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Deconstructing the Myth of the Civilized Nation and the Emergence of the Pragmatic Freedom Fighter: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*

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Abstract— *Long Walk to Freedom is an important text because it shows how a person retains the ability to build a future and reclaim the dignity lost through mass oppression. This research paper does not look at Nelson Mandela simply as a rising leader; instead, it focuses on moving away from the old myths of leadership toward understanding him as a practical man. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis, this study examines how a leader is born in the worst circumstances and whether a freedom fighter is a godly figure with perfect actions, or an ordinary person who makes mistakes yet still brings change to entrenched patterns. It also considers Mandela's understanding of racism, observed in his own writing, where he states that "no one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin" (Mandela, 1994, p. 542). Overall, this paper analyzes the discursive choices that trace an apartheid chain-bound man's transformation into a real freedom fighter.*

Keywords— Apartheid; Leadership; Romanticized Leadership; Linguistic Analysis; Identity Construction; Critical Discourse Analysis.

I. INTRODUCTION

For decades, the colonizing world sought to colonize the rest of the globe simply to extract the treasures of nations by any means necessary. This is the underlying idea confronted in Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*: that the history of civilization is, in fact, a history of mass oppression directed at already-civilized peoples, and that it is a myth that the colonizer arrived to bring "light" and shape "advancement" in self-sufficient lands. This literary work challenges the prevailing notion of the African land and, beyond telling a heroic story, Nelson Mandela took a very unusual road—one that everyone wishes to travel but few are willing to accept the bitterness of. This analysis traces Mandela's journey through his nonfictional account of that bitter road, beginning from an unspoken acceptance and moving toward active resistance against every form of systemic harm.

This study examines the discourse used in explaining the historical apartheid system and closely analyzes the discursive choices that construct not a mythical, powerful leader, but an ordinary man with extraordinary courage to challenge systemic oppression. It focuses on the tone and behavioral patterns used to voice injustice in a humanistic form rather than through the lens of a mythical hero.

This paper has three goals: (1) to show how Mandela's story challenges the colonial idea of the "civilizing mission"; (2) to explain how the book presents Mandela as a grounded, practical freedom fighter rather than a heroic figure; and (3) to explore how Mandela's account presents African communal beliefs—particularly about land and human relationships—as evidence of a civilization that existed long before, and in many ways surpassed, Western ideas of progress. This paper also applies Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality and its systemic mechanisms to examine how discursive choices help dismantle the system through the emergence of true consciousness.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Discourse studies without understanding the structure of knowledge and power is incomplete. Discourse is generated through knowledge of power, and power is generated through discourse and knowledge. According to Michel Foucault, power and knowledge are mutually constitutive—power produces knowledge, and knowledge reinforces power (Foucault, 1978). Here, in *Long Walk to Freedom*, we can observe that it is not just high-standard commanded knowledge that creates power, but the choice of discourse in common language that is very powerful.

The difference between political agenda power and the power that is reflected in *Long Walk to Freedom* is that it does not talk about power in specific hands; rather, it speaks of *Amandla Ngawethu*, which means "Power to the People." This is an African term for distributing and accepting that power does not belong to certain hands, but rather to all who belong to one nation—unity, power is for all of them.

Zhou (2020), in "An Analysis of *A Long Walk to Freedom* from the Perspective of Transitivity System," argues that in *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela is not telling his people to fight for freedom, but rather showing that the condition in which they are already living has, in effect, already begun the walk toward achieving it. For Mandela, freedom is not a rigid action tied to a specific moment to be achieved, but a journey—one that every freedom fighter, and humanity as a whole, continually progresses toward freedom.

Felekidou (2014), in her thesis dissertation "The Use of Metaphors in Nelson Mandela's Autobiography and Their Relation to His Social Roles," says that the speech and written discourse expression of a person is always reflected through his social status, which shows that the discourse used in the autobiography and the real life of Nelson Mandela outside the textual writer are no different from each other—what is reflected in the text is what he is. Looking at the aftermath interview of Nelson Mandela after his release from Robben Island reflects what his discourse choices and beliefs about life are, and they are very much alike—what he said and what he believes.

