

‘Asserting the right to be’ : Postcolonial African Writing and the Discourse of Human Rights

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I teach at a Suburban college in Mumbai affiliated to the SNDT Women’s university. Ours is an undergraduate home science institution that caters exclusively to women students, many of whom are first generation college learners. We offer no literature component. Apart from teaching basic English Communication Skills, I am also required to teach two foundation courses in order to fulfill mandatory workload requirements - these are ‘Environmental Studies’ and ‘Current Concerns and Issues related to Women’. This is not an uncommon practice for English teachers today, given the fact that there are hardly a handful of colleges in Mumbai which offer B.A degree programs in English literature.

Though I was initially disappointed that I would not be engaged with the teaching of literary texts, I soon realized that this was a unique opportunity to develop inter-disciplinary pedagogical approaches for undergraduate classroom teaching. This is particularly applicable to the ‘Current Concerns’ foundation course, which is offered to SY B.Sc. students and is unitized into three main modules : Human rights, developmental issues and types of conflicts- causes and resolutions . The recommended reading list of the SNDT Women’s university for these modules is mainly derived from Western liberal traditions - right from the Magna Carter to the treaty of Westphalia, the French charter for equality and liberty, the declaration of American independence up to the 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights . This almost seems to suggest that the Euro-centre has had a history which has been inherently liberal and tolerant , and therefore should serve as a benchmark for discussions of human rights in other parts of the world.

My area of interest is postcolonial African writing in English, and contexts of production therein. The very roots of postcolonial theorizing is predicated on the critique of Eurocentric conceptual frameworks as a given truth, and as a student of postcolonial fictions, one can argue that the experience of imperialism has itself been one long night of the violation of human rights.

In the course of my reading of postcolonial African writing, I have developed great respect for the sustained ethical commitment of African writers and intellectuals who tirelessly emphasise upon the need to interweave artistic intent with social and political engagement. In his acceptance speech of the Fonlon –Nichols Award associated with human rights activism (1996), Kenyan writer- activist Ngugi wa Thiong’o reflects with pride on the commitment of his contemporaries, who consciously and critically interrogate what he refers to as a neo-colonial unequal social order.

If you take African and Black literature as a whole, it is the one body of 20th century literature that can be truly associated with questions of the right to be; with the economic and political environment around the right to be; and with the quality of that being. African writers raised their voices against slavery and colonialism, and today they continue in that noble task, but this time against Africa-run postcolonial regimes. (338)

Ngugi asserts that the “first right of every human being is of course, the right to be, because without being alive in the first instance, we cannot even dream about everything.” He adds that in postcolonial circumstances, “so many people do not have the right to be - those who are denied eco/political rights are denied their fundamental right to be” (337).

Returning to my concern of using the narrative as an extension of social commentary, I wish to draw out possible conceptual linkages for an undergraduate class, between human rights writing from the African continent, and current issues within an Indian context ranging from the Narmada valley to Nandigram, as well as more localized problems such as the suppression of the freedom of expression, growing urban inequalities, and intra-state migrations, all which have led to an extremely volatile situation in the city of Mumbai today.

In order to do so, we must first address the question. -What constitutes the genre of human rights writing? According to Barbara Harlow¹, the 30 articles outlined in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed by the general assembly of the UN in Dec. 1948, “translate the standard literary paradigm of individual versus society, and the narrative practices of employment and closure, by mapping an identification of the individual within a specifically international construction of rights and responsibilities” Harlow goes on to suggest that human rights narratives as a genre can be described as that body which draws the attention of civil society to degrees of violation of basic precepts that underline the United Nation Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR).

Wole Soyinka in *A Climate of Fear* (2005) goes a little further to suggest that there is a ‘basic ethical imperative’, ‘an ethical core’ and a ‘zone of the sacrosanct’ that when breached, ‘draws down a sustained universal response’ (ix). Citing examples of protests of violations globally, from Bosnia to Rwanda, and to the treatment of post 9/11 prisoners by the USA, Soyinka is of the positive belief that this genre of writing is directed at a shared moral universe – ‘a compass of morality’(xii) which goes beyond geographical and politically imposed boundaries.’

Concomitantly, in order to engage in a ‘human rights ‘reading’ one could take literary themes that are already present in narratives (often in the autobiographical mode) and read them through the lens of human rights violations. If we define ‘violation’ in terms of the opposition of the strong as aggressor, and the weak or the unsuspecting, unprepared and innocent’, then we will automatically take cognizance of the problematic of hierarchies

and ensuing marginalities (Soyinka xiii). Importantly, the student should be trained to evaluate the ability with which a creative writer is able to 'translate abstract ideals into a process that draws attention to the issue of accountability'. While on the one hand, there is a troubling presentation of 'a culture of impunity', on the other hand, we are witness to the incredible courage of the artist who keeps alive the memory of 'shame' while sounding a word of caution for history not to repeat itself.

