

## READING AUTOBIOGRAPHIES AND (RE)IMAGINING THE NATION LENDO AUTOBIOGRAFIAS E (RE)IMAGINANDO A NAÇÃO

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**ABSTRACT:** Contemporary discourses on the nation, nationality and nationalism are theoretically discursive and aporetic. Ideological constructions of the nation from positions of liberalism, Marxism and cultural constructivism further complicate our understanding of the nation and what constitutes its *nationness*. To Homi Bhabha ‘a particular ambivalence [that] hunts the idea of the nation, the language of those who write of it and the lives of those who live it’. Following Bhabha and others, the present paper attempts to open up another window on the discourse of the Indian nation reading through the autobiographies of Mohandas Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Verrier Elwin. While Gandhi and Nehru have the advantage of being insiders to Indian culture and its history, Elwin remains as a figure on the margin. Gandhi and Nehru, the two most important figures at the helm of India’s struggle for independence view the Indian nation from their own perspectives while Elwin’s autobiography as an outsider-insider’s account offers a critique of the dominant cultural construct of the nation advocated by Gandhi and Nehru in espousing the cause of the tribes of India, a marginal constituency, thereby unpacking a counter discourse on the Indian nation that the country’s diverse communities and their aspirations need to be accommodated in the evolving national discourse. Reading through the biographies of Gandhi, Nehru and Elwin, the present paper, taking a non-ideological position, argues that together these three texts provide an inclusive view of the Indian nation that could engender the discourse on ‘diversity’ in strengthening democracy and multiculturalism.

**KEYWORDS:** Nation, Autobiography, Ambivalence, Marginality, Diversity, Tribe, Inclusiveness, Multiculturalism.

### 1. Prologue

The present paper proposes to read the autobiographies of Mohandas Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Verrier Elwin and revisit the mainstream discourse on the Indian nation. It is an accepted fact that some illustrious postcolonial life writings, for example, the autobiographies of Mohandas Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, are willy-nilly part of the complex narrative of the Indian nation. The narrative(s) of the Indian nation is not only connected to their life histories but in turn their life writings also underscore their apprehensions, anxieties and ambivalences of/about the nation. It is not that their autobiographies only capture the complexity of the Indian nation but there are other figures on the carpet who have lived on the margins of the nation as outsiders, for example, Verrier

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Elwin (1902-1964), British by birth and a colonialist by implication, also have contributed immensely to the heterogeneous narrative of the nation. The present paper attempts to study the autobiographies of Gandhi and Nehru along with Elwin's, a figure on the margin of the nation, for their life writings variously inform and unravel the narrative of a nation and its self-fashioning. The ambivalences of a person like Elwin, unlike that of Gandhi and Nehru, in unpacking the discourse of the nation open up plural contestations about the Indian nation and its making and unmaking. Elwin's autobiography *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin* (1948) opens up the debate on the status of the tribes of India who hardly figure in our national discourse at the time of India's independence. A study of Elwin's autobiography along with Gandhi's and Nehru's, it is presumed, would help us in (re)imagining the Indian nation and its complexity. If Gandhi's and Nehru's autobiographies are in many ways central to our national discourse, Elwin's, in my view, is no less as he is closely associated with both of them and becomes controversial on the way in dissociating himself from Gandhi as well as from the Indian National Congress on the issue of assimilation and transformation of the tribes. Reading through Elwin's autobiography, the present paper would further endeavour to interrogate the mainstream construction of the Indian nation while examining his in-between position, liminality and the tribal question.

## **2. The Auto-Bio-Graphical: Lived Life and Self-Witnessing**

Ambivalence perhaps is the most dominant feature of all autobiographies. Ambivalence does create an implicit tension in autobiographical writing in opening up and complicating the negotiation between voluntary confession and the demands of objective truth. Self-fashioning is encumbered as one life embraces others'/other lives. As a history of the author-narrator's journey through life, an autobiography often intersects the private and the public domains. The narrative becomes a compilation of a number of impressions about the self and its experiences in the world while employing metaphoric and metonymic devices either idealizing a certain aspect of the lived life or filling in the narrative with reflections and platitudes. Two polarities of deformity that of "self-centredness" and of "self-extinction" inveigh life writing between the "fluctuations of destiny" and "confessions about it" that undercut the genre (RATH, 1986, p. 50).

