



Re-presenting the Subaltern in Gandhi's *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*

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Abstract

This paper will focus on the strategies employed in Gandhi's autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1927). Specifically, the paper throws light on how Gandhi constructs his narrative of identity by purporting to represent the interests of subaltern Indians in British India and South Africa. Gandhi's autobiography objectifies the Indian masses by employing negative tropes to describe their attitudes towards cleanliness and sanitation. The paper demonstrates that by projecting them as dirty and unamenable to change, Gandhi indirectly creates a binary opposition between himself and the subalterns. It concludes that, in spite of his claims of solidarity with the oppressed, Gandhi ends up objectifying them as "The others."

Keywords

Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, subaltern, identity, difference.

Introduction

Danielle Chassin de Kergommeaux, in her "Auto fictional Practices", has delineated three observable waves in the study of autobiography beginning from the early twentieth century. The first wave was concerned with establishing the constitutive features of an autobiography. In this sense, the first wave was preoccupied with issues of definition. Most theorists take autobiography to be the retrospective narrative of a "self-interested individual intent on assessing the status of the soul or the meaning of public achievement". Second wave scholars focused on interrogating the concept of the self in autobiography. They were particularly interested in interrogating the assumed unity of the autobiographical "I." In fact, it could be noted from this brief review that despite the extensive reach of autobiographical study in the areas of both theory and practice, scholars

have not paid attention to how autobiographers employ their narratives to objectify the non-writing "he/she/it," that is, those who are (mis)represented by the writing "I."

Therefore, this paper intends to look at how the genre of autobiography objectifies the non-writing other by examining the rhetorical strategies employed by Gandhi in his autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1927).

Autobiography and the Semiology of Self-representation

Autobiography is the story of the life of the *self*, written or narrated by that self. It is an especially promising discourse in which the self is arguably assured of its existence and continuity through the medium of writing. It is an idealistic dream for self-preservation formed and framed through a textual encoding of self-presence. Consequently, the narrator of an autobiographical tale is central to that tale. In other words, the

narrator of an autobiography lives within that narrative rather than outside it. S/he is the consciousness or the “I” that narrates and propels his/her story through the aid of memory and the employment of literary tropes. Viewed this way, then, the “I” outside the text is contiguously related to the “I” that inhabits the text.

Thus, writing autobiographically allows the author to historically and textually imbue their life with greater cultural and political significance. In this view, autobiography is as much a filter as it is a mirror through which the desire for self-transcendence is textually projected through the medium of writing.

There are clear insights to suggest that autobiography is relevant in explaining life beyond the beckoning of the immediate situation, of the here and now. Indeed, writing the self autobiographically is a complex mixture of subjective experience, the re-framing of those experiences in discourse, and the interrogating of memory for intuition and interpretation of those experiences. From this point of view, we can argue that autobiography is an excellent example of clear and distinct individualism where the *cogito* is a dominating presence. However, it is important to note that the life represented in autobiographical narrative is diverse and disjointed, full of gaps and inconsistencies. It is indeed the realisation of the self’s dominating appetite to “storify” a life that is simultaneously too diverse and too disjointed to be exhausted that autobiographers try to artfully define,

shape and frame their narrative as a meaningful discursive ontology. As a corollary, it can be rightly deduced that autobiography is a creation, a discovery and an imitation of the self through the act and art of writing. This is because it is through the process of writing that the self and its representations become organically related and integrated, take on an emblematic form, articulate a particular shape and image.

This is why in organising their material, autobiographers may leave out whatever they wish and include anything they want; they may turn their book into a litany, a confession, an apology, a cathartic act, a collection of anecdotes or gossip, or even a place to wash dirty laundry.

Authors may also turn the autobiographical act into a space for aggravating differences between themselves and others. They do this most often by demonising the non-writing other through a process of objectification, that is, they frame their narratives through the trajectory of overarching social hierarchies that include the making of binary categories such as them/us, inside/outside, good/bad, native/stranger, strong/weak. Similarly, they may choose to disclose truth about themselves and their loved ones, or they may hide certain unpleasant events from the prying eyes of the reading public.

