CHAPTER ONE: ‘I have searched for myself’: Defining Identity in Society

No great work has ever been based on hatred or contempt. The true creator always reconciles peoples through some part of his heart and life ... An artist cannot refuse reality, because he must give it a higher meaning. How can one justify reality by ignoring it, and how to transfigure it if one accepts to be subservient to it?

Albert Camus

Discourses on identity

In this chapter I analyse range of the theoretical postulations on identity. The field of this dissertation is a challenging one, encompassing the autobiographical subject and the intricacies by which identities have come to be seen as constructions in the latter part of the twentieth century. This is markedly different from how identity was perceived in the Western world in earlier ages, owing to extensive recent interrogation of the concept of ‘identity’. This concept and its myriad forms (‘selfhood’, `individual subject’, ‘identity formation’, ‘identification’) have received considerable attention in the last two decades, particularly from academics in the fields of Literary Criticism, Sociology, Psychology, Psychoanalysis and Political
Science. Taking Stuart Hall’s reading of identity (Hall: 1996, 2-3) as central, ‘identity’ will be appraised in this section not as an essence, but ‘as a strategic and positional’ phenomenon. In Hall’s view, identity operates ‘under erasure’ in the interval between reversal and emergence, an idea which cannot be thought of as unmediated by other discourses than culture. ‘Identification’, on the other hand, indicates the construction of identity through recognition of a common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation. In contrast with the ‘naturalism’ of this definition, the discursive approach sees identity-formation as a construction, a process never completed - always ‘in process’. It is not determined in the sense that it can always be ‘won’ or ‘lost’, sustained or abandoned. Though not without its determinate conditions of existence, including the material and symbolic resources required to sustain it, identification in this sense is in the end conditional, lodged in contingency; even when secured, it does not obliterate difference. In this sense, it is, then, possible to view ‘identity’ as contested terrain.

The idea of identity as process is part of a growing debate in which little agreement has begun to emerge as to what `identity' is. However, there is general agreement that in Europe the preoccupation with `identity/identification/selfhood' begins in the post-medieval period, particularly with Protestantism, and thence spreads to the Enlightenment period. Raymond Williams sees `individuality' as related to the break-up of the feudal system:
The emergence of notions of individuality in the modern sense can be related to the break-up of the medieval social, economic and religious order. In the general movement against feudalism there was a new stress on a man's personal existence over and above his place or function in a rigid hierarchical society. There was a related stress, in Protestantism, on man's direct and individual relation to God, as opposed to this relation mediated by the Church. But it was not until the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that this new mode of analysis, in logic mathematics, postulated the individual as the substantial entity (cf. Leibniz’s ‘monads’), from which other categories were derived. The political thought of the Enlightenment mainly followed this model. Argument began from individuals, who had initial and primary and laws and forms of society were derived from them: by submission, as in Hobbes; by contract or consent, or by the new version of natural law, as in liberal thought. In classical economics, trade was described in a model which postulated separate individuals who [possessed property and] decided, at some starting point, to enter into economic or commercial relations. In utilitarian ethics, separate individuals calculated the consequences of this or that action which they might undertake. (Williams, 1976: 135-6)

In terms of the arts it will be observed that as early as the fourteenth-century in Italy, a small coterie of an emerging class of the newly-rich foreswore the Church, colonised leisure time, re-discovered classic Greek and Roman literature and art, and through this process engendered what has come to be known as the Renaissance period. This was an age of expanding trade that made various European centres accessible to one another; an age where rising crop yields eradicated famine and ushered in an expansion of outlook. The Italian perception spread to these other centres of Europe because it was so innovative in breaking up the often constricting relationships of ‘God-man’ and ‘state-individual’. In other words, it freed individuals who wanted a life not dictated by the Church or imposed from above by state functionaries. One cannot negotiate this field without also looking at the seminal intervention of the French philosopher Rene Descartes (1596-1650). As Hall intimates (1992, 282), Descartes ‘settled accounts with God by making him the Prime Mover of all creation: thereafter he explained the rest of the material world entirely
in mechanical and mathematical terms’. This culminated in ‘the Cartesian subject’, in which the conception of the rational, cogitative and conscious subject was placed at the centre of knowledge.