As a contested genre, autobiography or life writing turns upon itself, for the *auto*-biographer labours hard to maintain a balance between the demands of the narrative and the fluidity of events in one's life, interlaced with contradictions and tensions. The tensions

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derive from conflicts between Being-For-Itself and Being-For-Others within the horizon of Being-in-the-World<sup>2</sup>. Being-for-Itself is constituted of the actions of the self while Being-for-Others is the image of the self that *others* hold for it. It bears on the sum total of the potential of the self's awareness of what is not realized by the self while working on them towards its projected image. Beyond this existential model, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault have contributed to a more complex understanding of the genre in which personal truth, its narrative load/effect and the relationship between the self and the other(s) have been contested and complicated.

To Paul de Man, autobiography is an effacement of the autobiographical figure in that the narrative becomes conflictual in a struggle between the *author*, the *narrator* and the *protagonist* (LEJUENE, 1982, p. 193 *apud* ANDERSON, 1988, p. 2). Such conflicts underwrite the internal tensions of the genre. Might be for this reason, to de Man autobiographies look slightly “disreputable and self-indulgent” (1979b, p. 919). Derrida's position on autobiography further substantiates de Man's contention that the law of the genre is always impure that underlines a “principle of contamination” (1980, p. 206). But what is fascinating in Derrida's larger perspective is that there is always a sense of “inclusion” and “exclusion” as the genre always transgresses the norm. Beyond Derrida's larger vision of the law of the genre, in an autobiography the ‘I’ moves between “inside” and “outside” with a Barthean perspective of the *instance* of the ‘I’ through the instability of writing of “the Text of life, [and] life as-text” (1977, p. 64). de Man claims what remains after effacement is only *writing* as the autobiographer's story as well as his/her identity depends on the ‘I’ that turns into a dominant signifier within the narrative in that “language both gives [it] a voice and takes it away”(ANDERSON, 1988, p. 13). Michel Foucault explains the ontological status of the subject and how in an autobiographical writing the subject forms its subjectivity and goes beyond it:

The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered... as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment of going beyond them (1984, p. 50).

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<sup>2</sup> This dialectics can well be explained in James Kinneavy's rhetorical model based on Sartrean Being-for-itself and Being-for-Others thesis. Following Sartre, Kinneavy identifies three constituents of the self: Being – for – Itself, Being-for-Others and Being-in –the- World. The Sartrean concept of the For-Itself, he points out, has three dimensions: “As present, the For-Itself is constituted by its presence in the world; as past, the For-Itself is constituted by what has made of itself in its previous actions and expressions; as future, the For-Itself is what it is working on to make itself – it is its possibilities” (1971, p. 398). Being-for-Others, from the same Sartrean perspective, is the image of the self which an other holds for it.

Foucault's historico-critical reflection on the self in the context of Western Enlightenment is encoded in a philosophical attitude that "has to be translated into the labor of diverse inquiries" (FOUCAULT, 1984). In this division of labour, the compelling factor is the way the self organizes and integrates the diversity of experience in writing the book of life. If in Sartrean sense it would mean Being-in-the World, in Foucauldian sense it is the concentration of the self in which the gaze of the world not only is turned on one self but also a turning of the self upon itself that underlines one's subject-positions calling upon one's experiences in the world (Foucault calls it typical of the subject's experience in the Western tradition) (2001, p. 230). Moving away from a faith in the postulates of Western Enlightenment that emphasizes the value of the subjective experience, one may look at the critical ontology of the self as a means of unraveling the complex relationship between the self and others from other sources say Oriental or Indian. In Gandhi's autobiography the intuitive understanding of the self and its actions derive from a non-rational, non-experiential motivation. Hence the story of his life doesn't emphasize the mundane but underlines a moving ahead from the personal to the non-personal (here public) domain naming his life story as 'experiments'; interestingly using a rational trope for a non-rational method of telling the story of his life. Nehru's autobiography has the tenets of Foucault's view of subjective experience; however there is more emphasis on historicised traditions and civilizational ethos. On the contrary, Verrier Elwin's *The Tribal World* is a complex document that integrates and problematises the story of his life in relation to other/others' lives. He did not have the privilege of a Gandhi or a Nehru having been internalized, in the process of growing up, the Indian ethos and values coming from another culture yet he becomes an Indian in discovering himself as one in his empathetic bonding with the tribes of India and their ways of life.

