



AUTOBIOGRAPHY: AN ANSWER TO “WHO AM I?” A STUDY OF HITLER’S *MEIN KAMPF* AND MUSSOLINI’S *MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY*

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ABSTRACT

*Ideas, incidents and beliefs are the building blocks of one’s identity; it’s in relation to these that we define ourselves. An autobiography not only gives an account of the author’s life but also simultaneously provides an insight into the mind and character of the writer. It helps the writers to craft their identities in the way they perceive themselves and want others to see them as. The word “autobiography” was first used as a hybrid in the 1797 by William Taylor but it had been used as a form by writers long before that. Autobiographies have dramatically evolved over the period of hundreds of years. In the classical period, they were full of self-justification and confessions and were entitled Apologia. With the advent of 18th and 19th centuries, autobiographies became more romantic in nature where they explored the role and emotions of the writer. The 20th and 21st centuries saw autobiographies not only from the academic and artistic spheres but also from the world of politics, sports and media, where the individuals had help from ghost writers. This paper explores two autobiographies from the 20th century by two of the most hated people in the history of mankind and how through their works they defined their identities and explored their emotions on paper. The autobiographies under study are Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* or *My Struggle* and Benito Mussolini’s *My Autobiography*. The paper would attempt to explore the early lives of these dictators, the justifications they used for their heinous crimes, the psychological cognitions that shaped their identities and the emotional landscape they present in their respective works.*

KEYWORDS: *Autobiography, Fascism, Nazism, Hitler, Mussolini, Political Propaganda*

PAPER

Two of the most devastating products of the Great War, Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, brought the world to its knees and their countries to another war. The post-World War I period was a time of tumult and exasperation for Germany because of its being on the losing side and the humiliating terms of the Treaty of Versailles. Even though Italy emerged on the winning side of the war there was still a lot of upheaval and dissatisfaction in the country because of the inequitable treatment Italy received at the hands of the Allies in exchange for all the sacrifices it incurred during the war. Italians had lost confidence in their government after the war and the political, economic, and social circumstances were such that the people turned to Fascism resulting in Mussolini’s rise to power as the Prime Minister of Italy in 1922. It was only in 1925 that Mussolini gave up the act of a democratic leader and declared himself *Il Duce*, the dictator of Italy. Hitler put on no such show of democracy although he was appointed as the Chancellor of Germany in 1933; he had long ago become disillusioned with the parliamentary procedure. In 1934, Hitler became the *Führer*, leader, of Nazi Germany vowing to make the country a

world power. Both of these dictators have written their autobiographies revealing their lives, the hardships they suffered and how they shaped their personality, their political ideologies and aspirations and the future plans they had for their respective homelands.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Autobiography as a literary genre emerged from the European enlightenment in the eighteenth century and was considered as one of the highest forms of literary art. Philippe Lejeune, a specialist in autobiography, defines an autobiography as, “a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality”(14). An autobiography not only gives an account of the author’s life but also simultaneously provides an insight into the mind and character of the writer. It helps the writers to craft their identities in the way they perceive themselves and want others to see them as. Sarojini Jain in her essay “Autobiography: A Literary Genre” explains the need people feel to write their autobiographies,



“The auto-biographer may not realize what his real motivation is. His desire to write his life may arise from a need to clear certain misunderstandings, and justify his past actions, he may wish to confess his misdeeds and seek to communicate the essential nature and truth of his “self.” (203-204)

“Autobiography” as a word was first used by William Taylor in 1797, but as a form it dates back to antiquity. Such works then were entitled *Apologia* and they served the purpose of self-justification. The first autobiography was written by St. Augustine titled *Confessions* between 397- 400 A.D. Later in the eighteenth century Jean-Jacques Rousseau also titled his autobiography *Confessions* and laid the pattern for the modern autobiography. With the advent of eighteenth century, writers started using autobiographies as a means of exploring their emotions on paper. In the twentieth and twenty first century the popularity of the genre encouraged politicians, journalists, philosophers, celebrities and other famous people to write their own life stories and thus came forward works like Nelson Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom*, Jean-Paul Satre’s *The Words*, Jessica Savitch’s *Anchorwoman*, Paramahansa Yogananda’s *Autobiography of a Yogi* and many more. People no longer used autobiographies just as confessions but also as an emotional outlet, for self-justification and glorification, and as propaganda for their ideologies: personal and political. Hitler and Mussolini have done the same in their autobiographies.

