

Political masculinity and public iconography: An analysis of the autobiographies of Mandela and Obama

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the world of political masculinities as constructed by autobiographical narratives. It focuses on Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father* and Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*. It also explores the experiences of these two leaders to see how they narrate their life tales, shaping public perceptions and creating iconic identities. This exploration is crucial within their distinct socio-political backgrounds. The aim is to unravel how cultural, social, and political influences have influenced how these leaders define their masculinities from young boys into grown men. The study is guided by Michel Foucault's theory of power and discourse and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to dig into the narrative techniques that either push back against or reinforce the hegemonic expectations surrounding Black political masculinity. The results show some tensions between self-representation and what society expects of them, and this gives an insight into how personal stories can be a strategic way to identity formation and political image-making. Furthermore, these narratives function as strategic tools for identity formation and political image-making.

Keywords: Autobiography, Iconography, Performativity, Political Masculinities, Public Construction

I. INTRODUCTION

Political identity is shaped by personal narrative, societal norms, and public perception. Autobiographies of leaders like Barack Obama and Nelson Mandela reflect not only individual journeys but also broader socio-political contexts (Garba & Akuva, 2020; Camille, 2009; Hook, 2013). *Dreams from My Father* and *Long Walk to Freedom* illustrate how political masculinities are formed within distinct cultural and historical frameworks. Obama's narrative, set in post-civil rights America, explores biracial identity and racial tension. On the hand, Mandela's story, rooted in apartheid South Africa, reflects resistance and reconciliation. However, both autobiographies challenge traditional masculinity—often linked to dominance, by presenting leadership grounded in vulnerability, resilience, and moral conviction.

Autobiographies serve as functional tools for constructing public identity. As such, through symbolic elements, speeches, images, and references, Obama and Mandela shape their iconography, reinforcing ideals of strength and integrity. Their narratives also expose power dynamics, asserting agency and fostering collective identity through personal storytelling. While scholars like Gqola (2009) and Lodge (2006) have analyzed Mandela's masculinity, and Cooper (2008) has deconstructed Obama's, a comparative analysis of the autobiographical construction of this masculinity remains underexplored. This paper dives into theories of performance and power. It explores how storytelling contributes identity and how cultural frames leadership. Also, in various settings like the theater or even a corporate boardroom, storytelling can define who people are. More so, this phenomenon emphasizes the importance of narratives in understanding oneself and one role in society.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

2.1.1 Theories of Power, Discourse, and the Performativity of Gender

Smith (2009) suggests that power is intelligible in terms of the techniques through which it is exercised. Many different forms of power exist in society such as legal, administrative, economic, military, and so forth. What they have in common is a shared reliance on certain techniques or methods of application, and all draw some authority by referring

to scientific truths. Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. The most important feature of Foucault's theories on power reveals that power is not a thing or a capacity which can be owned either by State, social class or particular individuals. Instead, it is a relation between different individuals and groups and only exists when it is being exercised. Gender performativity is a term first used by the feminist philosopher Judith Butler in her 1990 book *Gender Trouble*. She argues that being born male or female does not determine behavior. Instead, people learn to behave in particular ways to fit into society. The idea of gender is an act, or performance. This act is the way a person walks, talks, dresses, and behaves. She calls this acting "gender performativity." What society regards as a person's gender is just a performance made to please social expectations and not a true expression of the person's gender identity. History validates identity of an individual through the process of repetition. The acts that have been appropriated by the society over the years are bound to greater approximation and acceptance as gender.

2.2 Tracing the Personalities

Mandela is often seen as a conciliatory figure, celebrated globally for his moral leadership, though some South Africans viewed his inclusive politics as controversial. Obama, on the other hand, is shaped by his biracial heritage and upbringing in predominantly white spaces, reflects a hybrid masculinity influenced by multiple cultural norms. Both rose to prominence during transformative moments—Mandela at the end of apartheid, Obama during a shift in U.S. racial politics. Their autobiographies trace their development as leaders, documenting how personal experience informs public identity (Camille, 2009; Hook, 2013; Gqola, 2009). As Nobel Peace Prize laureates and global icons, Mandela and Obama use storytelling to align, or challenge, public expectations of leadership and peace. Their narratives reveal how political masculinities are constructed, negotiated, and symbolically represented in public discourse (Cooper, 2008). These texts allow readers to engage with personal narratives that shape public perception, revealing how political figures use storytelling to define their values and experiences.

