

## **(RE)CONSTRUCTING THE SELF IN PRISON: A REFLECTION FROM A READING *PART OF MY SOUL WENT WITH HIM***

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This paper sets out to examine Winnie Mandela's *Part of My Soul Went with Him* as a prison narrative that delves into the (re)construction of the self of the author in confinement. In this narrative, which is unconventionally addressed as an autobiography, she depicts her prolonging resistance to the apartheid regime in South Africa. The narrative presents a lucid summary of the dramatic turn of events in her life mainly because of her associations with the struggle. It describes her journey in prison from resistance to resilience. Prison had transformed her spirit considerably well to get along with the hundreds of blacks deprived of freedom and dignity. It had been a paradox; though it meant to destroy the voice of the defiant morally and physically, she had been able to get empowered to resist the white minority rule.

**Keywords:** apartheid, detainee, confinement, self

Winnie Mandela is perhaps one of the most ever discussed political figures in South Africa mainly because of her dedicated association with the historical struggle for independence of the nation. She lived in the political turmoil of the apartheid era that had witnessed arrests and imprisonments of many political agitators and leaders. It is through the notes, diaries and letters of communication she had written during the period of her detainment that we know about her hard and troublesome journey in the years of segregation in her homestead. *Part of My Soul Went with Him* and *491 Days: Prisoner Number 1323/69* are the two books that throw light on her participation in the freedom struggle of the nation.

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In order to know Winnie Mandela's political significance in South Africa, it is necessary to look through the apartheid era in which she lived. Apartheid was a special type of government established in South Africa when the Afrikaner Nationalist Party won the election in 1948 in South Africa on a racial edifice that separated the population into four races. It describes the system which, theoretically, aims to separate the white and non-white peoples of South Africa and divides the country into separate areas for occupation and ownership by whites- "white" South Africa; Africans- the "Bantustans" or Bantu "homelands"; and Coloreds and Asians (Addison, 1981). The majority of the population in the 1940s actually were blacks but were alienated in all public spheres of life. The Nationalist Party had introduced new legislation that would legalize the visions of the apartheid. The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949, the Immorality Act, Population Registration Act, The Suppression of Communism Act and The Group Areas Act in 1950 were some of the stringent acts that led to the endless restrictions on the natives. Many agitators were arrested and detained during the apartheid within the purview of these laws and were silenced in prisons.

Winnie had experienced confinement in different jails. She served imprisonment in Pretoria prison, Kroonstad prison and was placed in exile and house arrest in Brandfort and was detained in Johannesburg Fort for longer periods. She had been detained and transferred in and out of several jails. Her autobiographical narratives clearly depict the wounds and torments encountered along with the physical impressions of prison. She was arrested in 1969 under the Terrorism Act that allowed the police to arrest any person who might seem to be an opponent of the regime in the country without a warrant and, at the same time, could be kept in solitary confinement without a lawyer for an indefinite period of time. Winnie had spent many days in prison, house arrest and internal exile during the period of the antiapartheid struggle in South Africa. She was banned intermittently and forbidden to address public gatherings or meeting with people in groups for most of her life. For all these reasons, her writings became so important to understand the tumultuous days she had spent in her homeland, especially in confinement. The most significant thing about her life was that she had lived a life of separation from her husband, Nelson due to his imprisonment for more than twenty-seven years after they married. It is through these narratives, readers understand Winnie as a woman, a mother and a political fighter. In the foreword to *491 Days*

*Prisoner Number 1323/69*, Winnie Mandela's prison memoir Ahmed Kathrada announces:

Because of her commitment, loyalty, courage, determination and resilience, Winnie emerged from this long spell in detention unshaken and proud, with her head held high. Something can be written about every one of Winnie's detentions...However, this book is about one of her highly risky, dramatic, unique and perhaps unprecedented initiatives. (Mandela, 2014)