Sociological conceptual shifts, however, challenged the ‘subject’ as conceived by Descartes. Hall cogently suggests that the notion of the ‘sociological subject’ raises serious doubts about the centred, unified ‘subject endowed with the capacities of reason, consciousness and action’:

The notion of the sociological subject reflected the growing complexity of the modern world and the awareness that this inner core of the subject was not autonomous and self-sufficient, but was formed in relation to ‘significant others’, who mediated to the subject the values, meanings and symbols - the culture - of the worlds he/she inhabited. G.H. Mead and C.H. Cooley, and other symbolic interactionists are the key figures in sociology who elaborated this ‘interactive’ conception of identity and the self. According to this view, which has become the classical sociological conception of the issue, identity is formed in the ‘interaction’ between self and society. The subject still has an inner core or essence that is ‘the real me’, but this is formed and modified in the continuous dialogue with the cultural worlds ‘outside’ and the identities which they offer.

Identity, in this sociological conception, bridges the gap between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ - between the personal and the public worlds. The fact that we project ‘ourselves’ into these cultural identities, at the same time internalizing their meanings and values, making them part of us, helps to align our subjective feelings with the objective places we occupy in the social and cultural world. Identity thus stitches (or, to use a current medical metaphor, ‘sutures’) the subject into the structure. It stabilizes both subjects and the cultural worlds they inhabit, making both reciprocally more unified and predictable (1992, 275-6).

The interactive sociological model, however, was not without its problems in the latter part of the twentieth-century. Quite early in critical arts, as modernity was being celebrated by the twentieth century, writers such as T.S. Eliot (‘The Waste Land’; ‘The Love Song of Alfred Prufrock’), Kafka (The Trial), and James Joyce
(Ulysses) problematised conceptions of ‘selfhood’ in their works. The selves in these texts reflect the complexity of modern living, being angst-ridden, alienated and dislocated. Modernism ushered in more problems than it resolved for the identity of individuals, despite the preceding ‘enlightened’ understandings of the self as a rational, cogitative and conscious subject.

When late-modern ideas of the 'subject are scrutinised, they will be seen, ironically, to suffer from the very advances in human thought and progress that Descartes celebrated. According to Hall, the five major ruptures and disjunctures in the history of human knowledge which have forced a re-thinking in how selfhood is constructed are these:

- Traditions of Marxist thinking: one of the conditions of Marxist thinking which has since been re-visited with vigour states that ‘men (sic) make history, but only on the basis of conditions which are not of their own making’;

- Freud's 'discovery' of the unconscious: the theory that our identities, our sexuality, and the structure of our desires are formed on the basis of the psychic and symbolic processes of the unconscious, which function according to a 'logic' very different from Reason, plays havoc with the concept of the knowing and rational subject with a fixed and unified identity - the subject of Descartes' 'I think, therefore I am' ;

- The work associated with the structural linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, who argued that persons are not in any absolute sense the 'authors' of the statements they make to produce meaning expressed in language. Language is social, thus it pre-exists individual humans;

- The work of French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault, who isolates a new kind of power, evolving out of the nineteenth century and coming to full flower at the beginning of this century [i.e., the 20th century]. This he labels disciplinary power, concerned with regulation, surveillance and government of, first, the human species
and secondly the individual and the body. Thus the more collective and organized is the nature of the institutions of late-modernity, the greater the isolation, surveillance and individuation of the individual subject;

- The impact of feminism both as a theoretical critique and as a movement, part of the ‘new social movements’ of the 1960s as a watershed decade of late-modernity, which politicised subjectivity, identity and the process of identification as gendered identities became apparent. (1992, 285-91)

