a self that was not in some important way linked to institutionalised racism. Apartheid sought to construct an identity of the African as timeless, fixed, and immutable. Overstressing the

fixedness of African ethnicity as ‘biological’ while viewing the white South African component as homogeneous, the fact is that this component comprised the following ethnic constituencies: English, Welsh, Scots, Afrikaner, Portuguese, Australian, Polish, Jewish, Italian, German, and Greek. Pertinently, this configuration of whites as a ‘race’ excluded the Chinese and Indian South Africans. While the Chinese were designated ‘honorary whites’, the Indians remained Indians. All this made ethnic identity a big lie, as was life under apartheid. Es’kia Mphahlele noted concerning life under such a system: “[Blacks] tell whites a million lies a day in this country. First, because we have to survive, second, because they themselves already live a big lie” (1984:6-7).

Thus, if we are to make sense of any South African identity as it appears in autobiographical writings, we need to grapple with the construction of identities within a framework of institutionalised racism. Racial classification under South Africa’s laws was one of the most confusing and debilitating areas of living in a divisive and divided society. For instance, it was possible for a white person to apply to be classified as ‘Coloured’, i.e., as a biracial individual. It was also possible for a biracial person to apply to be classified as ‘white’. It was *not* possible, however, for any individual to apply to be classified as ‘black’ by choice, or to change from being originally classified as ‘black’ to being reclassified as ‘white’. Primarily this was because reclassifying a ‘white’ person would have played havoc with the myriad laws pertaining to every aspect of that individual’s life such as housing, education, taxation, marriage, sport, use of amenities and so forth. And yet, in all their absurdities, apartheid laws decreed that any visiting African American was, for the duration of his or her stay, to be classified as an ‘honorary white’, thus affording the visitor the benefit of using the hotels and other facilities which such an individual took for granted in the United States. For the purposes of this discussion, the following schemata of South African citizenship will apply: white equalled ‘first-class citizen’, Indian/Asian equalled ‘second-class citizen’, biracial equalled ‘third-class citizen’, and black meant ‘fourth-class citizen’ or ‘foreign native’. It must be noted, however, that over the years there was significant overlap between the second-class citizenship and the third-class citizenship, particularly in terms of state-designated amenities.

In the South African situation of institutionalised racism, expression and identity were irrevocably interlinked with constraints such as location, period and ‘citizenship’. As Stuart Hall notes,

actually identities are about using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we might become, how we have

been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside of representation. They relate to the invention of tradition as much as to tradition itself, which they oblige us to read not as an endless reiteration but as 'the changing same' (Gilroy, 1994): not the so-called return to roots but a coming to terms with our 'routes'. They arise from the narrativization of the self, but the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity, even if the belongingness, the 'suturing into the story' through which identities arise is, partly, in the imaginary (as well as symbolic) and therefore, always, partly constructed in fantasy, or at least within the fantasmatic field (1996:4).

Hall points to how, in referring to our innate 'identities', we are actually positioning ourselves in history: that is, we use the historical, linguistic and cultural treasure troves we have inherited to position ourselves in the present. The manner in which we access our *selves* is through the narrative of history.

Retelling a life: Es'kia Mphahlele

That life (*bios*) can at the best of times become 'mere fragments' is borne out by Es'kia Mphahlele's autobiographies *Down Second Avenue* and *Afrika My Music*. From its opening sentence, reminiscent of Abrahams's own experience, *Down Second Avenue* (Mphahlele, 1959) registers bewilderment: "I never knew why we – my brother, sister and I – were taken to the country when I was five" (1959:11). Bewilderment as a child is at best temporary, but in Mphahlele's case it forms a leitmotif. His consciousness struggles to break through, and awareness is very slow to envelop the self. This of course is compounded by the early age at which this seemingly incomprehensible world becomes apparent to him as we notice in the first sentence. He is constantly at sea moving in ways that are not of his own choosing or volition. After his mother comes to fetch the children back to Pretoria, he is thrown into the urban slum of Marabastad: he is just as suddenly yanked back to the city as when he was 'shanghaied' to the paternal village:

I never dreamt that I should go back to the city, which I couldn't picture in my mind anyway ... Three things stick out in my mind about those few days. The few days when whatever hand it was that drove the train of my life across the trackless wilds suddenly decided to take a capricious turn. First, my grandmother cried. I had only seen her cry at revival services in the Methodist church house. I knew my mother couldn't just come in the middle of the year like that to move a hard-hearted mother-in-law to tears

with a kind of domestic joke. Secondly, my mother shook our lousy rags and scrubbed us clean and wrapped us in brand new clothes ... Thirdly, those bright lights we found on Pietersburg station after travelling many miles of dusty road (Mphahlele, 1959:23-25).