Homi Bhaba suggests that bibliographies are like maps that "alert us to the junctions and networks through which the traffic of ideas circulate across fields and enable us to find our own paths". In the later section of my paper, I will draw upon 'bibliography' as a method to cite examples of writing by African writers in English which can be linked to the broader ambit of a discourse of determinism, in terms of the struggle to assert human dignity, justice and peaceful co-existence. My list is by no means comprehensive. Also I have not covered writing from South Africa, as this is an area I am not sufficiently familiar with.

II

The first generation of the modern Africa writers who published in the 1950s and early 1960s wrote largely in resistance to the colonial invasions of the African cultural spaces. By mid 1970s however, social and political problems of the newly decolonized African nations severely complicated the relationship between the writer and the nation state. As a consequence of the increasing disassociation between the dissident post-colonial intellectual and the governing elite, creative writing entered a new phase antithetical to the pre-immediate independence mood of affirmation. Writers like Achebe, Soyinka, Awoonor, Armah, Ata Aidoo all begin to function increasingly, as Viney Kripal puts it, as the "conscience pickers" (72) of their societies.

Between 1960 and 1975, there were as many as thirty military coups and infamous megalomaniac rulers like Idi Amin of Uganda, Mobute Seseseke of Zaire, and 'Emperor' Jean Bedel Bokassa of the Central African Republic, who were tragically propped by Western vested interests. Josaphat Kubayanda categorises the emerging body of voices of dissent against authoritarian state power as the 'anti-dictatorial literature of post-independence Africa' (1990:5). The "fear of the midnight knock," arbitrary detentions, disappearance, torture as a rule rather than the exception" (Soyinka 3 – 4) become central motifs of 'the literature of megalomania'.

The imprisonment of writers has led to an entire sub-genre of prison writing. We have, for instance, Ngugi's *Detained: A Prison Diary*, Wahome Mutalhi's *Three days on the Cross* (1991), Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died*, Ken Saro Wiwa's novel with a prison setting, *Lemona's Tales* (1960) as well as the posthumously published *A Month and A Day: A Detention Diary* (1995).

A prolific writer of works of fiction, short stories and political essays, Saro Wiwa paid the price for organized protests against the activities of the Anglo-Dutch oil company *Shell* in the Niger Delta. He was hanged in 1995 along with eight other fellow Ogoni activists. Saro Wiwa describes the plight of the small Ogoni ethnic minority in the Niger Delta as the plight of ‘domestic colonization’ in *A Month and a Day*. He repeatedly pointed out that hardly 1.5% of the oil revenues actually found their way back to the Ogonis, most of the revenue having been squandered by corrupt leaders. He also voiced concern over the gradual degradation of aquatic life and agrarian swamp marshlands, and the consequences on the means of livelihood of the Ogoni. Describing the nature of Saro-Wiwo’s craft, Garuba comments, he had the ability to take “literature into the streets,” and “the streets into literature,” and this, according to Garuba, was his ultimate triumph against those who sought to silence him (cited in Okome 26-27).

While fellow Nigerian Soyinka deeply mourns the unjust execution of Ken Saro Wiwa, he suggests that international attention could be garnered to protest against Saro Wiwa’s execution, mainly because of his involvement with the cause of ecological preservation which has today become a global agenda. The world has largely remained indifferent to the large number African writers who have been subject to censorship, imprisonment, exile and even death (Soyinka 114).

Malawian poet Jack Mapange’s *Gathering Seaweed: African Prison Writing* (2002) is an important collection of voices of dissidents across the continent imprisoned for views ‘which were at variance with those in power. Mapange, who had himself been incarcerated for four years by Kamuzu Banda, describes the voices in this anthology as a ‘defiant recasting of Africa’s history through the eyes of some of its finest hostages’ (xvii). The struggle to write becomes a determined act of ‘exemplary courage’ on the part of dissidents who ‘refuse to be erased from memory; and made invisible by the autocratic regimes that imprison them (xiv).