Following Derridean indeterminacy of truth, it is assumed that in life writing the so-called truth sits uncomfortably in the middle of so many factors to which the self is indubitably a witness. It is in this witnessing many discourses align with life writing. Particularly in the context of postcolonial life histories, the witnessing plays a crucial role in the making of a nation, for most postcolonial struggles and consequent liberations are mirror reflections of some illustrious life histories.

### **3. Life Writing and the Nation in Postcolonial Imaginary**

Life writing and the nation converge as stories either independent of or complementary to each other. At the birth of a nation, there is a story. This story is often mythologised. One such story about the Indian nation or Bharat Varsha is described in Raja Rao's *Kanthpura*. The mythic reference to India's divine origin is not new but what is significant is its reiteration in a postcolonial novel that at one level attempts to transcend the discordant ways of constructing the nation and, on the other, alerts us to the otherness of the other (here the colonizer) through that myth. While deploying the self/other binary, Rao underlines the importance of Gandhi as the redeemer of the Indian nation in its quest for liberation. Rao's narrative goes beyond the political and underlines the cultural identity of India as a nation. The significance of Gandhi in the context of the present essay is not the way Rao has deified him but to emphasize how the life story of an individual willy-nilly becomes the story of a nation. From this example, it obtains that a discourse on the nation is closely connected to life histories of some illustrious personalities. In fact contemporary historiography uses life writing as one of its resources for producing the history of a nation. It is more clearly evident in the context of alternative histories; in particular, autobiographies of nineteenth century slaves and some of the important Black leaders are used in writing alternative histories of the United States. Although subject to contestation the history of the Indian nation state of last century has intersected the lived lives of a host of personalities. From among them the live histories of Mohandas Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru are the most exemplary, indeed central to any discussion on the Indian nation. Gandhi's *The Story of My Experiments with Truth (The Story of My Life)* (1925) and Nehru's *An Autobiography* (1936) are texts that use one's lived experience to imagine the nation, describing its mythologies, aberrations, sufferings, strengths and more importantly its cultural ethos, traditions and values. It is important to note how they have imagined, understood and wrote about India, mirroring the nation through their personal lives.

#### **4. The Gandhi- Nehru- Elwin Trajectory**

The assumptions that Gandhi and Nehru share about India as a nation make their life writings more fascinating than talking about autobiographies *per se*. In fact it is difficult to distinguish between the private and the public domains in their lives as the nation variously shapes and intersects their lives. If Gandhi's and Nehru's autobiographies cannot be separated from the larger discourse on the nation the same also holds true in case of Verrier Elwin. Gandhi's life writing is interesting and intriguing for he carefully titled his autobiography as

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“My Experiments with Truth” and insisted on terminating the narrative in 1921 being laconic that his pen urged him to stop there. Beyond the stopping of the pen he adds that from now on, as he has entered public life, his life has become an open book that does not need to be written any further:

It is not my purpose to attempt a real autobiography or story of my life. I simply want to tell the story of my numerous experiments with truth, and as my life consists of nothing but those experiments, the story will take the shape of an autobiography. My experiments in the political field are now known. But I should certainly like to narrate my experiments in the spiritual field which are known only to myself, and from which I have derived such power as I possess for working in the political field. The experiments I am about to relate are spiritual, or rather moral; for the essence of religion is morality (1955, ed., iv).

And again:

My life from this point onward has been so public that there is hardly anything about it that people do not know.  
In fact my pen instinctively refuses to proceed further.

It is not without regret that I have to take leave of the reader. I set a high value on my experiments. I do not know whether I have been able to do justice to them. I can only say that I have spared no pains to give a faithful narrative. To describe truth, as it has appeared to me, has been my ceaseless effort. The exercise has given me great mental peace, because it has been my fond hope that it might bring faith in truth and Ahimsa to waverers (GANDHI., 1970, p. 160).

It is typical of Gandhi not saying in a straightforward way that “here is the story of my life” but playing around a heteronomy of genres where his “experiments” become “stories” and those stories become the story of his life. This may be a ploy to distance the personal Gandhi from the public Gandhi while claiming that his life is nothing beyond his “experiments with truth” and is also an open book. However, if we follow Gandhi’s intention revealed in the last quotation, it is his effort to initiate people to have faith in Truth and Ahimsa instead of having any curiosity about his personal life. He exhorts his fellow country men to follow the path of Truth and Ahimsa not undertaking the kind of “experiments” he did as a means to his spiritual ends. Had some people been enticed in doing those experiments, they certainly would not have arrived at the same truth as Gandhi did. However, people accepted his claims as something extraordinary only a Mahatma can undertake thereby creating a mystique around him. His Truth directed towards liberation of the Indian nation

does not allow a reader to distinguish between his private truths from his public pronouncements.