In 1984, Anne Benjamin published *Part of My Soul Went with Him* by collecting and editing the manuscripts that Winnie had written while in prison or under-house arrest. "This is not an autobiography," says Anne Benjamin in the editorial note, "in the conventional sense" (Mandela, 1985). Winnie was unable to write about what was happening to her in the various jails for being part of the liberation struggle of South Africa. Besides, "In any case, she dislikes talking about herself: it is not she who is important, she would say, but the struggle" (Mandela, 1985). Whatever is written about her can never overlook the torments that she had gone through in confinement. Why she was compelled to keep a secret journal during detention would reveal the fact that she had endured repression at its strongest level. *Part of My Soul Went with Him* begins with the description of her days at Brandfort, which is called 'Little Siberia.' Winnie was always prepared to face arrests and detention. As she describes, "I've always been detained alone-my children were usually in boarding schools. I have a suitcase ready so that when I'm taken to prison, nobody is going to have to struggle to find me. I have a set of clothes, toiletry, toothbrushes, combs" (Mandela, 1985). She had evolved herself to be a hardcore political activist, who was always under the surveillance of the government, and at any time, the police would turn up to inform that she was under arrest. It had become a usual practice for her to get arrested and interrogated intermittently. She describes in the autobiographical narrative about being transferred to Brandfort. She says, "I hadn't the slightest idea of what was going on; I thought I was under arrest. From there, I thought I was going to be moved either to Pretoria or so to another country's prison as usual. And when Zindzi came with these men, it was the first time I realized I was being banished" (Mandela, 1985).

The narrative exhibits the struggle and deprivation she had undergone in the long struggle for freedom. The author's growing interest in harmoniz-

ing the conscience of the nation is reflected in her narrative explicitly well. Her collective effort to support the people for gaining human dignity is salient to relate to what power does in the community. The narrative clearly exhibits how the self of the author is constructed and reconstructed through her journey from resistance to resilience in the carceral environment. Foucault (1995)'s definition of the author, the time and space of the production of a text are important. Since the study is based on carceral writing, Foucault's concept of space is important. Literary resources like diaries, memoirs, and letters written in the physical space of prison need to be analyzed with scrupulous attention to make a critical study of how the self is evolved in confinement. Prison is an apparatus intended to normalize the individual to conform to the ideologies of the state. In his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault (1995) discusses the changing power relations and the system of punishment. An individual's body is the field upon which the state enforces its tool of control. He says:

The body now serves as an instrument or intermediary. If one intervenes upon it to imprison it or to make it work, it is in order to deprive the individual of a liberty that is regarded both as a right and as property. The body, according to this penalty, is caught up in a system of constraints and privations, obligations and prohibitions. Physical pain, the pain of the body itself, is no longer the constituent element of the penalty. (Foucault, 1995 p. 11)

She had faced solitary confinement for seventeen months, having no contact with the outside world. In prison she had only, "A coir mat on the floor of her cell was her bed; two filthy urine-stained blankets her sole protection against the biting cold of the Transvaal winter. The only other items in her cell were a plastic bottle of water, a mug and a homemade sanitary bucket without a handle" (Harrison, 1986). The image of prison revealed in the book is that of a terrible one without any basic facilities for survival even. She describes, "And in those days all I had in the cell was a sanitary bucket, a plastic bottle which could contain only about three glasses of water, and a mug" (Mandela, 1985). Winnie exposes the dreadful conditions in prison in matters of food, sanitation facilities etc. Sometimes it would be impossible to eat in the prison. And hence hunger strikes and protests against the denial of basic facilities for survival in prison were common though these complaints were taken with little attention. This was one of the worst that affected her health seriously in prison. She recounts the image of prison:

I was kept in Pretoria Central Prison. My cell had a grille inside, a door in the middle and another grille outside. From what I heard and had read I realized that mine must be the death cell. I did not even know I was with other detainees in the same block. I thought I was alone; for months I didn't know that the whole country had been rounded up. All I could hear was a distant cough and a faint sound of prison doors being locked. (Mandela, 1985)