Mein Kampf (1925)

Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) was a German politician who rose to be one of the cruellest and abhorrent dictators of all times. He was the Chancellor of Germany from 1933 to 1945 and declared himself the *Führer* in 1934. His aim was to make Germany a world power and rid the country of the parasitic Jews; who he blamed for Germany’s defeat in World War I. He was responsible for the implementation and execution of Holocaust causing the death of six million European Jews.

Adolf Hitler’s autobiography *Mein Kampf* or *My Struggles* is divided into two volumes, the first one of which was written during his imprisonment after his failed coup in Munich and the second was written after his release from prison. The first volume, *A Reckoning*, was published in the summer of 1925. It consists of twelve chapters giving an autobiographical account of Hitler’s childhood, his relationship with his parents, his youth, his stay in Vienna, his time in army and the development of his political ideologies. The second volume, titled *The National Socialist Movement* was published in the winter of 1926, is divided into fifteen chapters where Hitler writes about the objectives of the National Socialist Party and his future plans for Germany. It was written in an attempt to make his party favourable. Hitler even went to the length of making

Mein Kampf the new bible of Nazi Germany. Throughout the book there is a strong hatred displayed for Judaism and Marxism which he considers are the two biggest threats to Germany as is evident in these sentences:

It was during this period that my eyes were opened to two perils, the names of which I scarcely knew hitherto and had no notion whatsoever of their terrible significance for the existence of the German people. These two perils were Marxism and Judaism. (32)

Hitler begins his autobiography by writing about his background. He was born on April 20, 1889 in Braunau am Inn, a town in Austria-Hungary. He wrote about his father, Alois Hitler, who was a civil servant and his mother, Klara Hitler, whom he loved dearly. Of this relationship he writes, “I respected my father, but I loved my mother.” (29). Hitler described his teen years on a farm in Lam Bach as the “period that I first began to have ideals of my own.” (18) during which he became interested in military and war by reading about them, he mentioned, “I became more and more enthusiastic about everything that was in any way connected with war or military affairs.” (19). He penned about having “more or less strenuous arguments” (19) with his classmates, nowhere does he mention any close friendship during his early years. There was a constant struggle between him and his father because of their difference in opinion regarding Hitler’s career. Hitler’s father wanted him to be a civil servant like him but Hitler wanted to be an artist and he was rather obstinate about it, “No amount of persuasion and no amount of ‘grave’ warning could breakdown that opposition. I would not become a State Official, not on any account.” (20). Hitler had always been headstrong, a personality trait he developed at an early age. His father died when Hitler was thirteen leaving behind his mother to urge him to fulfil his father’s wishes. Hitler described his mother’s death “as a terrible blow” (29) which happened when he was only fifteen years old. Orphaned, he moved to Vienna to study art but was rejected admission on the grounds of being more suited to study architecture for which he lacked the required qualification to be eligible. Hitler then moved to Vienna for several years where he experienced acute poverty and made his living by drawing post cards for tourists. About that period of his life Hitler wrote, “During those years a view of life and definite outlook on the world took shape in my mind.” (32), so it was during this period that he developed most of his world view and came to know about Marxism and Judaism. He became increasingly repulsed by Jews under the influence of the anti-Semitic pamphlets and newspaper articles and this was further fuelled when he noticed that most prosperous folks in Vienna were Jews. His dislike for Jews was further strengthened when the Zionist