Mandela and Obama emerged from racially divided societies, shaped by apartheid, colonialism, and segregation. Their autobiographies reflect efforts to position themselves as unifying figures, resonating with global audiences. While they present themselves as icons, their narratives also expose personal complexities that challenge idealized images. The autobiographies of Mandela and Obama are not only historical records but also tools for shaping legacy (Bongila, 2011). Their narratives reveal silences, contradictions, and deliberate choices in what is shared. The timing of publication—Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* and Obama's *Dreams from My Father*—is significant, reflecting their political positioning and the strategic crafting of public image.

Both leaders use creative techniques to narrate their masculine experiences, blending emotional depth with detailed storytelling. Their attention to formative moments and everyday life offers insight into how personal histories inform public leadership. This study argues that multiple masculinities converge to form the broader political identities of Mandela and Obama, shaped by narrative, context, and public reception. Though Obama's leadership emerged in a diaspora context, his influence resonates across Africa, making a comparative study with Mandela relevant in exploring political masculinities. Masculinity is socially constructed and shaped by cultural, historical, and political contexts. Political masculinities reflect dominant ideals of manhood, often competing with marginalized forms. In South Africa, African patriarchal masculinity—rooted in anti-apartheid resistance—contested white, apartheid-driven masculinity. Black political leaders, through their agency, reclaimed distorted African masculinities, elevating their status to heroic icons (Gqola, 2009).

Obama's narrative draws on the American Dream to challenge conservative hegemonic masculinity and promote unity (Rowland & Jones, 2007). Their autobiographies reflect personal ideals—justice, humility, perseverance, and democracy—that align with national values and contribute to their symbolic power. There is need to explore how their personal histories intersect with broader socio-political contexts, and how literature serves as a tool for shaping public identity, reconstructing history, and challenging dominant discourses.

2.3 Iconography and Political Masculinity in Mandela and Obama

Iconography—through speeches, images, and symbolic representation—plays a central role in crafting their public personas as moral leaders and icons of peace. The construction of Mandela's and Obama's masculinities is deeply tied to their iconography—how the public idealizes them as symbols of leadership and morality. Iconography, in this context, refers to the global perception of these figures as icons, often shaped by public discourse, media, and political rhetoric, rather than their lived realities (Hyslop, 2008). Mandela and Obama are admired not only for their leadership but also for their ability to present relatable, humanized versions of themselves while embodying moral and political ideals (Rowland & Jones, 2007).

Mandela's image as a symbol of moral courage under apartheid and Obama's portrayal as a gentlemanly leader reflect their alignment with shared societal values—simplicity, humility, justice, and unity (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2014).

Smith (2009) describes Obama as “a genuinely many-voiced man,” emphasizing his plural self-identities and ability to resonate with diverse audiences. Their oratory skills further elevate their status. Mandela spoke of human rights and democracy before these became global discourses, while Obama’s speeches often reflected universal values (Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Ngcaweni, 2016). Though Obama’s political career unfolded in the diaspora, his African heritage and paternal ties to Kenya position him within African political discourse (Lane, 2023).

Autobiography has gained scholarly attention as a tool for critiquing life narratives (Butler, 2009). Mandela and Obama’s masculine identities were shaped early in life through distinct cultural orientations. Mandela’s upbringing in the royal household of Chief Jongitaba instilled African democratic values (Garba & Akuva, 2020), while Obama’s close bond with his mother and grandparents nurtured values of empathy, honesty, and resilience (Ihua, 2022). This study is framed by the interregnum periods in South Africa and the U.S.—post-apartheid and post-slavery transitions—that shaped Mandela’s and Obama’s narratives. These historical shifts contextualize their leadership and the political masculinities they represent (Gqola, 2009). As Kelley and Tuck (2016) note, post-1970s Africa saw disillusionment with nationalism, making the emergence of figures like Mandela and Obama critical to reimagining leadership and masculinity.