The body of the defiant is entangled in the network of power exercised by the various mechanisms in prison that attempts to regulate by space, time and behaviour. Having flung to an extremely unfamiliar area that was hardly suitable for living, Winnie had to suffer immensely to alleviate the panic in her daughter Zindzi who was a sixteen-years old girl then. It was a terrible and traumatic experience for her daughter. The living condition offered nothing to them except a small house which could neither be called a home or a cell. She had raised protest against these dreadful conditions while at the same time she remained calm and silent in prison. She has acknowledged the language of silence at times as she believed that it is also a powerful weapon to resist the superior power. She remarks:

Many of our leaders are now silent. Some are silent because they are dead and others because they are banned, detained or imprisoned. One thing the dead have in common with the banned and detained is that all of them are silent. They can no longer speak in order to be heard. Yet they can continue to communicate with us even through the medium of their silence. (Mandela, 1985)

In the beginning, while in confinement, the author feels a terrible sense of loneliness, uncertainty and anguish. She has endured acute suffering that included isolation, lack of food, sanitary pads, etc., improper health care, constant interrogation, psychological torture and so on. She describes, "Those first few days are the worst in everyone's life- that uncertainty, that insecurity: there is a sense of hopelessness, the feeling that this is now the end. The whole thing is calculated to destroy, not only morally but also physically" (Mandela, 1985). The fleeting nature of the individual self was well evident in prison. Surviving in prison amidst all odds seems to be a very horrid task, especially at the time of solitary confinement. In solitary confinement, one would feel torturous because of being removed from the human community. In the case of political leaders who identify themselves with the people, this is even more intolerable. The author in the cell suffers from a perfect lack of doing things of her own likes when before her lies long days and nights. Her

days and nights turned even longer as she had nothing to do practically in the cell other than some minimum movements like playing with the insects or ripping the blankets etc. Discrimination based on class was being practised in prison at almost every point. Winnie says they were not served the same food as the Indians and the Coloured prisoners. Though it was difficult to address the issue before the authorities, they went on hunger strikes every week by banging on the wall.

Furthermore, the narrative presents even more graphic details on the assumptions of what was happening through the noises gathered from outside the cell. One should be extremely watchful in prison to explore and interpret the events going around. The silence in prison creates a vacuum but sometimes, social reality is created through the minute sounds observed within the confined spaces. The prolonged days of physical isolation in prison during the initial period of her confinement created serious mental distress that she had overcome slowly. She writes, “Those first few days are the worst in anyone’s life—that uncertainty, that insecurity: there is such a sense of hopelessness, the feeling that this is now the end. The whole thing is calculated to destroy, not only morally but also physically” (Mandela, 1985). Another important thing was the lack of physical activity. For hours she had to engage herself with the small insects like ants or materials like blankets or so. She did not have anything to do except the daily work specified for prisoners. She describes, “I remember how happy I was when I found two ants, how I spent the whole day with these ants, playing with them on my finger and how sad I was when the warders switched off the light” (Mandela, 1985). A more elaborate image of prison is revealed through the experience of the author. The interior of the prison is described as a place that invites the thought of death. For her, it is presumed to be a death cell in the beginning. It erases all traits of the nation outside. She describes:

My cell had a grill inside, a door in the middle and another grille outside. From what I heard and had read, I realized that mine must be the death cell. I did not even know I was with other detainees in the same block. I thought I was alone; for months, I didn’t know that the whole country had been rounded up. All I could hear was a distant cough and a faint sound of prison doors being locked. (Mandela, 1985 pp. 98-99)

She speaks of losing her individuality and assuming herself to be the representative of the nation. She says, “I have ceased a long time ago to exist

as an individual. The ideals, the political goals that I stand for, are the ideals and goals of the people in this country. They cannot just forget their own ideals. My private self does not exist” (Mandela, 1985). The author is able to rise above the physical hardships and mental trauma in prison to obtain freedom from the institutionalized white domination. The same prison had transformed her spirit later. Her political commitments overpowered the hardships and trauma she had faced during her imprisonment. The prison narrative of Winnie provides a persuasive summary of life being written with a different emphasis on her life of community engagement.

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