Furthermore, in autobiography the author is also the narrative voice. For this reason, the author-speaker in an autobiographical tale directly addresses the reader through the medium of narration where events are carefully selected and interpreted to suit the

intentions of the writer. In fact, as noted earlier, autobiographical narratives are self-reflexive accounts of the life of the biography-subject. However, there are times when the autobiographer will deploy their powers of reflexive monitoring with the aim of objectifying people, religions or ideologies. Here the author-speaker will exploit the strength of what Philippe Lejeune calls the “autobiographical pact,” a sort of an unwritten agreement between the autobiographer and his or her reading public who a priori assumes that what they are saying is verifiable and a matter of fact. Armed with this knowledge, the autobiographical subject would then proceed to transfer onto the “other” the properties of an object by usurping the power to narrate as well as interpret the life and actions of the “othered” in a way that fits their ideological, political or religious agenda.

Likewise, as noted earlier, autobiographical texts are in the final analysis nothing but representations. In this context, it is worth noting that an autobiographical subject’s text is, to all intents and purposes, both a seeing and textualising form, a kind of writing strategy, which as Derrida would argue, however, never touches the soil, as it were; for the writer has only created a representation of *reality*, rather than the real, matter-of-fact reality of his or her life or biographical details, for all such details are their own *visual* imaginative and semantic practices within the textual spaces of narrativity. Viewed this way, then, autobiography is a metaphorical and often hyperbolic narrative that has an axiological pretention toward reality.

To put it in yet another way, Gandhi’s book does not portray or reflect a real, factually active life, or *historical* self, but necessarily and inescapably a metaphorical self, a self which has been reduced to its semiotic and linguistic play, to, in the words of Terence Hawkes, “the shape and structures of the activity of writing”. In a nutshell, the author’s narrative accounts of life are only a text. In this sense, an autobiographical narrative is not factual knowledge about a real person, or about other people’s languages, cultures and landscapes, but a text – an impossible dream of holism, in which the self is no more than a system of distinctions and hierarchical oppositions. Indeed, the argument that autobiography, in its contemplative mirroring of personal experiences, most often vacillates between fact and fiction, disclosure and concealment is an interesting element that has opened it to a variety of critical assessments. The present paper is an attempt in this direction because it examines the ways in which Gandhi subtly objectifies the subaltern in his autobiography.

Gandhi and the Objectification of the Indian Masses

In providing the foregoing context for my discussion, I will proceed from the notion of autobiography as a conjuncture of the private and the public, the individual and the communal. Viewed in this sense, autobiography is a narrative encoding of the experiences of the author-writer that most often involves the recounting of the nonself “other” or “others” (Marcus 273). As a narrative form, therefore, autobiography is inevitably implicated in the ideological promotion of ideas and practices that

may not be apparent at first glance. Indeed, the narrative mode of representation, of which autobiography is one, has most often been a veritable tool that can be used to create “object” and “subject” positions for the characters that the autobiography is about. In fact, many scholars have noted the ideological character of narrative. For instance, Miller has argued that narrative and narrativity most often function as “basic assumptions of a culture about human existence”. Similarly, Barthes sees narrative as something that is integral to human life and existence because it is “international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself”. Even more fundamentally, the efficacy of narrative in creating the “subject” of power and hierarchy, “capable of bearing the ‘responsibilities’ of the law in all its forms,” is what, among other things, gives narrative its peculiar character as a bearer of ideology. In fact, narratives are most of the time structured around a conflict “in which power is at stake”. This struggle for power is mostly exhibited in the dialectical terms of either domination or resistance to that domination. It is thus pertinent to note that Gandhi’s autobiography is also constituted around two basic features of power, that is, enforcement and resistance. However, before I delve into a fuller discussion, it is pertinent to clarify the concepts that form my paper’s basis of contention. Objectification is a notoriously vexed concept in social theory and analysis. Consequently, it has been defined by scholars working in various disciplines. For instance, Immanuel Kant sees it as a process that involves