The use of the word “experiment” does not mean for Gandhi the Western concept of *rational* inquiry; on the contrary, he uses the word “experiment” to justify the intuitive aspect of spiritual knowledge. Truth for him was an exclusively moral notion. But the personal experience of that truth in epistemological terms as Akeel Bilgrami maintains: “is... to be understood in how truth surfaces in our practical and moral relations. That is why truth itself will have no value for us *other* than the value of such things as truth-telling, which does involve our practical and moral relations (2003, p. 4164). Following Bilgrami we may assure ourselves that the truth of life writing is in the nature of truth-telling hence beyond “scientific rationality.” Gandhi’s spirituality in no way is divorced from his day today preoccupation with the Indian nation. Ashis Nandy posits that the “moral and cultural superiority” of the colonized is not an empty slogan to Gandhi. His *Swaraj* although is conceived through his own experiments with Truth and non-violence, it is achieved through “a sophisticated ethical sensitivity” and “political and psychological shrewdness” (1995, p. 49).

On the other hand, Nehru was not concerned with the so-called experiments with the Truth and not in agreement with a lot of ideas of Gandhi. But he always accepted Gandhi as a great man he had to seek advice and guidance from. He did not do any experiment but wrote a plain and straightforward autobiography. His autobiography was one of the best sellers of the time. His autobiography was written in the prison in the charged atmosphere of the nationalist struggle. His assumptions although were based on some kind of moral principle, he was cautious for not speaking candidly about some of his political contemporaries:

I began the task in a mood of self-questioning and, to a large extent, this persisted throughout. I was not writing deliberately for an audience, but if I thought of an audience, it was one of my own countrymen and countrywomen.

A superficial courtesy and an avoidance of embarrassing and something distressing questions do not help in bringing about a true understanding of each other or of the problems that face us. Real co-operation must be based on an appreciation of differences as well as common points, and a facing of facts however inconvenient they might be. I trust, nevertheless, that nothing that I have written bears a trace of malice or ill will against any individual (1947, ed., vii).

Nehru's discreetness about his colleagues is not only a matter of taking a moral stand but is politically strategic. Nehru's *Autobiography*, writes S. Gopal, "is in one sense a *tour de force*" while narrating Indian condition and the British misrule, "his privacy largely remains unbroken" (1975, p. 197). Commenting on the success of Nehru's *Autobiography* and drawing a difference between Gandhi and Nehru thereby differentiating the two Indians of their vision, as revealed in their attitudes and personalities, Shashi Tharoor writes:

his [Nehru's] *Autobiography* was an astounding success in Britain and the West, and established Jawaharlal Nehru firmly in the world's imagination as the leader of modern India. Mahatma Gandhi, with his baffling fasts and prayers and penchant for enemas, stood for the spirit of an older tradition that imperialism could not suppress, but Jawaharlal's book spoke for free India of the future (2003, p. 95).

Reading through Gandhi's and Nehru's autobiographies, one would notice that the cultural values of India as a civilization have overtaken their personal lives that almost goad their growth from childhood till they plunge into the nationalist struggle. On the contrary, Elwin's life comes full circle as it undergoes several dramatic twists and turns. However, Elwin's closeness to both Gandhi and Nehru makes it impossible to read his autobiography in isolation. In contrast to Gandhi's and Nehru's pronouncements on autobiography, Elwin is more candid on the very nature of autobiographical writing. To him, an autobiography remains a story of an individual written with some discreetness that public confession of a life requires. Elwin's autobiography is the perfect example of what Foucault calls Western mode of self-experience that gets subsumed in Bilgrami's understanding of truth-telling. A life that has made many choices and turned in many directions, discreetness about certain personal truths is necessary so also putting across some unpleasant truths about others while integrating the diverse experiences to the singularity of one life. Elwin maintains:

I have tried to show my life as a whole and to describe those things in it that have been important to me. I have not put in everything. In a recent discussion in the *Times Literary Supplement*, it is suggested that while, inevitably, every autobiography in an essay in omission, readers in the modern world are no longer content with a self-idealized *persona*, 'something not too wide of the mark – but, please Heaven, not too close either': they want the full man. The realistic Confession, the unexpurgated Diary is what appeals today and 'the blacker the picture of a lifetime the louder the applause with which it is likely to be acclaimed'. The difficulty is that the writer and his readers may have very different ideas about what is important, even about what is black (1964, ed., viii-ix).