2.4 Mandela and Obama as Liminal Political Figures

Nelson Mandela and Barack Obama represent liminal political figures—leaders who stand at the threshold of racial divides in their respective nations (Garba & Akuva, 2020). Mandela, shaped by early exposure to apartheid in Johannesburg, navigated the tension between colonial oppression and a post-apartheid future rooted in reconciliation. Obama, born into a racially complex America, confronted identity conflicts shaped by a colonial legacy and responded by embracing the American Dream as a vision for racial equality (Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Ngcaweni, 2016). This study positions both leaders as “in-betweeners,” whose liminal identities inspired their political engagement. Their autobiographies reflect personal and national struggles, shaped by cultural, racial, and historical divisions. Mandela’s narrative centers on anti-apartheid resistance, while Obama’s echoes the civil rights movement, particularly Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” philosophy—fulfilled symbolically through Obama’s presidency (Lane, 2023).

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretive approach to examine how political masculinity is constructed in Nelson Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994) and Barack Obama’s *Dreams from My Father* (1995). According to Yilmaz (2013), qualitative research is an inductive and naturalistic process that seeks to understand how people interpret their lived experiences. Guided by this perspective, the study explored how the two leaders narrate identity, power, and leadership through language and self-representation. A textual and discourse analysis approach was used to provide an in-depth interpretation of the selected autobiographies. The analysis focused on recurring themes, metaphors, and narrative strategies that reveal how masculinity is performed and negotiated within specific socio-political contexts. This approach was context-sensitive, allowing for the examination of Mandela’s and Obama’s narratives within their respective historical and cultural environments.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Situating the Self: Intertextuality and Historical Context

Mandela and Obama embed their personal stories within broader socio-political histories, enriching their autobiographies and deepening their iconography. In *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela frames his life within the anti-apartheid struggle, referencing events like the Sharpeville Massacre and global resistance to apartheid. These shifts focus from individual heroism to collective liberation. In *Dreams from My Father*, Obama connects his experiences—growing up biracial, studying in Indonesia, and organizing in Chicago—to civil rights history. References to figures like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. highlight how his identity and activism are shaped by systemic injustice. His narrative becomes part of a broader story of social transformation.

4.2 Performing an Alternative Masculinity: Subversion of Traditional Masculinity

Both leaders challenge dominant masculinity by presenting strength through empathy, vulnerability, and collaboration. Mandela redefines leadership through compassion, especially in his role in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. His emphasis on healing over retribution contrasts with conventional ideals of control and aggression. Obama embraces emotional openness and shared responsibility. He highlights the influence of family, particularly Michelle Obama, and values listening and community engagement. His candid reflections on identity struggles present leadership as inclusive and human.

Mandela and Obama also subvert traditional masculinity, presenting leadership rooted in empathy and collaboration. The analysis aligns with Foucault's and Butler's theoretical framework on power and gender performativity to elucidate how language and discourse shape the two icon's identities as male political icons. Representations of Mandela as "father of the nation" and Obama as a symbol of Black freedom are discursive constructs they actively reshape through narrative, slogans, and symbolism.

Ultimately, Mandela and Obama use their autobiographies to challenge idealized public images. Mandela states he wasn't born with a hunger for freedom but was shaped by circumstance—dismantling the myth of innate heroism. Both invite readers to engage with the complexities behind their public personas.

4.3 The Public Construction of Barack Obama and Nelson Mandela as Icons

Public construction is a dynamic process—autobiographies serve as platforms where personal narratives are exposed to public scrutiny, shaping perception and identity. Mandela's text, published before his presidency, helped elevate him to global icon status. Obama's autobiography similarly positioned him as a relatable figure, rallying support and reshaping public views of Black leadership. This analysis demonstrates that autobiographies function as strategic tools for political self-definition. They correct misconceptions, influence public discourse, and construct masculine identities that contribute to iconography. However, these identities are fluid and contestable.

Masculinity, leadership, and icon status shift with context, time, and public sentiment.