stripping a person of their personhood. Nick Haslam, on the other hand, associates it with a loss or disregard for an individual’s emotions, autonomy and liveliness. This process, he argues, further alienates the persons involved, turning them into things. Martha Nussbaum similarly suggests that objectification is a process that “entails making into a thing, treating as a thing, something that is really not a thing” . She further argues that this process turns what is objectified into objects and tools that are “inert, violable, fungible, or interchangeable with similar objects, as well as lacking in self-determination”. In yet another formulation, Jamie Goldenberg describes objectification as “any instrumental subjugation of a people by those with more power. Sarah Gervais on her part sees objectification as a process whereby “a person’s body parts or functions are separated from the person, reduced to the status of instruments, or regarded as capable of representing the entire person”. With reference to the foregoing discussion, I will seek a working definition of objectification by incorporating the ideas of Kant, Nussbaum and Haslam. Thus “objectification” as used in this paper implies the “thing fication” of the non-self (the “other”) by the attributing of negative qualities to it. The non- self/other in this sense becomes the object of the autobiographer’s scorn, ridicule and mockery. More importantly, objectification as a concept used in this paper is viewed as a process of identity formation based on the taxonomy of difference in the social world of the author-narrator that is shaped by her or his desires and beliefs. Hence, it is my

view that most often this narrative of difference is framed through a trajectory of overarching social hierarchies such as, among others, “them/us,” “inside/outside,” “good/bad,” and “clean/dirty.” In broader terms, I argue that objectification can be achieved through association of the objectified with certain qualities, traits, symbols and images. Moreover, these qualities, traits, symbols and images are most often negatively presented from the vantage point of the author-narrator.

It is in line with this that the present paper aims to show how autobiography involves a process of *objectification*. With this in mind, the paper focuses on how autobiography shifts from being the story of the self to the story of others, often with negative consequences or outcomes. In this context, the paper draws on theoretical developments linking autobiography with identity formation processes by scholars such as Paul de Man, Leigh Gilmore, Julia Watson, Sidonie Smith, Linda Anderson, Domna Stanton and Elizabeth Bruss. But it goes further in that it explores how autobiography is used to narrate the story of the non-self which, in the process, is made to mutate into an object and subject of difference. In this regard, the paper is specifically concerned with how Gandhi’s autobiography deploys the dichotomous notions of “dirt” and “cleanliness” to objectify the Indian subalterns. Thus, the central argument is that Gandhi’s autobiography is an identity-creation project that is anchored on the rhetorical strategy of difference. In the text the writing-remembering-seeing “I” is concerned with creating a public identity through

the textual encoding of carefully selected, filtered and structured experiences. Hence, in trying to forge and give shape to these experiences in the form of a coherent narrative, Gandhi’s autobiography is encoded as an aesthetic ontology of difference, largely through the deployment of negative tropes as rhetorical tools for projecting and articulating his identity and that of the subaltern groups of India.

It is indeed worth noting that “dirt” and “clean” are classificatory concepts that include as well as exclude groups and social formations. They can also be deployed to create class hierarchies and social boundaries in narratives. Indeed, contrary to commonly held opinions, “dirt” and “clean” are value-laden concepts that can be used to create and enforce social order in societies. When this is taken together with Zygmunt Bauman’s observation that “To classify means to set apart, to segregate...”, the exclusionary thrust of classificatory concepts such as “dirt” and “clean/liness” will begin to manifest itself. This is pivotal to the very idea of the difference between the “self” and “other” that is posited again and again in autobiographical narratives such as Gandhi’s. Indeed, scholars such as Adeline Masquelier, Suellen Hoy, Elizabeth Shove, Mary Douglas, and Campkin and Cox have noted the ideological content inherent to the concept of “dirt” in social discourse. For instance, Shove has argued that “Describing people, things or practices as clean or dirty is not a socially neutral enterprise.” She elaborates that whenever such “classificatory schemes” are deployed in social discourse they create

