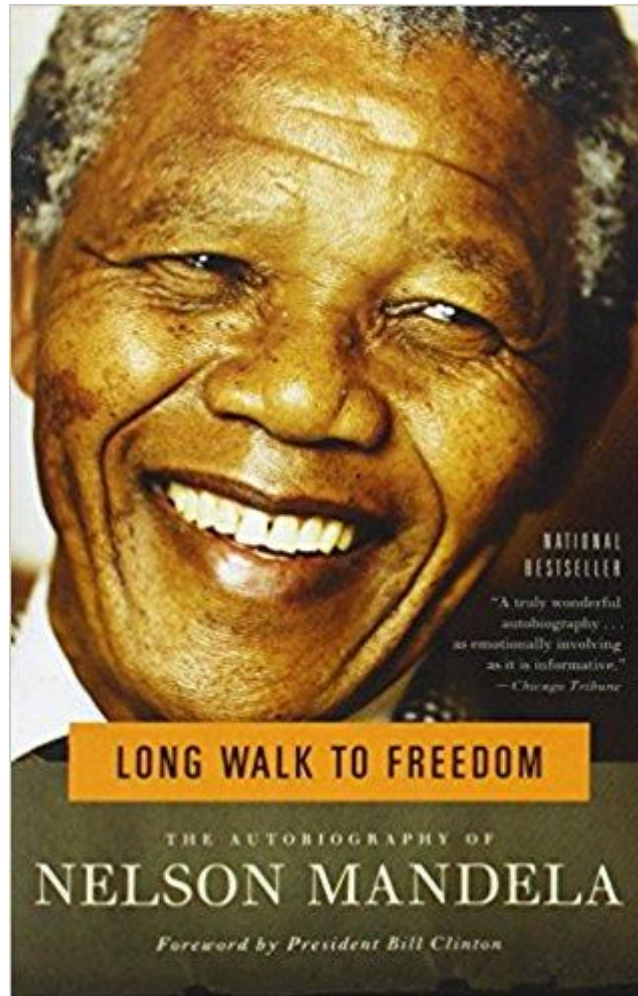


**Resilience of the Human Spirit  
as Observed in The Autobiographical Work of Nelson Mandela,  
*Long Walk to Freedom***

**Kavitha Karen Xavier, Ph.D. Research Scholar**

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<https://www.amazon.com/Long-Walk-Freedom-Autobiography-Mandela/dp/0316548189>

**Abstract**

Any subject dealing with the study of Autobiography brings into question the meaning or origin of the word and its definitions. The word *Autobiography* is derived from three Greek words: *autos*, *bios*, and *graphein* meaning 'self', 'life' and 'write' respectively. This style of life writing has been around for centuries and it was not classified as a literary genre until the late eighteenth century. Every autobiographical work tends to be a cry for the expression of identity and every autobiographical study yearns to understand the evolution of the individual. Anyone familiar with the

life story of Nelson Mandela will know that his very name is synonymous with the word ‘resilience’. Nelson Mandela spearheaded the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa and emerged victorious after spending 27 years in prison. His is no ordinary story and the human soul cannot fathom how Mandela stood by his ideals and liberated his people from oppression and suppression. It seems inconceivable to maintain sanity, dignity, hope and a reason for existence under severe oppressive forces, that taxed the spirit, body and mind of political prisoners. But Mandela possessed an inner strength that could not be diminished, it shone forth brightly, enlightening this great man and ensconcing him in its powerful aura.

**Keywords:** Resilience, Apartheid, Autobiography, Nelson Mandela, Democracy, Equality, Perseverance, South Africa, Racism, Racial inequality.

### **Nelson Mandela**

Henry David Thoreau said, “How vain it is to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live” (65). Nothing could be truer than this quote when considering the autobiographical work of one of the greatest men of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Nelson Rohlhlhlahla Mandela. *Long Walk to Freedom* by Nelson Mandela was first published in Great Britain in 1994 by Little, Brown and Company. Mandela dedicates the book to his six children, his twenty-one grandchildren and his three great-grandchildren. The book is also dedicated to Mandela’s comrades, friends and fellow South Africans who have witnessed and been part of the greatest anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. Mandela started writing his autobiography clandestinely in 1974 during his imprisonment on Robben Island. He resumed work on it after being released from prison in 1990. Since its initial publication, the book has been widely read and distributed resulting in making *Long Walk to Freedom* one of the greatest autobiographies ever written where the resilient nature and disciplined spirit of Mandela shines throughout, overwhelming the reader. No wonder this engaging and inspiring account of Nelson Mandela’s life has carved a niche for itself in literary studies about the most famous autobiographies of today.