movement gained popularity in Vienna. When Germany adopted the British form of parliament, he supported parliamentary democracy and opposed dictatorship but later became disillusioned with the parliamentary procedure because he noticed that the government was a group of corrupt politicians and no single person could be held responsible. In 1913-1914 he joined the National Socialist Movement and started believing that Marxism had to be destroyed to save Germany. When the World War I broke out he applied to the Bavarian regiment. It was this period of serving in the war that had a lasting impact on his life about which he wrote, "I am not ashamed to acknowledge today that I was carried away by enthusiasm of the moment and sank down upon my knees and thanked Heaven out of the fullness of my heart for the favour of having been permitted to live in such a time." (155). Here is a man who instead of weeping for the ruin and destruction that war brings along with it, is thanking for the opportunity to be a part of such massacre. A vital insight into the mind of a crazed person possessed with the thoughts of violence. The turning point in Hitler's life came when he decided to enter politics which was instigated by Germany's thought of capitulating in WWI. He began his political career by working as an army spy in German Worker's Party. Towards the end of the first volume Hitler has discussed racial purity in great detail where he pointed out the superiority of the Aryan race as nation builders and calls Jews an inferior "parasitic" race:

It was not by mere chance that the first forms of civilisation arose there where the Aryans came into contact with inferior races subjugated them and forced them to obey his command. The members of the inferior race became the first mechanical tools in the service of a growing civilization. (267)

He further wrote about how racial mixing is harmful for the Germans as it lowers their pedigree by coming in contact with the weaker races. Only by keeping their blood lines pure can they achieve true greatness that they are destined for, the words fanaticism thinly veiled as necessity for greatness.

What we have to fight for is the necessary for the existence and increase of our race and people, the subsistence of its children and the maintenance of our racial stock unmixed, the freedom and independence of the Fatherland; so that our people may be enabled to fulfil the mission assigned to it by the Creator. (198)

In the second volume of the book Hitler while discussing the problems of post-war Germany blamed the Jews for their downfall. He claimed that German speaking Jews were accepted as Germans by people of other countries but these sly people belong to no country, he reduces them down only to a race of "cunning" and "parasitic" people who can never look

beyond their own selfish motives. He suggested racial purity of the borders and championed the concept of only highest breed being allowed to have children. But it is largely devoted to National Socialist German Worker's Party, the principles of the party and its aspirations. Hitler in detail discussed his own political views and motivations and plans he had in store for Germany, "Germany will either be a world power or there will be no Germany."(601). The greatest political influence on Hitler was that of Mussolini, about whom he wrote:

...I conceived the profoundest admiration for the great man south of the Alps, who full of ardent love for his people, made no pacts with the enemies of Italy, but strove for their ambition by all ways and means. What will rank Mussolini amongst the great men of this earth is his determination not to share Italy with the Marxists, but to destroy internationalism and save the fatherland from it. (607)

My Autobiography (1928)

Benito Mussolini (1883-1945) played a great role in establishing and developing Fascism in Italy. He was a politician, journalist and leader of the National Fascist Party. He was Italy's Prime Minister from 1922 to 1943 during which he declared himself *Il Duce*, the dictator of the country.

Mussolini's *My Autobiography* was published in 1928 with a foreword by Richard Washburn Child. It is divided into thirteen chapters exploring the author's childhood, the beginning of his political views, his time serving in the war, his struggle to form the National Fascist Party and his rise to power. Child while praising Mussolini writes, "He has not merely ruled a house; he has built a new house." (viii). Mussolini described his childhood home where he was born on July 29, 1883 at Varano Di Costa. He wrote about his connection to the land he was born stating, "Such was the land dear to me because it was my soil. Race and soil are strong influences upon us all." (2). His father, Alessandro Mussolini, was a blacksmith by profession but he was also closely associated with the social causes in Italy, "(His) Heart and mind were always filled and pulsating with socialistic theories." (3). His father's attraction to "International movement" (3) and socialistic beliefs greatly influenced Mussolini's political ideologies in his early years. His mother, Rosa Mussolini, was a primary school teacher, "She was so quiet, so tender and yet so strong." (5). His deep affection for his mother is evident in the sentence, "My greatest love was for my mother." (5). He learnt the value of discipline at school and later studied to become a teacher. There was a desire in him to escape his familiar surroundings and set foot somewhere new therefore after teaching a year at a school, Mussolini went to Switzerland which he described as, "It was in this wander-life, now full of