Mandela and Obama's narratives reveal their vulnerabilities, contradictions, and human flaws. Their texts resist static definitions of manhood, showing that being a political icon does not erase personal complexity. Public perception may idolize them, but their own words highlight the tension between myth and reality. Multiple publics produce multiple masculinities. Some view Mandela as a hero; others as a sellout, especially in light of post-apartheid challenges. Similarly, Obama's image is shaped by both admiration and critique. These shifts underscore the fluidity of public making and the impermanence of icon status. Both leaders use literary techniques—Mandela through dramatic language and metaphor, Obama through paradox, synecdoche, and symbolic imagery—to explore identity, race, and masculinity. Their autobiographies reflect artistic self-awareness and deliberate narrative construction.

Nelson Mandela and Barack Obama's public personas are shaped by iconography—idealized images constructed through media, public discourse, and symbolic representation. Their autobiographies serve as platforms for identity formation, allowing readers to engage with personal narratives that challenge simplified portrayals (Rowland & Jones, 2007). Both leaders are celebrated as moral icons and Nobel Peace Prize laureates, recognized globally for promoting unity in racially divided societies. Their autobiographies reflect personal and collective struggles, elevating them as symbols of justice and reconciliation. Mandela is revered as the "father of the nation," and Obama as a "symbol of Black freedom." However, public perception often flattens their complexity.

Mandela is idealized as a saintly figure, though he acknowledges his flaws: "I have made missteps along the way" (Soyinka, 1988). His emphasis on reconciliation is frequently romanticized, obscuring the difficult negotiations it required. Obama's *Dreams from My Father* reveals internal conflicts and identity struggles. His biracial heritage and outsider status complicate the image of a unifying leader: "I often felt like an outsider" (Stein, 2011); "I had to make my way on the basis of my ability, not my heritage" (p. 31). Both use their autobiographies to reclaim their narratives, offering nuanced portrayals that contrast with their iconic status. Their stories reflect broader societal struggles while exposing the limitations of symbolic leadership.

4.3.1 Barack Obama

In *Dreams from My Father*, Obama reflects on identity, race, and belonging. While often seen as a symbol of hope and unity, his narrative reveals internal struggles. "I often felt like an outsider" (p. 119) and "I had to make my way on the basis of my ability, not my heritage" (p. 31) highlight the tension between public image and personal experience. His biracial heritage is central yet often simplified. "I was the son of a black man from Kenya, a white woman from Kansas" (p. 3) underscores the complexity of navigating dual identities. Obama's introspection and vulnerability foster connection, though public focus tends to emphasize his charisma over his challenges. Obama's leadership vision is rooted in empowerment and community. Yet, the public often idealizes him, overlooking his nuanced understanding of leadership: "A degree was not in itself a guarantee of leadership" (p. 74). He also explores masculinity, noting societal expectations for Black men to appear non-threatening: "Such a pleasant surprise to find a well-mannered young black man who didn't seem angry all the time" (p. 71).

Raised by a white family, Obama learned to navigate identity with restraint and empathy. Cooper (2008) argues he redefined Black masculinity, bridging cultural divides. Obama's activism, including urging Occidental College to divest from apartheid South Africa, reflected his commitment to justice. The slogan "Yes We Can" captured his belief in shared humanity. A visit to his ancestors' graves in Kenya marked a turning point: "Their struggle, my birthright" (p. 430). Obama's early organizing work emphasized action and shared purpose: "Once I found an issue people cared about, I could take them into action... I liked these concepts" (p. 155). His appeal lies in his ability to embody multiple identities

while remaining relatable. Smith (2009) describes him as “a genuinely many-voiced man... each man must be true to his selves, plural” (p. 4). As a liminal figure, Obama reconciles racial divides, writing: “I occupied the place where their dreams had been” (p. 27).

4.3.2 Nelson Mandela

In *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela presents a lifelong commitment to justice and reconciliation: “My hunger for the freedom of my people became a hunger for the freedom of all people... The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity” (p. 611). Mandela’s leadership was shaped by moral conviction and humanistic values. Soyinka (1988) called him a “symbol of culture and dialogue backed by an unparalleled generosity of spirit.” Kofi Annan described him as “the most admired, most respected international figure” (Ihuah, 2022, p. 17). Mandela’s oratory and foresight positioned him ahead of his time, advocating human rights before they became global discourses (Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Ngcaweni, 2016). Lodge (2006) viewed him as a model of gentlemanly leadership and political masculinity. In post-colonial Africa, where dictatorship often replaced democracy, Mandela stood apart. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, (2014) highlights his decision to serve only one term as a mark of democratic integrity.