Nelson Mandela is revered all over the world for his unwavering devotion to democracy, equality and peace that put an end to racial segregation in South Africa. Amidst tremendous hardships and mounting political turmoil, Mandela held on to his belief and hope for a democratic nation where all citizens irrespective of caste, creed and colour are deemed equal under the law. Even after courting arrests numerous times and being banned from political activities, Mandela continued to play a dominant role in South Africa’s struggle for democracy. He never lost his determination even during the horrible and nerve wrecking ordeals he faced during his 27 years of incarceration, this is the single most defining trait in Mandela that makes him a great person. Mandela being the consummate man that he was, refused the apartheid government's offer of freedom in exchange for giving up the liberation movement. Makes you wonder about what lies at his very core, how many people “would rather stay in jail than be free at the cost of their integrity?” (Cowell). It would have been easier for him to renounce the anti-apartheid struggle and render an apology to the ruling powers, but Mandela was a highly moral and ethical man. He couldn’t adhere to a system that legally enforced racial segregation; he fought against it and refused to accept defeat. Despite various threats and confinement Mandela never grew bitter or vengeful; he refused to answer racism for racism. This paper seeks to discover those defining qualities that make Mandela the person he is today, a beacon of hope and inspiration to people all over the world and especially to those undergoing various forms of oppression.

### **Acquisition of Leadership Qualities**

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Nelson Rohlihlahla Mandela was born in a small village Mvezo in the district of Umtata of the Transkei region, South Africa into a highly respected family. His father was the chief advisor and a respected and valuable counsellor to the Thembu chief. As a boy Mandela grew up in the company of tribal elders and chiefs, he learnt to observe their customs and rituals. When Nelson Mandela was nine years old he lost his father and went to live with the acting regent of the Thembu people, chief Jongintaba. It was here that Mandela observed the leadership qualities and the principles of democracy that were prevalent in the chief's court. He developed a rich sense of heritage and nationalism; the early seeds of leadership were slowly being sown into this young Xhosa's personality. Mandela was the first in his family to attend school and it was there that the name Nelson was bestowed on him by an English teacher. He received his early education at Clarkebury Missionary School and graduated from Healdtown, a strict Methodist College. He pursued his higher education at the University College of Fort Hare (South Africa's first university college for Black Africans) and later qualified in law from the University of Witwatersrand.

### **Political Involvement**

Nelson's political involvement began when the National Party that supported apartheid policy of racial segregation won the all-white elections. For the blacks, South Africa was becoming increasingly volatile and a dangerous place to live in, the "South African government used most of its manpower and resources not to fight crime but to crush its opposition" (Beck 130). The White supremacist government sought to curb protests and dissents by issuing countless laws and ban orders that severely restricted the movements of black people and made life intolerable for them. These laws were so demeaning to the point of being ridiculous, there were

travel documents, labour documents, residential documents, curfew documents, the non-production of which, when they were asked for by officials, carried penalties of various kinds. The variety of documents which Africans were required to possess was complex to the point of unfairness. (Davenport 531)

### **Imposition of Apartheid**

The ruthless "National Party constructed grand apartheid on a foundation of legislation" which eventually led to increase in poverty and crime rates (Beck 128). Like the other blacks in the land, Mandela too faced these demeaning and oppressive measures, meant to break the spirit of Africans and instil in them their inferior place in society.