And again:



On the whole, though I would not call my life successful (for I have not thought in terms of success), it has been very rewarding, and a portrait of inner happiness is not a mere *persona* but, realistically, the whole man (ELWIN, ix).

Two important factors that seek attention in our discussion of Elwin are his liminality and the in-between space that he occupies. These two factors are closely connected to his representation of the tribes of India, a marginalized constituency and the way Elwin has turned their ways of life into a personal philosophy.

## 5. The Indian Nation and Its Nationness

The central debate on India's "nationness" continues to veer round two powerful tropes that India is/has been, historically and culturally, a nation and that India is still a nation in the making. The contradiction is centered on how India organizes itself as a nation and what constitutes its "nationness." Theoretically discursive and underpinned by ideologies of liberalism, Marxism and cultural constructivism, the discourses on nation, nationalism and national identity are encumbered and aporetic.

As our concern in this paper is to examine life writing and the nation, for the narrative address of a nation can never be one but many hence we would look at the loops that connect and disconnect simultaneously those addresses. The language of that address used by Gandhi and Nehru is always qualified with a personal modifier — "my country men," "my country women", "my country" etc.—; this filial address to the Indian nation becomes central to their autobiographies. Both Gandhi and Nehru imagined India as an ancient culture and civilization going beyond Benedict Anderson's (1983) definition of a nation as an "imagined political community, limited and sovereign" or of Edward Said's definition as an "imagined geography" (1979).

In his introduction to a volume of essays titled *Nation and Narration*, Homi Bhabha maintains: "What I want to emphasize in that large and liminal image of the nation... is a particular ambivalence that hunts the idea of the nation, the language of those who write of it and the lives of those who live it. It is an ambivalence that emerges from a growing awareness that, despite the certainty with which historians speak of the 'origins' of nation as a sign of the 'modernity' of society, the cultural temporality of the nation inscribes a much more transitional social reality" (2003, p. 1). In this context, I would posit that within the cultural temporality, a pervading sense of continuity of national identity exists in India. This aspect of continuity is underlined by Richard Fox in Gandhian cultural resistance that is inherently *Revista Literatura em Debate*, v. 4, n. 5, p. 01-17, jul.-dez., 2009. Recebido em 29 set.; aceito em 15 out. 2009.

“spiritual, consensual, and corporate” (1992, p. 151). Gandhi’s invocation of the spiritual East in opposition to the material West has been subjected to unending debates but what endures in his understanding of India is not the stereotyped oppositional image but an essential element of Indian civilization in spite of multiple arguments that could be called upon to counter it.

Although Nehru’s *The Discovery of India* (1945) is not exactly an autobiography but it describes the historical identity of Indian civilization along with its contemporary reality. This text underlines a particular civilizational identity without contesting or being nostalgic about India’s “nationness.” The vision of India’s “nationness”, Nehru is emphatic to term it as middle-class: “That middle class felt caged and circumscribed under the British rule and wanted to grow and develop itself. But it was too much the product of that structure to challenge it and seek to uproot it” (1966, p. 13). This position of Nehru has not been examined critically but stands in contradistinction to many established views on nationalism and India’s nationhood. Such a view also confirms to the social background of the prominent players in India’s freedom struggle. *Time* and *space* are two important vectors in Nehru’s discovery of India that map the evolution of a nation while transcending the divisive factors that fracture a coherent national identity. The trope *discovery* includes the *quest* motif making the narrative journey subjective. The process of that quest also includes the self’s journey as well as the subjective responses to India as a nation as self-knowledge. If Nehru takes his journey into the Indian past in discovering India’s present, Gandhi takes on India’s present for rediscovering its cultural past and turns that past in reinventing the Indian nation.

If Nehru has his dilemma and ambivalence of living “two lives” in the “unending procession” of the past and the present in the becoming of a nation, Gandhi fought against any ambivalence in accommodating the many in one India. He says: “India cannot cease to be one nation because people belonging to different religions live in it... A country is one nation only when... That a country must have a faculty for assimilation (1993, p. 26). In Gandhi’s vision of the Indian nation, as Richard Allen maintains, he goes beyond the contradiction in that the teleology of a nation cannot be separated from the character of the people who live in it. Both Gandhi and Nehru have (re)discovered the Indian nation in their own ways and have contributed immensely to a reinvented national consciousness.