difficulties, toil, hardships and restlessness that developed something in me. It was the milestone which marked my maturity. I entered into this new era as a man and politician.” (12). He further wrote about his views on how politicians should act, “I detest those who live like parasites, sucking away the edges of social struggles. I hate men who grow rich in politics.” (13). He eventually came back to serve his compulsory military service and was placed in Bersaglieri regiment at Verona but his service was cut short when his mother passed away, an occurrence he described as the “greatest sorrow of my life” (16). He then turned to journalism and became the editor of the socialist newspaper, *Avanti*. His father passed away soon after at the age of fifty seven. Mussolini was forced to resign from his editorial post because of his strong views. He became a member of the Italian Socialist Party but was later expelled from there because of his support of Italy’s intervention in the World War I which he thought was a revolution Italy deserved to experience. He then founded the newspaper *Il Popolo d’Italia* through which he tried to convince Italy to join the war. He wrote about the time he served in the war, “I underwent the hardest trials of my life in mountain trenches” (43) but nothing could break his determination to be the best soldier. He quickly rose through ranks in the army. When the war ended the unfair treatment of Italy made him realise the weakness of the existing political rulers and in 1919 he founded his National Fascist Party. He penned his rise to power as the leader of Italy and his future plans for it, “I want to make Italy great, respected, and feared; I want to render my nation worthy of her noble and ancient traditions. I want to accelerate her evolution toward the highest forms of national co-operation; I want to make a greater prosperity forever possible for the whole people.” (309).

CONCLUSION

Both Hitler and Mussolini presented an emotional landscape of their childhood and their relationship with their parents. Both of them shared a loving bond with their mothers but the bond they shared with their fathers were different, Mussolini was greatly influenced by his father’s political views whereas Hitler had a strenuous relationship with his. Hitler’s years of struggle in Vienna and Mussolini’s in Switzerland shaped a great part of their personality, ideology and psychology. They supported their country’s participation in war. Through both their autobiographies we learn that they truly found themselves while serving in the World War I and it was after it ended that their political careers took shape. It is evident from their books that they believed in fanatic nationalism which drove them and compelled them to try to restore their countries to their ancient glory. Hitler justified his crimes against the Jews in this book by blaming them for the loss

Germany incurred in the Great War because they controlled the press, economy and by inculcating feelings of anti-nationalism. Mussolini justified his coup on Rome for power and his dictatorship by making it seem that it was the need of the time that demanded a strong leader who would come forward and take charge of Italy and drive it out of the clutches of unemployment, corruption, inflation and communism. They both had a knack for violence from the very start as is evident through the sentence, “...I became more and more enthusiastic about everything that was in any way connected with war or military affairs.” (*Mein Kampf* 19), Hitler had always been fascinated with the idea of war and this grew into his urge to start one when he became the dictator of Germany while Mussolini enjoyed violence from a young age, “I was often beaten but I enjoyed it.” (*My Autobiography* 6).

Their id and super-ego overlapped in such a way that that they both truly believed that they were the chosen ones who had to save their people and lead their nations to glory. Since Hitler wrote his autobiography before he became a dictator there are a lot of unanswered questions about his violent actions leading to the World War II but Mussolini had already been a dictator for six years when he wrote his autobiography and still did not mention the violence he had caused in Europe. In both the books the autobiographical element is limited to the time Hitler and Mussolini develop their political ideologies after that they have simply used their autobiographies as a propaganda to preach their party’s philosophies and justify their heinous crimes.

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