This existing literature shows that *Long Walk to Freedom* is an example of how mass oppression is exposed through simple non-acceptance, and this research also looks at the discourse and power relation, but in terms of linguistic pattern understanding and discourse analysis of specific themes and ideologies taken from the book itself.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research is based on a close reading of Mandela's autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*, in which selected discourse passages are analyzed thematically to examine how language shapes the power of resistance, and how ordinary language plays a crucial role in understanding and resisting apartheid oppression in South Africa. It also considers how this same linguistic expression extends beyond South Africa to resonate globally. This research takes the form of a textual analysis of selected chapters from the complete book, with direct quotations drawn from the text and analyzed accordingly.

The analysis draws on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its methodological framework, following Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model, which examines texts at the levels of description (linguistic features), interpretation (discursive practices), and explanation (social practices). Selected passages were coded for lexical choice, transitivity patterns, modality, and metaphor, and then interpreted in relation to the socio-political context of apartheid South Africa. The analysis is qualitative and interpretive, and no claim is made to statistical generalizability.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

This research draws on anecdotes of lived experience across different situational contexts to examine how new forms of resistance are framed. Looking at the event descriptions and major grounding principles in the autobiography, the text appears to convey objectively what is unacceptable, rather than simply narrating the joys and hardships of life. *Long Walk to Freedom* is not merely a sequence of life events; it is an emerging account of the end of oppression, unfolding in unexpected ways. This research focuses mainly on the following parts of the book:

Part One, "A Country Childhood," where expressions and vocabulary related to Xhosa culture and a child's upbringing in a traditional setting are explored. Part Three, "The Birth of a Freedom Fighter," shows that the rising anger and resistance are not born of inspiration but of necessity—a forced action that must be taken so that a peaceful land can reclaim its dignity. Each chapter is thoroughly examined in this study, and a theoretical framework of power and discourse is applied to build a complete understanding of power, discourse, struggle, and persistence under apartheid oppression.

In Part Three, the opening paragraph clearly states how a freedom fighter is born in South Africa, because being an African in South Africa meant being confined to a few areas of one's own land:

> "I cannot pinpoint a moment when I became politicized, when I knew that I would spend my life in the liberation struggle. To be an African in South Africa means that one is politicized from the moment of one's birth, whether one acknowledges it or not. An African child is born in a hospital reserved for Africans, taken home in an ambulance for Africans, lives in a location for Africans, and attends a school for Africans, if he attends a school at all." (Mandela, 1994, p. 109)

Part Four, "The Struggle Is My Life," followed by his time on Robben Island and, finally, freedom, are all thoroughly incorporated into this study. Every chapter carries its own discourse markers signaling the preexistence and acknowledgment of mass oppression, and each marker is closely examined to reveal how the treacherous nature of the apartheid system is invoked to build a meaningful bridge between struggle and resistance.

This analysis also focuses on how ordinary words shape the act of struggle, examining how language and discourse produce and distribute power. As Foucault argues, power is not held by a ruling elite; rather, power is diffused everywhere and embodied in discourse, knowledge, and regimes of truth (Foucault, 1978, p. 93).

V. DISCUSSION

Nelson Mandela's story begins at the very beginning, from when he was born and given his father's name, Rolihlahla. He was a child set on an unusual path.