The nationalist movement spearheaded by Gandhi created a pan-Indian consciousness and recreated a national identity as some historians argue while others find in it a distortion of reality. The latter group of historians argues that the nationalist struggle launched by the Congress espousing the Indianness in Nehru’s “unity in diversity” has failed to take note of

the sub-nationalist aspirations manifest in autonomy movements triggered by ethnic and religious differences, for they subvert the claim of one nation and one identity. Some of them are of the opinion that the national identity produced by the nationalist struggle of the Congress has been hollow as it is embedded within the logic of Western imperialism. Parth Chatterjee observes that Indian nationalism has always been marked by ambivalence in that there is a rupture between the external domain of materiality and the inner domain of spirituality. The material domain comprises of the economy and statecraft, science and technology, where the superiority of the West is obviously established. The inner spiritual domain bears the marks of the essential cultural identity of India. This debate has further deepened by radical historiography that has forced the entry of peasants, tribes and other marginalized classes and castes into Indian history. The debate that Indian national identity is fractured and constructed makes the task difficult for having its homogeneous representation historically and otherwise.

In fact life writing, if studied seriously, could bridge the gap and unite the fragments within a non-ideological perception of the nation as André Béteille has advocated: “As an ideology, nationalism can easily run to excess and acquire a doctrinaire and intransigent form. But doctrinaire nationalism is not the same thing as a sense of attachment to the nation. Many persons carry an attachment or even a loyalty to their nation without being nationalists in the ideological sense of the term” (2000, p. 51). The autobiographies of Gandhi and Nehru underline primarily a personal attachment to the Indian nation and an unquestioned sense of nationalism although we read in them various aspects of ideological differences, particularly, on socialism and spirituality. Ashis Nandy views Gandhi as a counter-modernist and instrumental in reinventing Hinduism: its myths and metaphors while giving it a political currency for spiritual awakening of his countrymen. Of course there is no single opinion on Gandhi’s spirituality which often gets mixed up with his more important concepts such as Truth and Ahimsa. Elwin rightly remarks that “Gandhi’s religion was neither Eastern nor Hindu, nor genuinely modern in the best sense of the word. It is an amalgam of Ruskin, Tolstoi and that gang...” (1964, p. 81). On the other hand, apart from his personal commitment to nationalism, Nehru’s concept of the nation is mostly derived from the Western liberal humanist discourse although he is far removed from Gandhi’s concept of an awakened spiritual India. Their approaches to nationalism, nation building and multiculturalism seem opposed to each other on many counts, what makes the sameness significant in their thought is an integrated view of India based on secularism, tolerance and unity almost underwriting

India's civilizational goals using different resisters for truth, goodness and beauty (Satyam, Sivam and Sundaram).

## **6. Writing Life and Narrating the Nation: *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin***

In her recent work, *Affective Communities: Anti-colonial Thought and the Politics of Friendship* (2006), Leela Gandhi opens a new window on the colonial/postcolonial transactions. Writing on individuals who renounced the privileges of imperialism and choose to affiliate with the victims of colonial expansionism, she maintains, are persons who not only abandoned imperialism's sanctified modes of conduct but associated with marginalized lifestyles, subcultures and traditions. They were united against imperialism and forged strong bonds of friendship with colonial subjects and cultures. Gandhi makes a forceful case for these white people living on the margins of imperialism who contributed to Indian nationalist struggle. In talking about C. F. Andrews, who was an ardent believer in Gandhi, Ashish Nandy says: "It was modern Britain Andrews disowned, not the traditional West. When Gandhi described him as an Indian at heart and a true Englishman, it remained unstated that it was by being a true Englishman that Andrews became an Indian" (1995, p. 48). The same could be said of Elwin. When Andrews' Christianity sought to authenticate Gandhi's philosophy, Elwin's disagreement with a lot of Gandhi's ideas proved him to be a nationalist of different order placing him outside Western modernity and Gandhian spirituality. As "imperial/colonial marginals" and "complicit postcolonialists" both Andrews and Elwin occupy an in-between space as outsider-insiders. Although Leela Gandhi does not deal with Elwin and his works as her subject of study she refers to Ramachandra Guha's biography of Elwin describing him as "the British environmentalist and writer who opposed both imperialist and nationalist lobbies during a protracted debate on India's tribal communities" (2006, p. 6). Elwin's empathetic identification with Indian nationalist struggle is recognized by no other than Nehru himself in his autobiography. He says: "Mr. Verrier Elwin, a brave and generous Englishman, tells us what his reactions were. "It was a wonderful experience," he says of 1930, "to watch a whole nation throwing off its mental bonds of servitude and rising to its true dignity of fearless determination"" (1947, p. 338). Among all the Englishmen and women who were sympathetic to India's nationalist struggle it is Verrier Elwin who stands out as a cosharer of Nehru's "syncretic view of Indian nationalism", "his secularism, his socialism" and "his faith in a 'scientific' approach to human history" (THAROOR, 2003, *Revista Literatura em Debate*, v. 4, n. 5, p. 01-17, jul.-dez., 2009. Recebido em 29 set.; aceito em 15 out. 2009.