Ngugi wa Thiong’s literary career has been a lifelong sustained attempt to protest against the nexus between authoritarian control in Kenya and international capitalism. Ngugi advocates an activism that goes beyond the mere literary expression of dissent. The ‘Titular hero’ of his fifth novel *Matigari* (1989) is an embodiment of the militant insurgency left over from the unnamed nation’s struggle for independence. *Matigari* initially emerges from the forest and buries his gun. In his nationwide quest for truth and social justice, he is accompanied by an orphan, a prostitute and a striking worker. Along the way, he is unable to convert a student, a teacher and a priest to his cause and realizes that the enemy cannot be defeated by words alone (Wright 61), Ngugi’s most recent novel *Wizard and the Crow* (2006) is set in the fictional republic of Aburua, under a despotic and paranoid leader referred to as ‘The Ruler’ surrounded by sycophantic ministers, and obsessed with the construction of a heaven-scraping tower called ‘Marching to Heaven’. *Wizard*

and the Crow takes cognizance of growing urban discontents in terms of social malaise, degradation and political instability.

One of the most versatile writers from the continent today is Nurrudin Farah who has spent the larger part of his life in exile from Somalia. Farah's 'Dictatorship Trilogy' of *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1979), *Sardines* (1981), and *Close Sesame* (1992) critiques the oppressive and totalitarian military regime of General Siyad Baree. His 1992 novel *Gifts* is written against the context of International Aid sent to the famine struck horn of Africa. Farah explores the complexities of the donor-recipient relationship, suggesting that this relationship is sustained by the West in order to prolong the relationship of dependency on the part of Somalia. In the context of micro-nationalism and ethnocentric violence, Farah's sixth novel *Maps* is perhaps one of the most complex and difficult of contemporary African novels. Set during the 1977 between Ethiopia and Somalia, over the disputed territory of Ogden, Farah uses the relationship of the orphaned Somali child Askar, with his Ethiopian surrogate mother Misra, to explore the problematics of ethnicity viz. postcolonial nation identity. Farah's voice serves as a reminder to those who are engaged in migration theorizing of the need to provide space for the voices of asylum seekers, deportees and refugees.

In recent years, women writers have taken up themes such as child abuse and incest (*Gwendolen* by Emecheta 1990), and marital rape (*Changes* by Ama Ata Aidoo 1991) as well as the forgotten role of women in war zones. Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins* (2002) deals with the aftermath of the bitter and long war for liberation in former Southern Rhodesia. Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel *The Book of Not* (2006), published after a gap of eighteen years after the publication of her first novel *Nervous Conditions*, can be read in terms of a 'revised' war novel. Women in Africa today are confronted with newer calamities, triggered by the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS. This writing takes completely new forms such as memory books produced mostly by dying mothers for their children. An online document published by the Human Rights Watch in December 2003 describes HIV/Aids related human rights abuses against women and girls in Africa. It points out that the crisis brought about by the epidemic can be linked to gender related issues such as the lack of sexual autonomy, pressures of poverty among young women resulting in prostitution, abusive domestic violence, rape as a weapon of war, and lack of adequate medical treatment.

III

While this list of thematic preoccupations is in no way comprehensive, it does allow for discussion of basic propositions that govern the quality of human existence (Soyinka xii). More importantly, it draws attention to the question - how and why should 'Art survive in a climate of Fear'? What is the power of fear? Soyinka links the imposition of fear with the loss of a sense of freedom, which in turn leads to a loss of self-apprehension

and reduction in self-esteem/loss of inner-dignity (8). This “loss of dignity” can be described in terms of the exercise of the power of the individual over another or that of a totalitarian state over the populace”. It is the ‘entitlement to dignity’ which ought to be enshrined among the first of our fundamental rights as humans.

Urban Indian college students actively engage with discourses of a new global order interconnected by the super information highway and multiple methods of sophisticated information dissemination. Yet, let us not allow our students to forget, as Larson reminds us, the painful possibilities of a parallel world of “bookless societies, readerless societies, authorless societies.’

Human rights narratives as a genre, serve as a constant reminder of our own responsibility towards sustaining the democratic right to free self expression. By acknowledging the powerful “instrumentality of literature for the transformation of culture”, we can perhaps in some small measure contribute, to quote Ngugi, to a “a world that measures human progress in terms of the quality of human life.”

I conclude with an appeal by Chinua Achebe in his speech ‘Africa is People’ at the World Bank in June 1998. Achebe cites the Bantu declaration *umntu ngumuntu agabantu* (a human is human because of other humans), and then goes on to remind us that : “our humanity is contingent on the humanity of our fellows. No person or group can be human alone. We rise above the animal together, or not at all. If we learned this even later in the day, we would have taken a millennium step forward” (cited in Larson 149).

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ii Cited from the e course description of a course that Prof Harlow offered in 'Human rights and Literary Narratives' at University of Texas at Austin, in 2005.