While many commentators do not accept the five de-centrings as outlined by Hall, it is difficult to perceive how late-modern subjectivity is to be reflected upon and refracted by the academy if these arguments do not form part of the process by which identity is intellectualised. As with the South African case, for instance, the first theoretical rupture that Marx caused, concerning the making of history is very pertinent, thus affecting the very conceptualisations of identities by the citizens of that country. The subjectivities of South Africans owe much to a reliance on collective memory, too. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), as an example, relied on this collective memory, showing how the desires of individual victims clashed with the ‘logic’ of apartheid. As Njabulo Ndebele reflects on the TRC and collective memory, he writes that: 'Hopefully, it is this reflective capacity, experienced as a shared social consciousness, that will be the lasting legacy of the stories of the TRC.' The same holds for the rupture observed by Ferdinand de Saussure, for language in South Africa has played a major role in the construction of peoples and concomitant identities. And how can we argue with the Foucaultian rupture, for the South African state became obsessed with bodies, their scrutiny, their surveillance, capture and ultimate dis-memberment (as on its killing farms such as Vlatplaas). Lastly, the feminist rupture enriched South African subjectivities and repressed social identities, freeing women to increasingly experience and author their multiple selves through self-writing. Feminism exposed, as a political and social question, the issue of how South Africans are formed and produced as gendered subjects by politicising subjectivity, identity and the process of identification.
As the next section will highlight, it is these ruptures in human history that severely underlined the creation and maintenance of a distinct South African state which in turn engendered the multiple and variegated identities among its citizens as revealed in its autobiographical heritage.

The creation of the state of South Africa

For the purposes of a thorough-going discussion of the construction of South African identities, it will be pertinent to discuss the construction of the state of South Africa itself. This must involve attention to the processes of colonialism on the one hand and of nationalism on the other. While scholars do not always see the process of state formation as a necessity in studying contemporary society, it may be misleading to leave out so massive a dislocation of identification in the now post-colonial worlds. Walter Benn Michaels argues that ‘virtually all the events and actions that we study did not happen to us and were not done by us ...When, however, we claim it as ours, we commit ourselves to the ontology of "the Negro", to the identity of "we and "they"...’ (1995, 59). Colonialism caused so many distortions in the history of African societies that these contemporary societies cannot divest themselves of foundations of inequality by attempting to avoid the unpalatable past and thus to study these inequalities is to partake in the evolution of their epistemology.

Colonialism worked primarily on the process of a constructed ‘Other’ to differentiate its victims from ‘Us’, that is, through the process of differentiation and thus identification. More pertinently, the Age of Enlightenment, by categorising, cataloguing and historicising human cultures, assisted in the process of evolutionism by which the mysteries of the world could be explained as those of a guiding Deity through whom the world was not produced as one single, perfect planet, but came about through processes of change. While explorers, voyagers and navigators were prone to be unflattering in their presentation of those on whose shores they landed, and with whom they interacted, their observations enabled a mode of difference, so that the idea of ‘primitive’ societies evolved into a science:
Cultural anthropology, in its worst expressions, became the mirror reflecting "primitive" societies, focusing on their particular positions on the linear chain of civilizations, and, later on, as a service to colonial enterprises, analyzing the conditions for converting those societies.... Such is the context which metaphorizes the names of Africa.... Only from the eighteenth century is there, thanks to the Enlightenment, a "science" of difference: anthropology. It "invents" an idea of Africa. Colonialism will elaborate upon this idea. (V.Y. Mudimbe, 1994: 29-30).

Thus was knowledge deployed for means that created identities of difference. Meanwhile, colonial actions were not in and of themselves acts of charity. As early as 1493 Pope Alexander VI in Inter Coetera stated:

> Among the works well pleasing to the divine majesty and cherished of our heart, this assuredly ranks highest, that in our times especially the Catholic faith and the Christian religion be exalted and everywhere increased and spread, that the health of souls be cared for and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself (Mudimbe, 30).

Papal instigation thus made possible the overthrow of societies: the exploitation of the ‘Other’ had ecclesiastical blessings. As God's representative, the Pope could "give, grant and assign for ever [to European kings] countries and islands [newly] discovered" (Mudimbe, 30). In the then-existing international context, non-Christians had no rights whatsoever. On the basis of Julius II's Universalis Ecclesiae of July 28, 1508, the world was seen as ready to be colonised in the name of religion. For Father Sepulveda, a rigorous Spanish and Aristotelian philosopher, ‘all natives were meant to be subjugated.’ According to him, it was God's explicit purpose, in creating natives, for them to be subjugated and it would be morally wrong to oppose their enslavement and exploitation because such opposition thwarted that purpose (Mudimbe, 33). Spain of course was not the sole and initial coloniser. The Tordesillas Treaty of June 1493 had been devised to divide the world between Portugal and Spain.
From such beginnings, colonialism became both an ecclesiastical and secular enterprise. For several reasons, the full-blown colonisation of Africa did not begin until late in the nineteenth century. What had been the only areas under occupation, Algeria in the north and South Africa in the south, were not then seen as fundamental to the Scramble that would soon ensue. One scholar, Mahmood Mamdani, locates the fundamental shift in this position to the resolution of the American Civil War, which had repercussions for Africa few could have anticipated:

The moment of the Scramble was a meeting point of several interrelated developments, both internal and external. The end of slavery in the Western Hemisphere underlined the practical need for organizing a new regime of compulsions, except this time within newly acquired African possessions. From being a humanitarian impulse, the movement to abolish the slave trade gained practical immediacy in the aftermath of the American Civil War. A direct effect of the war - which rerouted the supply of southern cotton to the north - was an acute shortage of cotton for textile production elsewhere, the "cotton famine" as it came to be known. To address the dilemma this vital shortage posed for its leading industry, the British Cotton Growing Association was formed in 1902. By 1904, the cotton question had become sufficiently important to be included in the king's speech. This changing context helped swing important sections of manufacturing opinion against slavery in favour of colonization, so that Africans who yesterday were transported to the New World could now stay at home - in both instances to produce cotton for "the Satanic mills." (1996, 37)

The colony that later became South Africa had originally come about when the Chartered East Indies Company decided to have a suitable refreshment station at the Cape of Good Hope en route to the East Indies. The scene for a Dutch settlement at the Cape was set by several voyagers on their way to the East Indies. Vernon February (1991, 15) observes that the first voyager was Cornelis de Houtman, who set sail for the East Indies, via the Cape, in 1595. He was back in 1597. He found the scenery beautiful, the flowers lovely and the vegetation memorable. Other references to the Cape were made around 1649 by Janssen and
Proot, who were aboard the Haarlem when she was shipwrecked at the Cape in 1647. The original need for a piece of land for refreshments - a kostgrondje - turned by 1657 into the need for a colony when the first Dutch settlers became 'freeburghers'. Other nationalities involved in this colonial enterprise were German and French. Under the stewardship of governor Simon van der Stel, then in the colony itself, the Chamber XVII decided to send French Huguenots, including uytgeweekenen piedmontoisen of dalluyden onse gellofsverwanten (exiled Piedmontese and valley people, our spiritual kin), to the Cape. At the Cape at least, the French were given a taste of the policy of assimilation. That is, the sort of assimilation the French Huguenots underwent was remarkably similar to that which later French later adopted in their colonies: complete absorption of the subject peoples. As refugees they had spent some time in Holland and were not ignorant of the Dutch language. The LeFebres had lived in Middleburg, Holland, since 1514, the Malherbes at Dordecht since 1618, the du Toits, Jouberts and Malans in Leiden since 1605, 1645 and 1625 respectively. The process of identification, which was started by Jan Van Riebeeck as the man assigned the task of setting up the first refreshment station in 1652, as well as many other accounts of a constructed difference of the 'Other', is apparent among the French and German colonialists when they arrived at the Cape. Vernon February notes that there was hardly any difference in their perceptions of the Khoikhoi:
The Dutch involvement with the Cape is well documented. We have many accounts of the early Dutch attitudes towards the KhoiKhoin, whom they derisively called the ‘Hottentots’. The most important accounts are by Frank van der Does, Joris van Spilbergen, van Warwijck, Paulus van Caerden and several others. Many of the accounts are documented by Isaac Commelin’s *Begin ende Voortgangh van de Oost-Indische Compangnie* published in 1646. The general picture concurs with that of the Germans and the French at the Cape. The emphasis is on the horrible physical appearance of these ‘savages’, their disgusting eating habits, their ‘ugly speech’, which was remarkable for the ‘click sounds’. Borrowing lavishly from one another, one observer after the other adds a horrible picture of the original inhabitants of South Africa. Their accounts would find resonance in present-day apartheid South Africa. The language of the Khoikhoi is depicted repeatedly as *clockende als calcoensche hanen* (clucking like turkeys). (1991, 8)