This inhuman treatment of the majority by the white-led minority, led Mandela to join the ANC (African National Congress) an organization dedicated to ending black oppression in South Africa. Mandela was instrumental in guiding the ANC to conduct various forms of nationwide protests, he is also the reason the organization continued to function after it was outlawed. He conceived an elaborate plan that came to be known as the Mandela-Plan or, simply, M Plan which enabled the ANC to function underground. During most of the 50's Mandela was the victim of various forms of repression; he was banned, arrested and imprisoned. Rather than being deterred, this only cemented his resolve and Mandela continued to voice his opinions intelligently and eloquently with a flair that came from being a learned attorney. When the government met the ANC's peaceful demands with violence, Mandela was forced to reconsider his strategy of non-violence and resort to violence in his fight for equality. Umkhonto we Sizwe (meaning Spear of the Nation) was the militant wing of the ANC that performed acts of sabotage in retaliation to the governments brutal disregard to passive resistance.

### **Arrest of Mandela**

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After being on the run for seventeen months, Mandela was finally arrested and charged with illegal exit from the country and incitement to strike. Mandela was convicted and imprisoned for 27 years in Robben Island, where he was forced to endure hard labour in a lime quarry. Mandela bore the torment of his oppressors and the long hours of confinement with stoic dignity and grace. He became a martyr for his people and the nation, he garnered the respect and admiration of his jailors and fellow prisoners through his integrity, intelligence, and dignified defiance. Toward the late 1980's mounting pressure from international and local communities on the South African government led to the release of Mandela on 11<sup>th</sup> February 1990. The apartheid reign finally came to an end in 1994 when Mandela's organization won the first ever democratic multiracial elections and Mandela went on to become the first black President of South Africa, an overwhelming triumph indeed. *Long Walk to Freedom* is a testament of one man's struggle and triumph over overwhelming hardships; it is also a historic account of the birth of democracy in South Africa. Through this autobiographical work the history of oppression unfolds leading to the evolution of a resilient spirit coupled with great leadership qualities in Mandela.

### **Unwavering Belief in a Noble Cause**

Due to his extraordinary patience, his unwavering belief in a noble cause, his ability to forgive the oppressors who tormented him and above all because of his resilient nature, Mandela has garnered intense admiration and respect from every corner of the globe. He has literally weathered the test of time and emerged victorious. The hardest and most intense battle he had to face was within himself during those long years of incarceration. Mandela managed to keep his spirits and hopes alive despite being held captive. Nelson Mandela had a vision and he worked hard towards achieving it, everything else in life came secondary to his goal of abolishing apartheid and setting the grounds for racial equality in South Africa. He couldn't be a father to his children or a devoted husband to his wife during those forlorn years of incarceration, and after his release he plunged headlong into his political goal of achieving democracy and equality thereby becoming the father of the masses and ultimately the father of the nation.

### **We Need More Nelson Mandelas!**

The world needs more moral and ethical leaders like Nelson Mandela who had the courage to voice his opinions and stick by his convictions. Such is the measure of the true greatness of the man, his soul and spirit; he believed in himself and he believed in a better life for his people. In every aspect he was a better person and human being than his white oppressors who considered themselves the superior race. This can be attributed to his Christian upbringing and schooling, which instilled in him the Christian values of forgiveness and kindness. Even though the white supremacists were probably Christians, they hadn't imbibed the true values of a Christian faith. Mandela on the other hand had a gentle and nurturing soul; he was brought up in tribal communities where mutual caring and sharing was the norm. He grew up listening to valorous tales of wars fought by his ancestors in defence of the fatherland; this was the driving force behind his motivation to take up a prominent role in the freedom struggle. Nelson Mandela had no visions of overthrowing the white supremacy government; he only wanted every person to be treated equally with equal rights and privileges. This can probably be traced back to his early roots, where children were not considered the sole property of the parents but of the entire community. The community raised them collectively and every child was equally loved and protected under their tender, nourishing care.

In addition to patterns of shared child care in polygynous households, childcare responsibilities were also diffused through the common African practice of fostering children. African communal societies were characterized by high degrees of interdependence and the

belief that individual self-development and personal fulfilment were dependent upon the well-being of all members of the community. ... Fostering was a means of minimizing what was often viewed as a dysfunctional emphasis on individualism within a communal setting. (James 47)

### **Indignation and Distress**

Being brought up in such an environment, and then being thrust into the outer world must have been an eye-opening experience for Mandela.