4.4 The Limits of Iconography

Narratives of iconic leaders shape public perception and legacy. Nelson Mandela and Barack Obama are celebrated not only for their political achievements but also for the stories they tell. Yet, their autobiographies - *Long Walk to Freedom* and *Dreams from My Father* - reveal complexities that challenge idealized public images. This analysis explored how both leaders use personal anecdotes, introspection, historical framing, and redefinitions of masculinity to resist simplified portrayals. Their vulnerability complicates heroic narratives, while self-reflection exposes moral dilemmas and contradictions. By situating their lives within broader struggles for justice, they connect personal experience to collective history. As demonstrated through Foucault’s theories on power the analysis reveals that power is not a thing or a capacity which can be owned either by state, social class or particular individuals. Instead, it is a relation between different individuals and groups and only exists when it is being exercised.

4.5 Narrative Strategies of Humanization

Nelson Mandela and Barack Obama use storytelling, introspection, historical framing, and symbolism to challenge idealized public images and construct nuanced identities.

Personal Anecdotes and Vulnerability Mandela recounts the emotional toll of imprisonment and personal loss, disrupting the image of an unbreakable hero. His strength is shown as forged through suffering and sacrifice. Obama shares his struggles with identity and belonging. His reflections on being biracial and feeling like an outsider complicate the narrative of confident leadership, presenting authenticity over perfection.

Self-Reflection and Moral Complexity Both leaders engage in deep introspection. Mandela reflects on his support for armed resistance and later emphasizes dialogue, challenging the image of a flawless revolutionary. Obama explores systemic racism and the limits of policy, highlighting the need for cultural change. His reflections on race, class, and division underscore the challenges of governance and the importance of empathy. Through these narratives, Mandela and Obama redefine leadership as a journey shaped by growth, ethical complexity, and social awareness. Their autobiographies resist mythologizing, offering nuanced insights into their legacies and the realities of transformative leadership.

Humanizing through Personal Stories Mandela’s accounts of imprisonment and emotional loss reveal the personal cost of political struggle. Obama’s reflections on childhood and identity highlight the complexities of biracial heritage. These narratives ground their public personas in lived experience.

Introspection and Moral Complexity Both leaders engage in deep self-reflection. Mandela examines the ethical dilemmas of resistance and reconciliation. Obama explores race, identity, and the tension between authenticity and public expectation. Their introspection challenges the myth of flawless leadership.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study examined how Nelson Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom* and Barack Obama’s *Dreams from My Father* construct political masculinities that diverge from their public iconography. Although both leaders are celebrated globally as moral and political icons, their autobiographies reveal layered and deeply human portrayals shaped by

struggle, vulnerability, and moral reflection. Mandela's self-representation projects a masculinity grounded in endurance, collective struggle, and ethical restraint, rejecting the dominance and aggression often associated with patriarchal power. Obama, by contrast, presents a reflective and hybrid masculinity informed by his transnational experiences, racial consciousness, and emotional sensitivity. Together, their narratives disrupt idealized depictions of leadership by illustrating masculinity as fluid, performative, and historically contingent. In examining these texts as self-narratives of political subjectivity, the study underscores the role of autobiographical discourse in redefining what it means to be a leader in both postcolonial and global contexts, revealing that political masculinity is as much about moral negotiation and self-fashioning as it is about authority.

5.2 Recommendations

This study recommends that future scholarship continue to interrogate political autobiographies as important cultural texts that shape and challenge dominant understandings of gender and leadership. Researchers should extend this analysis to other African and diasporic figures, including women leaders, to reveal how different socio-political contexts influence the performance of gendered identities. The use of interdisciplinary approaches, drawing from linguistics, literary studies, and gender theory, can deepen the understanding of how language, memory, and narrative structure contribute to the construction of political selves. Moreover, educators and curriculum developers should integrate autobiographical works like those of Mandela and Obama into higher education to encourage students to critically engage with leadership, identity, and social transformation through discourse. Finally, media and cultural practitioners are urged to draw on such nuanced representations of masculinity to move beyond simplistic hero worship and instead promote images of leadership that embrace vulnerability, empathy, and shared humanity.

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