This description of the language of the Khoikhoi firmly attests to the de Saussurean rupture on selfhood and difference. According to de Saussure, language is social and pre-exists our humanity. Thus to describe the Khoi language in these appalling terms implies that even at that time racist language was not unknown to the explorers and the would-be settlers. It was a material aspect of everyday discourse from within their own societies. Also of significance is how February moves between two positions on the Khoikhoi - either as ‘the original inhabitants of the Cape’ or as ‘the original inhabitants of South Africa’. This is significant because the historiography of the country would have it that the Khoi-San were the original inhabitants of modern South Africa, a point about which apartheid ideology made much, arguing that the black people moved from the Great Lakes regions of Africa and helped in the process of annihilating the Khoi-San. Apartheid thus predicated itself on the myth that both white and black were moving from opposite directions to settle the land, a favourite teaching in schools from 1955. Recent archaeological findings in the country disprove this claim. That February himself cannot disclaim this thesis points to its tenacity. He does note, however, (in Mind your Colour), that the merger of French, German and Dutch to form the Afrikaans language was as a result of assimilation:
The Afrikaans language was an important factor in the genesis of Afrikaner nationalism. Afrikaans history is also rich in *dag-joernale* (diaries). We know from sources that Henrik Bibault’s *cri de coeur* in the streets of Stellenbosch, ‘Ik ben Afrikaander’, in 1705, was more than an act of disobedience. For the first time, the word ‘Afrikaander’ was used to mean ‘white’. (1981, 5)

One constant in the Dutch settlement of the Cape (and later the hinterland which came to be designated as South Africa), and especially in the meeting of the Westerner and non-Westerner, is the concept of freedom. It is present in the thinking of both Khoikhoin and Dutch. In fact, the Khoikhoin were quick to complain about the increasing encroachment of Dutchmen on their land (February, 39). When the Cape was annexed by the British in 1806, matters of freedom became the clarion cry for the next two centuries (and survive even after the first free elections of 1994, if one believes the Afrikaner Weerstandbeweging, led by Eugene Terreblanche, and the Freedom Front, led by General Constand Viljoen). The ‘intrusion’ of the London Missionary Society, among other missionary societies, in the nineteenth-century made for constestations around slavery and its eventual abolition (1834). It is instructive to note that this very intrusion enabled the missionaries to construct their own identity as ‘British’ and ‘English’. Careful comment on missionary influence and importance in this construction is given by Catherine Hall and Paul Gilroy.¹² Settlers depended on slaves - Khoikhoin, Malay, Griqua - and efforts to ban slavery made for rumblings among the ‘free burghers’. With these rumblings went the constant border wars in the Eastern Cape between settlers and Xhosas, together with the seeming oppression of the Dutch descendants by the Cape Colony’s British authorities. These, as is well known, gave rise to the Great Trek of 1836, an event around which myths were woven to portray it as an act of freedom-seeking Afrikaners. In the hinterland the Boer republics of Transvaal and the Orange Free State were founded, and while this may be seen as a testament to a tenacious belief in freedom, it is prudent to note that:
The fact that the slaves were only freed in 1834 (in the Dutch colony of Surinam they were freed as late as 1863!), was of no consequence to this definition of freedom. Later on...this concept of vryheid (freedom/liberation) would find its reflection in the Anglo-Boer Wars (1880-1 and 1899-1902), referred to by the Afrikaners as the Wars of Liberation (vryheidsoorloes). (February, 51)

South African colonialism meant that religious and cultural differences were emphasised and propagated. Major changes in the African communities' lives centred on Christianity. While "social Darwinism" operated for those Africans who had converted to the Christian faith, the more unfortunate natives who had lacked the wherewithal to prosper economically had to endure the misery of labour in the mines. The converts worked with the missionaries in the realisation that 'Christianity went along with new forms of agricultural production for the market, a transformed ideology towards accumulation, and a readiness to accept the education being proffered by the missionary' (Shula Marks: 1986, 46). Especially in Natal Province, missionary stations were flourishing centres. A prosperous African yeomanry was apparent:

To take but a couple of examples: The Reverend Daniel Msimang, one of the early followers of the Reverend Alison, had two houses on eighty-nine acres at Edendale and large blocks of shares in the syndicate from Edendale that had bought up land at Driefontein and Kleinfontein in the 1860s. His movable property included 2 ploughs, 2 wagons, 36 oxen, 260 goats, and 20 cows. His son, Joel, born in Edendale in 1854, was also a wealthy man. Although he lost 700 head of cattle during the rinderpest epidemic...he was nonetheless able to apply for permission to purchase two farms in 1916. (Marks, 46)