asymmetrical distinctions “like those of class, race, gender, and age”. In a similar fashion, Campkin and Cox have noted the structuring power of dirt and cleanliness in social intercourse by arguing that “beyond the specific architectures of hygiene, notions of dirt and cleanliness can be said... to influence the arrangement and occupation of all interior and exterior space, informing the minutiae of human behaviour and actively influencing relations between people”. It needs to be underlined that reading Gandhi’s autobiography is like reading a philosophy manual. The discourse of the text sounds more like an excerpt from the works of Descartes, Hume, Kierkegaard, Locke and Marx. Indeed, the story encoded in the text is that of a soul seeking metaphysical, corporeal, ethereal and spiritual transcendence. Fundamentally, Gandhi’s narrative is a cerebral tale of exhortations and restrictions framed through the trajectory of self-denial and self-imposed moral discipline. But it is also a text that in the process of framing the story of its protagonist incorporates the story of its “other.” Indeed, it is my argument that the penchant to narrate the story of the “other” and in the process to create that “other” in our own image, suggests a characteristically fashionable turn to objectification in autobiographical writings (recent examples include Mahathir Mohamad’s *A Doctor in the House* and Nelson Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom*). This can be observed from Gandhi’s autobiography where he uses the subaltern Indian masses as a palimpsest on which to inscribe his identity. Using the economies of difference, he documents

how his identity is in sharp contrast to that of the Indian subaltern groups he comes in contact with. He uses among other things, the trope of “dirt” as an index of difference between himself and the Indian masses. Thus, for him “dirt” becomes the conceptual trajectory through which he emplots his narrative of identity construction. For example, there are numerous lamentations about the insanitary behaviour of the Indian subalterns in his autobiography. At various points in his narrative, he bemoans the lack of will among the majority of Indians to observe simple environmental sanitation.

He cannot fathom how they can live “obliviously to the need or nicety of cleanliness”. He could thus complain that “It was too much for people to bestir themselves to keep their surroundings clean” . This behaviour, according to him, is what made the insinuation that “the Indian was slovenly in his habits and did not keep his house and surroundings clean” difficult to dismiss. However, he also makes it abundantly clear that he is not part of this “ignorant, pauper agriculturalists” by testifying to his “cleanliness, perseverance and regularity” in matters of personal hygiene, physical grooming and economic management. In fact, Gina Philogene aptly notes that “What defines individuals is their processing of difference with others on the basis of which they integrate their identity fragments”. By contrasting his self-representation in this way, the image of the “other,” that is, Gandhi’s “ignorant, pauper agriculturalists,” is made to become a sign of essential difference between the subaltern groups and the

Gandhian-self, and through this constant manipulation of ascribed difference an identity is generated. The point is that even though Gandhi is an Indian like the subalterns in his text, he is yet different from them because of his class-status as an educated lawyer. It is thus easy for him to question their revolt against change from the vantage point of a detached observer who wields enormous textual power over their lives.

It is evidently clear that in his autobiography Gandhi maintains a semantic authority over the body as well as the physical geography of the Indian subalterns. He thus visually colonises them by textualising their daily lives. Moreover, in his text he is simultaneously the gazing body as well as the speaking-writing body assiduously documenting the routines of the subalterns. In fact, the Biblical imagery of the shepherd is distinct. Consequently, as the narrative unfolds, the subalterns are objectified through “the nomination of the visible” . For instance, in his train travels in India, Gandhi observes how “Third Class Passengers” behave towards one another. He complains about their “rudeness, dirty habits, selfishness and ignorance” . He also bemoans their insensitivity by pointing out that “they often do not realize that they are behaving ill, dirtily or selfishly”. In this light, we come to see how Gandhi has visibly screened the subalterns in the construction of his narrative. By employing what Mary Louis Pratt calls “the Monarch-of-all-I-survey” trope, Gandhi deploys his powers of reflexive monitoring to exert enormous pressure on the shared social world of the subalterns. Thus, to him, in addition to

being empirical givens, the subalterns are also epistemologically transparent selves.

In particular, I want to stress that Gandhi uses the concept of dirt in his text to effectively stigmatise and eventually isolate the subalterns as the different “other.” This is achieved by his constant reference to their rigidity and resistance towards personal and environmental hygiene. In this regard, I follow Bauman who argues that stigmatisation is most often achieved “when an observable – documented and indisputable – feature of a certain category of persons is... made salient by being brought into public attention, and then interpreted as a visible sign of a hidden flaw, iniquity or moral turpitude.” Bauman further points out that the main reason for stigmatisation is to foreground difference in order to justify exclusion. However, my contention is that while Gandhi is eager to emphasise difference between himself and the subalterns, he does not seek to exclude them from their shared social environment. In this sense, he is more concerned with domination rather than exclusion.