Imagine his indignation and distress when forced to comply with the barbaric apartheid legislation, which must have been a rude political awakening to his youthful senses. Mandela tried to tackle this problem by joining the African National Congress, he gained prominence through sheer hard work and determination and was promoted up the ranks. Mandela's professional and personal life took a back seat to his political life, he was committed to the ANC and he took many risks to carry out clandestine tasks assigned to him. He skillfully organized and carried out peaceful protests and non-cooperation movements throughout the nation. In 1964 Mandela was convicted for inciting the people to strike and was sentenced to life imprisonment in the Rivonia Trial. This is where Mandela uttered his famous words that struck a chord within the country:

During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination; I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the idea of a democratic and free society in which all persons live in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die. (438)

These words form the basis of his historical struggle; it sums up his life's work and his moral ideals.

### **Charismatic Leader for the Oppressed**

Mandela became a charismatic leader to the oppressed, here again one sees the influence of growing up in Chief Jongintaba's care. Mandela always listened to the opinions of others and treated each person with respect; he never once misused his position of authority or manipulated the people's will like the power and money-oriented leaders of today. Instead like the court of his tribal elders, he patiently listened to discussions until a decision was reached collectively. His education and qualification as a lawyer raised his mental faculties and made him more astute; he realized the role he could play in court. "I was the symbol of justice in the court of the oppressor, the representative of the great ideals of freedom, fairness, and democracy in a society that dishonoured those virtues" (Mandela 376). He was an accomplished attorney and he fought his case with élan, he had a way with words and he could invoke nationalism in the crowd by his carefully and well-constructed defence. He wanted to make the state question its motives and realise that they were the ones perpetuating heinous crimes of discrimination. "I would not attempt to defend myself so much as put the state itself on trial" (Mandela 376). Throughout the freedom struggle Mandela conducted himself with utmost integrity and dignity; he never encroached onto the side of mindless violence. He only resorted to violent tactics like sabotage, to jolt the government and make them take notice; his only aim was to undermine the government's efficiency.

### **Treading the Higher Path**

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Mandela walked out of prison a free man on February 11<sup>th</sup>1990. He was warmly welcomed by the people, and nations everywhere applauded this great living soul. He truly embodies humanity in the purest form; he was not embittered by his wrongful conviction and confinement, instead he continued to appeal for peace and forgiveness. In fact, when

Mandela and the African National Congress (ANC) reentered the formal political arena, anger and suspicion seethed on both sides. Former exiles and guerrillas worried that once they returned, they would be seized and imprisoned; government officials feared that the ANC would take advantage of the amnesty to infiltrate guerrilla fighters into the country. (Berger 149)

But Mandela strode the higher path; he did not stoop down to his captive's level of hatred, ignorance and intolerance. He advocated racial equality and never sought to oppress the ones who kept him captive for nearly three decades. His dignified, gentle and calm demeanour coupled with his nerves of steel captured the imagination of the country and people learnt to emulate his good virtues. His father had rightly named him Rolihlahla, which in Xhosa literally means 'pulling the branch of a tree' (Mandela 3); its colloquial meaning being 'troublemaker'. True to his name and his father's stubborn nature, Nelson Mandela stubbornly weathered the storms of life he had to go through, and likewise he created enough trouble to finally emerge victorious over white dominion. A feeling of awe engulfs the reader who is moved by this engaging autobiographical account; one can't help but be touched by this man's compelling sacrifice and unwavering faith. It only cements the growing admiration, love and profound respect this benevolent leader deserves from us. He is fondly referred to as Madiba by the people of South Africa, it's an honorary title adopted by the elders of Mandela's clan.

Mandela is a remarkable man, despite twenty-seven years of incarceration and the appalling crimes committed against the black South Africans by the apartheid regime, Mandela still encourages forgiveness and urges reconciliation between various communities. Albert Einstein once remarked, "The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing" (qtd. in Yeatts, 32). Well, Mandela did his part by committing himself to the freedom struggle; he is the harbinger of hope, faith and democracy in multi-racial South Africa. Even after having lived a life fraught with strife and untold suffering that enabled him to finally realize his dream, Mandela still concludes that he has a long way to walk, "I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended" (751). Mandela has enriched our lives and he has made us think anew, he has helped make this world a better place.

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