It is observable here that even the naming of places marks them, sites them, as colonial terrain (Edendale, Driefontien, Kleinfontein). Both English and Afrikaans systematically eradicated original place names, and by the same process acculturated the native inhabitants. Marks observes that the mid-Victorian ‘code words’ of progress and improvement were a battle cry rooted in material reality for the
prosperous peasantry and what the petty bourgeoisie derived from this materiality in such cities as Kimberley and Johannesburg. It was out of the mid-Victorian vision of a "progressive world order," based on the virtues of free labour, secure property rights linked to a free market in land and individual tenure, equality before the law, and some notion of "no taxation without representation", that African Christians in the nineteenth century constructed their world (Marks, 47-48). In this manner, they could not de-link their identification from that of the colonizers, and came to view themselves as South Africans (this would have major implications for the coming century in which a nascent middle class of Africans began to agitate for representation, equality and political rights).

Into this ‘settled’ and enchanted world of prosperous farmers and gentry was introduced the Land Act, no.27 of 1913. Just as Africans began to enthuse about “civilization” and the faith displayed in the mid-Victorian vision, both imperialists and Cape liberals retreated from it. As Marks (57) observes, the demands of monopoly capital, first in the diamond fields of Kimberley and then in the gold fields of the Witwatersrand, for vast quantities of unskilled, cheap labour, and the speed with which that labour had to be identified, conquered, and coerced, left little room in the long run for an enfranchised black peasantry and artisan class. Late nineteenth-century imperialist expansion, ‘Anglo-Saxon race pride’, notions of efficiency, and the rise of Afrikaner nationalism, worked together to undercut the ambitions of an African elite. Unlike earlier settler farmers, who sought to flush out land and labour from peasant communities through an ongoing and endless series of so-called Kaffir wars, the demand of mining capital was for self-reproducing peasant communities (reserves), which would at the same time supply them with migrant labour in ongoing cycles. The point about the South African land law of 1913 is not just that peasant communities were confined to 7.13 percent of the land area - an allocation doubled by the Native Trust and Land Act of 1936 - but that there was a repeated effort to create and hold reserves in land which was held in customary possession. The Natives Land Act of 1913 was an occasion for a wave of forced removals of Africans from ‘white land,’ graphically described at the time by the writer Sol Plaatje. Through such acts, the political identity of black South Africans was disrupted and an ethnic identity encoded by the restrictions to ‘communal lands’, forerunners of the ‘homelands’. Black citizens were of South Africa but at an enforced diminished level.
These acts created a huge marginal peasantry with little option but to become a captive labour force. Complex pass laws were enacted that simultaneously prohibited blacks from moving about the country to get the best jobs on the best available terms in a free market and branded those without employment as vagrants. For those with employment, there was the Masters and Servants Act, which made it a criminal offence to break a labour contract, and a panoply of labour legislation that prohibited blacks from doing skilled work in most workplaces. For those caught up in it, cheap labour was a costly affair. Legally entitled to be in an urban area for only as long as they were employed, hundreds were daily sent to jail by commissioners' courts for staying longer than seventy-two hours without the requisite permission or for failing to produce their passbooks on demand. An estimated 17.5 million black people were prosecuted under the pass laws between 1916 and 1981 (Mamdani: 143-4; 227-8).

It must be noted that the hapless South African elites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries - yeomen, the petty bourgeoisie - who saw their fortunes disappear under a cloud of mysticism and rapaciousness, unleashed the desire to consolidate on a class basis. But this nascent class was too inconsequential as far as size and influence were concerned. As Tom Nairn puts it in his article on nationalism entitled ‘The Modern Janus’, elites on the periphery of power ‘had to contest the concrete form in which progress had taken them by the throat, even as they set out to progress by themselves’. To defend and expand their opportunities they had in turn to mobilize their own society and consciously create a ‘militant inter-class community rendered strongly (if mystically) aware of its own separate identity vis-a-vis the outside forces of domination’ (as qtd in Marks, 68). The formation of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) in January of 1912 in Bloemfontein was just this form of reaction, with John Dube as its first president. He was educated in Inanda and Amanzimtoti Theological School (later Adams College) before accompanying the missionary W.C. Wilcox to the United States in 1887, where for five years he worked his way through Oberlin College. After a brief spell back in Natal, he returned to the United States between 1896 - 1899 for further training and to collect money from American philanthropists for a Zulu industrial school along the lines of the famous Tuskegee Institute established by Booker T. Washington in
Alabama (Marks, 43-4). What this points to is the amount of acculturation Dube would undergo, and in the process inscribe himself as a South African nationalist.