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that Gandhi is able to classify and categorise the subalterns as “dirty,” “abnormal,” “retrogressive,” and “rigid” because of the asymmetrical power relations that exist between him and them. It is my argument that the cultural capital he wields over them as a result of his privileged education is what allows him to script their life as well as their existence in his text. It is thus easy for him to assert his command over the means of textual production by creating them in his chosen image. Indeed, we might be

tempted to ask why Gandhi is so averse to the “dirt” and unruly behaviour of the subalterns. A possible answer might be that it is because he sees himself in them or rather, as Merleau-Ponty might put it, “he” and “them” are “the obverse and reverse of each other”. In fact, seeing traces of the subalterns in him becomes a very uncomfortable experience for this “genuinely imperial figure”.

He thus constantly castigates them for their recalcitrance and intransigence in order to distance and set himself apart from them. However, he is largely unsuccessful in this regard because no matter how hard he tries to contain the effects of their debilitating behaviour, they keep coming back to his consciousness in the manner of the “repressed,” in the Freudian sense of the term. Thus, his constant distaste, dissatisfaction and bewilderment with their conduct can arguably be explained as an attempt to recover his threatened positive image that is at the risk of distortion because of their shared social identity.

It is my fundamental argument that Gandhi’s attempts to create a gap between himself and the subalterns through the kind of textual framing and social semiotics we see in his autobiography are important strategies in his identity creation project. It hardly needs saying that the activity of writing demonstrably offers Gandhi an avenue to objectify the subalterns. But having said all this, I want to stress that Gandhi still needs the subalterns’ identity for the construction of his contrasted identity. In fact, as I have demonstrated so far, it is easy to see that Gandhi and the subalterns are dialectically interdependent in this

narrative of clear binaries. Following from that, in this narrative of self-creation, there is a deep connection between the existence of the subalterns and Gandhi. This insight suggests that the insistence and continuous presence of the subalterns in his autobiography is a vital necessity rather than a conscious choice because he could not possibly project his chosen positive image in the absence of a contrasting negative image, which the subalterns symbolise in every respect.

Conclusion

This paper has examined autobiographical representation through objectification in Gandhi’s representation of the voice-less subalterns who occupy a space of centrality in his narrative. We have seen how the text deploys negative tropes to represent this marginalised group, “thingifying” them by means of a textual-aesthetic encoding of difference framed through a trajectory of overarching social hierarchies such as clean/dirty, obedient/revolting, normative/transgressive, liberal/conservative and rich/ poor. Through this mode of representation, Gandhi is able to transform the subalterns into epistemological objects as well as subjects of difference. More noticeably, Gandhi also flattens them into homogeneity by using the differential markers of dirt and cleanliness. Undoubtedly, there is a hierarchical power structure that plays out in the text. This arrangement places Gandhi at the apex of the power pyramid with the subalterns occupying bottom place. Consequently, his position at the very top renders Gandhi a place at the centre of the text’s narrative consciousness. Occupying a

place of centrality, however, is not without its problems. This is because there cannot be a centre without a margin or a periphery, with the latter always posing a danger to the former. In other words, the margin will always challenge the power of the centre. Therein lies the significance of Parker's observation that "the margin is where the centre's ordering capacity begins to ebb". This could be gleaned in Gandhi's narrative where the subalterns constantly exhibit reluctance and resistance towards his demands for moral propriety, personal cleanliness and hygiene.

By thus objectifying the subalterns, Gandhi succeeds in diminishing their unity-in-difference, their plurality, as well as their particularity as human subjects capable of normative self-actualization and positive agency. Indeed, by variously describing the subalterns as dirty, retrogressive and revolting, he is perforce questioning their metaphysical integrity as well as interrogating their social normatively. When this is seen in relation to his contrasting projection of himself as clean, dutiful, responsible and sociable, we begin to see how he has drawn a clear dividing line between himself and the subalterns. It is evident that such favourable characterizations of himself as opposed to the negative descriptions of the subalterns provide him with a platform to articulate his preferred identity. Thus, in spite of what is ostensibly an unabashed display of solidarity with the subalterns, Gandhi in fact demonstrates that he is everything the subalterns are not.

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