p. 90). Elwin thus remains much more than simply an imperial/colonial marginal and unlike others, he fought for the tribes of India, for their rights over land, forests and pleaded for preservation of their ways of life and cultural practices within a Nehruvian vision of Indian nation State.

Towards the end of *Civilizing the Savage: A Biography of Verrier Elwin*, Ramchandra Guha citing Leslie Stephen says that “an autobiography is interesting not so much for what it contains as for what it leaves out” (2000, p. 310). The observation of Stephen is indeed interesting as it enjoins Derridean understanding of “inclusion” and “exclusion.” The bare facts about Elwin that — he was an Englishman; trained for the Church who worked with the tribes of India; married tribal women and became an Indian citizen; awarded Padma Bhusan and died in India — bear on the personality of an individual in many parts who cannot be easily summed up by any biographer. It was his wish that he be cremated after his death and his ashes immersed in the Siang River that flows in Arunachal Pradesh. Is this the wish of an Indian, more so of a believer in Hinduism or of a humanist of extraordinary stature? It is difficult to ascertain. These bare facts as narrative threads come alive in *The Tribal World*.

The *what* of life writing for Elwin is an uneasy journey that he himself makes clear in his preface to *The Tribal World*: “In India I have found sorrow and joy, disappointment and fulfillment but above all reality, an answer to the prayer: ‘From the unreal, lead me to the real’”(1964, ed., viii). What is that real? Does that real hold all the truth about his life? In a sense for Elwin that real certainly includes the Indian nation and its fragments, among other things. Elwin’s autobiography supplements Gandhi’s as he is the rebel son of the Mahatma and makes his differences with him clear on some of the key Gandhian concepts such as khadi, prohibition and sex relations in the context of his experiences with the tribes: In his autobiography he writes:

I suffered a great disillusion when I discovered that the khadi programme was not suitable for our tribes. I have always been a strong supporter of handloom weaving, but spinning, for very poor people and in places where cotton did not grow, seemed to me artificial and uneconomic (1964, p. 85).

Gandhi’s emphatic view on Prohibition (which I consider damaging to the tribes), his philosophy of sex-relations, especially as exaggerated by some of his followers (which I consider damaging to everybody), and what seemed to me a certain distortion of values — the excessive emphasis on diet, for example, further separated me from him (Ibid.).

Not only that Elwin differs with Gandhi on many of his concepts but also registers his disagreement making a strong case for the tribal economy and ways of life. It is clear that no other Indian leader except Nehru who knows the conditions of the tribes of India has understood their ways of life better than Elwin. He spoke for these marginal communities and sought their accommodation in the emerging discourse of Indian nation State.

### **7. Liminality of the Self and the Putative Nation**

Verrier Elwin, as an English man in India, for me, occupies a liminal space that complicates and clarifies his identity, intention and action. Admittedly, Elwin lived two lives that of a Christian- British- European and also of an Indian. His thoughts come to convergence bringing together empathetic Christian humanism and Indian sense of disinterested engagement in his day today life. Elwin's difference with Gandhi and Nehru was that he lived in a world afflicted with poverty, squalor, disease and exploitation. It is this world of marginalization and exploitation that did not figure in the political discourse of the time. It is therefore pertinent to underline his liminality that focuses on his location, his work and his contribution to the understanding of tribal life. From this liminal position, Elwin could draw the attention of Nehru and with his support he was able to frame the tribal development policy for the country.