His brief sojourn in the village gives him an ancestral identity which would later be eradicated by urbanisation. The title of the chapter 'The Tribe' shows, at one level, the vestiges of tribal life, and at another, the disintegration of the same tribe through urbanisation. This is the process that Nationalist Party policies – that decreed that a black person had only one (tribal) identity – would later try to reverse.

His introduction to slum life is also an introduction to his parents' fragile relationship, so that when it breaks down the whole family joins his maternal grandmother's home in Second Avenue of the title. The grim existence begins, and Mphahlele describes it with an acute sense of remembered pain. With school a terrifying environment, home uncomfortable because of overcrowding, and the world outside hemmed in by racist practice, it is no wonder the autobiographical subject alludes to these early mingled memories as a 'jumble'. Rational, linear ordering is impossible with conflicting memories underlined by loss: "No use trying to put the pieces together. Pieces of my life. They are a jumble. My father's image keeps coming back only to fade. I can't think of him but as a harsh, brutal, cold person" (Mphahlele, 1959: 74-75). For a sensitive personality, this must have seemed the harshest of times. Here a sense of self is seemingly denied a chance to grow since it has to emerge out of other experiences that should make sense, and consciousness must be moulded by such experiences. Hence the leitmotif of bewilderment: "All the way to Sunnyside in the morning I was confused. I wondered whether this was the sort of life one was to continue to live until one's death" (1959:50). Even in high school, this sense of life lacking purpose persists: "I hadn't the slightest idea what high school education was for, and for a long time I was bewildered" (125). The one thing that does break through his foggy mind is what his station in life is designed to be, and thus he begins to see a chink through which he forges his identity:

For the first time in my life, when I was at St. Peter's, an awareness was creeping into me: an awareness of the white man's ways and aims. There was complete harmony between us and white teachers at school and between them and the African staff. And yet no one, Brother Roger or the Principal, or the Community fathers, ever said anything about the attitude they thought we should adopt towards whites and white authority outside school. Slowly I realized how I hated the white man outside the walls of St. Peter's (Mphahlele, 1959:126).

This awareness, as it dawns, is important: it draws distinctions concerning behaviour that is racial and human. The relationship at St. Peter's is harmonious, an island in a sea of racial tensions and discordance. The distinction between one set of white men and another points to the humanistic level at which Mphahlele operates, rather than to a totalising and counter-racist attitude. Since the staff is African, the observation also qualifies how he views employer-employee relationships. Having grown up in a situation where his grandmother, mother and aunt were domestic workers, it is a salient point, for he then knows that this harmonious relationship is rare outside the walls of St. Peter's. It is an inclusive awareness, therefore, declaring as it does a sense of his identity in relation to others about him.

It is here, too, that he meets Peter Abrahams, who at this stage is working hard at being a poet. Abrahams was writing verse influenced by Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican activist who advocated a return to Africa by African Americans. Writing on this aspect of Mphahlele's encounter with Abrahams's verse, Gilfillan (1995:165) makes an important observation:

He recalls Abrahams's poetic celebration of blackness in the tradition of Marcus Garvey: 'I remember how morose the verse was: straining to justify and glorify the dark complexion with the I'm-black and proud of it theme (Mphahlele in *Down Second Avenue*, 128). Indeed, given the 'either/or' – in Abrahams's case, the 'neither/nor' – logic of official race classification, it was predictable that Abrahams would reject the classification 'coloured' and embrace instead (however briefly) the Africanism of Marcus Garvey. Mphahlele's recollection of Abrahams at St. Peter's is more than a little satiric. By representing a desperate Abrahams attempting to assume a 'black' or African identity, Mphahlele distances himself from the quest for identity through the valorisation of blackness. He implies, moreover, that Africans such as himself had neither access to nor need for theories that 'justify and glorify the dark complexion': 'I remember him vividly talking about Marcus Garvey, taking it for granted we must know him.' (Mphahlele, 1959: 128).

Gilfillan's reading of the encounter is important since, in exile years later, Mphahlele would go on to challenge even the exponents of blackness celebrated by Léopold Senghor as disciples of 'Negritude'. What Gilfillan demonstrates, of course, is the contrasting swirls of conscious decisions someone like Abrahams attempted to make in rejecting the official identity meted out to him, showing too that at this point in Abrahams's life identity was a critical issue that found a creative outlet. Later, Mphahlele had reason to change his mind about Abrahams. As an MA student, he says:

‘When I read Abrahams’s books I began to understand what it must have meant to him to want to justify himself’ (1959:195).

