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# Book Review. 2017. Mandela's Dark Years: A Political Theory of Dreaming

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Book Review: *Mandela's Dark Years: A Political Theory of Dreaming*.  
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Sharon Sliwinski. 2016. *Mandela's Dark Years: A Political Theory of Dreaming*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 45 pp.

Nelson Mandela's life was not only defined by his fight against systemic oppression, but his life was also devoted to advancing the dignity of his people and the promotion of racial harmony in post-apartheid South Africa. This made Mandela one of the extraordinary human beings of our modern era. While his extraordinary life continues to attract scholarly/popular works, the attention on his years as a political prisoner appears to be disappearing from the scholarly landscape. This is why Sharon Sliwinski's new book: *Mandela's Dark Years: A Political Theory of Dreaming*, is relevant and timely in our attempt to better understand Mandela's life in totality.

Sliwinski's book is generally well-written with huge doses of political theory intermixed with in-depth conceptualization of dreaming or dream-life. Although short, the book has largely succeeded in examining the subject matter in six sections or chapters. Chapter one sets the tone for the book as the author recounts her reading of Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, and the struggles he faced as a political prisoner on the Robben Island. What triggered the idea for the book, as the author narrates, was the section called "The Dark Years" in Mandela's autobiography. Like other prisoners, especially the prisoners of conscience, emotional/psychological hardships can be as tormenting as physical pain/suffering. The urge to survive and gain freedom could be described as the ultimate goal/dream of a prisoner. As the author notes, Mandela recounted the recurrent dreams or nightmares he had in his autobiography. But the key question of interest is: Why should Mandela's dream matter beyond the ordinary conception of dreams? Finding an answer to this question appears to be the fundamental objective of Sliwinski's book. In the words of Sliwinski, "Mandela's nightmare seemed just as dramatic and important as his famous speech from the Rivonia Trial in which he named the apartheid's injustice and defined the ideal" (a democratic and free society) for which he was prepared to die (p.4). What then is a dream? And how significant are dreams?

The author examines these questions in chapter two and subsequent chapters. Drawing on many scholarly works on dreams, the author did a great job by integrating the ideas of what I will describe as dream scholars for the analysis. For example, the author echoes Sigmund Freud's conceptualization of dreams as not only a distinct species of thinking, but dreams dramatize an idea and construct a situation out of thought that have been transmitted into images (p.5). From the ordinary viewpoint, a dream is considered as an "experience that takes place on an unconscious plane, usually under the cover of sleep" (p.27). Advancing these ideas with reference to Mandela's dream-life, the author reminds readers that a dream-life is not a documentary display of events, but a "symbolic account of the dreamer's lived experience" (p.7). The author provides three interpretations of this idea with reference to Mandela. First, the author argues that Mandela's dream-thinking created a sense of alienation as a result of his prolonged imprisonment. Second, although Mandela was not physically free, he still had the freedom to experience what Sliwinski describes as a wander in an empty and uninhabited world

of dreams. Third, Mandela's dream-life, as the author observes, "testified to the experience of being ostracized from the larger political community of humanity" (p.7). The chapter's discussion of enlarged thought or mentality in reference to Mandela in the post-apartheid era is novel. It is clear that these discussions fall within the broader debates on the relevance of dream-life/psychoanalysis and the question of rationality. Sliwinski has actually addressed this very issue with reference to Mandela's dreams. According to her, Mandela's dream-life represents a good case of a political thinker who has shown that the "most potent and transformative forms of political thought" do not necessarily depend on rationality. But in dark or extremely difficult times, another form of thinking (dream-thinking) is needed to survive (p.13).

The author builds on these theoretical ideas of dream-life and Mandela's nightmares in chapters three, four, and five. Discussion of issues such as dream-work as civil defense, the distinction between dream-work and dream-thoughts as well as other aspects of dream-life and its relation to Mandela were examined (pp.17-25). Like other chapters, the fourth chapter takes readers into deeper echelons of complex conceptual discourse on dream-life and Mandela. The author's critical analysis of dreaming as a dialogue with oneself and the retelling of a dream as a form of communication with another person is quite revealing. Chapter five extends the book's central arguments on dreams with reference to Mandela's nightmares. As the author notes, Mandela's dream-life was one of the channels he used to exercise his sense of freedom (p.37). Chapter six concludes the theoretically "heavy dose" analyses with the author making a case for the importance of dream-life as an alternative thought-landscape or safe orbit worth exploring, especially in dark times (pp.43-44).

As the preceding review has shown, Sliwinski's book is an excellent/enjoyable piece. However, the book has a major shortcoming worth noting. It is apparent that the framework through which Mandela was analyzed in the book was largely through the European or Western-focused lens. Mandela was indeed a global political/cultural icon, but he was also a proud African who grew up with African ideas, values, and viewpoints on freedom and dreams that could also be interpreted from an African-centered perspective. Unfortunately, the author did not discuss any of these, let alone draw on any African scholar or writer on dreams in her analysis of Mandela's dream-life. Notwithstanding, the book is still a valuable addition to the literature on dream-life and Mandela's life.

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