The formation of the SANNC was a direct result of the creation of the Union of South Africa after the internecine war between the British and Afrikaner communities. Rising Afrikaner nationalism confirmed suspicions long held by black South Africans that the form of appeasement arrived at would be at their expense, as the Land Act demonstrated. The mollifying British authority only added to the agony of the blacks. What the Africans keenly felt, at that time, was more bluntly expressed in 1910 by Jules Harmand, namely the whites’ an overweening sense of superiority:

> It is necessary, then, to accept as a principle and point of departure the fact that there is a hierarchy of races and civilizations, and that we belong to the superior race and civilization, still recognizing that, while superiority confers rights, it imposes strict obligations in return. The basic legitimation of conquest over native peoples is the conviction of our superiority, not merely mechanical, economic, and military superiority, but our moral superiority. Our dignity rests on that quality, and it underlies our right to direct the rest of humanity. Material power is nothing but a means to an end. (as qtd by Edward W. Said: 1993, 17)

As Mamdani notes, Smuts was equally smug in his 1929 Rhodes Memorial Lectures at Oxford, seeing Africans as mere children:

> The African, Smuts reminded his British audience, is a special human “type” with “some wonderful characteristics,” which he went on to celebrate: “It has largely remained a child type, with a child psychology and outlook. A child-like human cannot be a bad human, for are we not in spiritual matters bidden to be like unto little children? Perhaps as a direct result of this temperament the African is the only happy human I have come across”. Even if the racism in the language is blinding, we should be wary of dismissing Smuts as some South African oddity. Smuts spoke from within an honourable Western tradition. Had not Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* mythologized ‘Africa proper’ as “the land of childhood”? (Mamdani, 4)
I believe that these two extracts sufficiently show how, at the turn of the century, the kind of racist perspective shown by early settlers in South Africa was still germane. Viewed from a different perspective in the twenty-first century, the rise of African nationalism might be seen as uncouth in the face of such crude racism. Yet it is well to remind ourselves, as Michael Herzfeld (1997, 171) succinctly puts it, that ‘we cannot afford to be sanctimonious when we meet in others substantial traces of the ideological histories of which we have tried to cleanse ourselves’. In a sense, the rise of African nationalism at the beginning of the twentieth-century was a result of feeling a diminution of political identity; denied any form of identity and identification, it was impossible for black South Africans to know themselves as cultural and political beings, since even their cultures were being re-written and distorted. Colonialism wrought a country out of disparate communities, European and African. Two different cultural forces were working through the communities, fostering a process of acculturation and assimilation. Twentieth-century South Africa would come to see contestations of identity to a degree that was unique in the annals of humanity.

Thus the idea of individuals constructing their selves, writing themselves into being through autobiographical writings, holds a particular appeal in the South African context. Self-writing becomes a way of, initially, protest, then a record of disproving state engendered lies (especially in prison literature), then historical documentation of lives dislocated by apartheid and a search for meaning. The texts attest to the search for political, philosophical and social answers, engaging in communal identification. In some cases, there seems to be a need for reassurance. However tenuous the autobiographical form might seem as literature, these texts do emerge as literary. Jane Watts notes:

The use of personal history as an illustration of the troubles of an entire community is what transforms these autobiographies and autobiographical fragments into literature. It is here that the writer universalises (not in a romantic but in a socialist sense) his experience, where the ‘I’ of the memoir is transmuted into the universal ‘I’ of group identity; or even, as D.J. Enright suggests in his memoirs, where ‘I’ bears the sense of ‘eye’. (1989, 125)
It with this observation in mind that I turn to chapter two and outline the origins and spread of autobiographical writings. This will help in our understanding of the self against the fragmentary nature of the modern South African state and personhood.