While Mphahlele may satirise Abrahams’s quest, he himself was not having matters made easy by his own growing sensibility. As his awareness unfolds, this sensibility becomes a niggling ‘foe’:

I was restless. My sensitivity was a foe at the time. I took offence at the slightest remark from the white man if I vaguely suspected that it was meant for me. I had chronic emotional upsets, so that the more I tried to think things out the faster my spleen seemed to fill up (1959: 137).

It does not ease matters that at the time he has these emotional upsets he is working as a messenger in a lawyer’s office in Pretoria. Being a messenger in itself is a lowly position, but it brings its own share of bruises to the sensitive person. Whites with whom Mphahlele interacted did not make it easier:

‘[Y]es, John,’ here; ‘yes, Jim,’ there; what do you want, boy?’ here ... That girl who phoned an official next door and said in Afrikaans: ‘... here is the Kaffir with the documents.’ The old man who tottered up to me and said, ‘Jim, where is the General Post Office?’ The post office clerk who shouted across the counter: ‘If you Kaffirs doesn’t bloody well stand straight in line I won’t serve you.’ One insult after another came back, fresh and poisonous, to plague my sleepless hours... (1959:137-138).

What the extract illustrates is that, coupled with what would by now be a growing sense of self, the autobiographical subject grapples with two irreconcilable processes: understanding his world and his place in it, and also, making up a coherent sense of himself and his apparent loss of dignity. If forming an identity goes hand in glove with a right to dignity, the extract demonstrates that for the white man and woman in South Africa this was not the case when it came to Africans. The same nonchalant insults, and their seeming inexplicable casualness, were a way of life.

The quest for an identity with which Mphahlele’s autobiography opens is consolidated in his life by a number of circumstances: he starts writing fiction in order to better understand his world, becomes a teacher, is expelled for daring to question the provisions of the Bantu Education Bill, and becomes fiction editor of *Drum* Magazine in Johannesburg. Importantly, he constantly realises that in a way the urbanised African is becoming a new person with the demise of the tribal system. While the authorities stress the development of Africans ‘along their own lines’, he notes: “We couldn’t see the lines and footprints. They got so mixed up

with other footprints in the course of time, and the winds had been blowing away some, too" (1959:166). In a number of ways this statement anticipates postcoloniality, the hybridisation of intermingling cultures and the constantly shifting borders and limitations that such an intermingling entails, and which in turn produces dynamic identities. As Edward Said notes, cultures tend to

cross national boundaries, [and] defy the police action of simple dogma, and loud patriotism. Far from being unitary or monolithic or autonomous things, cultures actually assume more 'foreign' elements, alterities, differences, than they consciously exclude (1993:15).

Mphahlele and his contemporaries' identities were hybrid, able to mediate between Western and African influences. This was what the state did not want and actively worked against. Because of immense frustration as a fiction editor, he knew, like Abrahams before him, that in order to freely breathe and to fulfil his potential he had to leave South Africa. An African with an MA degree in English Literature, he was not going to be of any use in a country that consciously prevented Africans from personal growth beyond 'certain forms of labour'. In one of the interludes that punctuate the chronological narrative, he notes both the irony and the choices open to him:

Of course, the easiest way out would be to leave the soul in this cage, and start a new life, resolve to fling ambition to the winds, and just become a thoroughly sensuous animal; leave aspirations, ambition, ideals, planning and aesthetics to the elect. Or you might deny existence of that in you which cherishes ambition and the rest, and seek no more than food, shelter, clothing. What joy and abundant satisfaction they must derive from life who did not wish for anything more than the bare necessities, like an ox! Or you might booze all extra-physical stirrings out of your system, as so many, oh so many, educated Africans do ... But of course once sensitive to things that are, enough to know that they weren't there and should be, you know you couldn't go back, could you? And your tribal cord had long, oh so long been severed and all talk about Bantu culture and the Black man developing along his own lines was just so much tommy rot. You just felt the world getting too small for you, ever-contracting and shutting you in (1959:202-203).

It is in this instance, therefore, that, rather than give up those ambitions, suppress those stirrings that would have him subsist as an ox, Mphahlele chose exile. He notes, of course, that the Verwoerdian dream of separate development is 'tommy rot'. To have done so as far back as 1959 shows remarkable perspicacity, and to live to see the demise of the