In this chapter, the reader encounters a boy within the tribal system, following the rituals and customs expected of him as part of a rich heritage. Mandela explains the core beliefs of the Xhosa people and the founding understanding of man and woman as conceived within his tribe. Notably, he does not speak in a romanticized tone, nor as a great warrior destined to complete a task only he can accomplish. Rather, the tone of each expression is deliberately ordinary, which allows the reader to feel that taking the right action—and acknowledging what has gone unacknowledged—is always possible. As he writes:

> "My life, and that of most Xhosa at the time, was shaped by custom, ritual, and taboo. This was the alpha and omega of our existence, and went unquestioned." (Mandela, 1994, p. 11)

These beliefs eventually turned him into a rebel—though not against his own tribe. As he studied his culture more deeply, he came to understand that a nation is not built on the power of a governing hand, but on cultural evolution and the struggle of a land-owning people to establish their roots. He learned that Africa and his people had never imposed one ruling regime over another. He recounts what Chief Joyi once said, in Chapter Three:

> "The African lived in peace until the coming of the abelungu, the white people, who arrived from across the sea with fire-breathing weapons. Once, he said, the Thembu, the Pondo, the Xhosa, and the Zulu were all children of one father, and lived as brothers. The white man shattered the abantu, the fellowship of the tribes." (Mandela, 1994, p. 27)

This passage shows how Western powers destabilized the land—not only through the seizure of territory but also through the destruction of the land's core values. What the colonizers brought never benefited the land's original inhabitants; rather, what the Western regime considered "civilizing," African peoples had already achieved thousands of years earlier. This statement suggests that the colonial project was never about civilizing a people through weaponized power, but about dismantling an already civilized society and reducing it to the very image the colonizer projected onto it. Mandela continues:

"The white man was hungry and greedy for land, and the black man shared the land with him as they shared the air and water; land was not for man to possess. The white man took the land as you might seize another man's horse." (Mandela, 1994, p. 27)

The deeper analytical point here is not simply about the apartheid system or the colonizers' looting of African land, but about the core African belief that land is not a human possession. Humans, in this worldview, are not the center of attraction in the way Western philosophy tends to assume; rather, all beings share resources with one another. This belief in shared natural resources echoes similar principles found in Eastern philosophy. In the Indus Valley civilization, for instance, archaeologists have found little evidence of weapons or coercive tools used to possess or capture territory, suggesting that this culture, too, was rooted in harmony and collective possession. The same appears true of pre-colonial Africa: a largely unrecorded history of confrontation-free coexistence.

The linguistic choices that trace Mandela's progression through life also reveal a distinct thematic pattern: a man who does not speak directly against higher authorities is not, for that reason, failing to challenge them. Examining the psychological patterns

embedded in his language use reveals a striking harmony between thought and utterance—what one thinks and how one speaks play an equally important role in resistance. Felekidou (2014), in "The Use of Metaphors in Nelson Mandela's Autobiography and Their Relation to His Social Roles," writes:

> "It can be argued that language has both social and psychological consequences for people, and this is examined by the science of social psychology, with a further specialization in language, which indeed studies language in both social and psychological contexts." (Felekidou, 2014, p. 17)

This suggests that language choice and psychological pattern are essential, interconnected elements in Mandela's journey.

VI. CONCLUSION

Overall, this research has focused on the linguistic patterns and discursive choices Mandela uses to explain his journey of freedom fighting—not merely as a role to perform, but as something to be lived through. Close analysis of specific chapters from *Long Walk to Freedom* shows that Mandela frames freedom as a natural, universal entitlement rather than a privilege to be granted, and demonstrates how the colonial chains are broken by refusing to accept anything as given. His account further suggests that this journey did not need to begin at some fixed point for the South African people, because it had already begun long ago; what remains is simply to carry it forward.

Ultimately, this research has examined how the freedom fighter is portrayed in *Long Walk to Freedom*, and what a pragmatic freedom fighter looks like when he follows the will of ordinary people and works to reclaim the lost identity of the South African people—as revealed through close attention to the discourse and linguistic patterns used throughout the autobiography.

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I declare that the ideas presented in this paper are solely my own and that I have every right to claim this as my work. I also wish to clarify that English is my second language and that I used an AI tool (Claude) solely for language improvement, including sentence restructuring and grammar correction. No ideas were generated by AI; all intellectual content is my own.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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