Verrier Elwin's life is full of events and struggles — religious, philosophical, social, cultural and historical— that are enmeshed in a world that belongs more to others than to himself. His life has been shaped by various factors among them mostly by Anglical evangelism, Gandhi's pacifism and the exotic world of the tribes across India. Finally, he turns his lived experience about the tribes into a Philosophy for development. In a sense his life has been made by others in that his autobiography brings into signification many aspects of the subcontinent's history of the last century. Thus, Elwin's autobiography *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin* challenges us variously including the mainstream construction of our national identity and nationalism.

The very title of his work, a selection from many suitable ones, underlines the transgression, a personal story apparently being titled in the third person as *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin*. The narrator creates a distance from the protagonist although the narrative is in the first person. It is interesting and intriguing that Elwin does not title the work as "My Tribal World" for making sure that the Tribal world remains as much of his as of the reader. It could be also a strategy to camouflage the personal life buried under the anthropologist's who moved from his Christian faith to become a disciple of Gandhi and finally, becoming a rebel

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son to the Mahatma. His life writing thus is a saga of self-reflexivity connecting the “within” with the “without”. Behind the scholar, anthropologist, policy maker deciding the destiny of 13 million tribes, Elwin has always remained a private man. The cultivated silence on many aspects of his lived life although has raised questions and controversies it is the larger goal that he accomplished in life more significant than those suppressed facts. Elwin’ impassioned plea for the protection of the tribes of India and preservation of their cultural practices has been a sour point for many. He was accused of promoting a policy that would keep the tribes for ever as museum exhibits and fix them in time. To this criticism, Elwin has always answered that his policy of exclusion of the tribes for a particular period is to raise their consciousness of their rights in a democratic country like India. To find their own voice and feet in the multicultural mosaic of India with life styles that are different from others, they need time to be truly liberated not only from external colonization but internal ones. His work *A Philosophy for NEFA* (1964) is indeed a mark of his impassioned plea to save the tribes from exploitation by outsiders. It is also to recognize the fragility of the tribal societies. He fought against the Hinduisation of the tribes as well as Christian proselytizing. He fought against the Sahukar-Mahajan – bureaucrat demons who were the agents of exploitation and marginalization of the tribes. Nehru in fact shared Elwin’s vision of the tribal India in his preface to the *Philosophy for NEFA*.

The argument that our national discourse also marginalizes the tribes of India holds true on many counts. They are the silent majority who are unable to protect themselves and frequently have been the victims of others’ battles. The symptoms of such vagaries are evident today in Kandhamal, in Northeast India and else where in the country. It is through Elwin’s autobiography that we get a glimpse of this world. It is not the rights or privileges one enjoys being a tribe under the policy of protective discrimination but the manner in which we engage with them. If we have to reconstruct an inclusive national discourse, the starting point certainly has to be Elwin and his works on the tribes of India including his autobiography *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin*.

**RESUMO:** Os discursos contemporâneos sobre nação, nacionalidade e nacionalismo são teoricamente discursivos e aporéticos. As construções ideológicas da nação a partir de posições liberalistas, marxistas e construtivistas dificultam nossa compreensão de nação e o que constitui a sua *nationness*. Para Homi Bhabha, há “uma ambivalência particular [que] fere a idéia de nação, a língua daqueles que escrevem sobre ela e as vidas daqueles que vivem nela”. Seguindo Bhabha e outros críticos, o presente ensaio objetiva abrir uma outra possibilidade para se pensar a leitura do discurso indiano através das autobiografias de

Mohandas Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru e Verrier Elwin. Enquanto Gandhi e Nehru contam com a vantagem de estarem imersos na cultura local e na sua história, Elwin permanece à margem. Gandhi e Nehru, as duas figuras mais importantes nos limites da luta da Índia pela independência do país, têm em vista a nação sob suas próprias perspectivas, enquanto que a autobiografia de Elwin, escrita da perspectiva de um observador externo, oferece uma crítica da construção da cultura dominante defendida por Gandhi e Nehru em resposta à causa das tribos indianas, uma circunscrição marginal, assim elaborando um discurso sobre a nação no sentido de que as diversas comunidades do país e suas aspirações precisam ser acomodadas no discurso nacional envolvente. Lendo através das biografias de Gandhi, Nehru e Elwin, este trabalho, tomando uma posição não ideológica, discute que juntos estes três textos fornecem uma perspectiva inclusiva da nação indiana que pode engendrar o discurso sobre a “diversidade” fortalecendo a democracia e o multiculturalismo.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Nação. Autobiografia. Marginalidade. Diversidade. Tribo. Inclusão. Multiculturalismo.

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