

## Writing in the Time of Mass Murder

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### Abstract

Unbearable scenes of cruelty and human suffering challenge the tendency of a section of academics to overlook the reality of everyday life and to remain detached from the wider world that they are supposed to serve intellectually. The recent episode of prolonged genocidal killings of Palestinians by Israeli forces has brought this question again to the fore. Given the ongoing human tragedy in Gaza, in this essay I seek to advance the ethos of writerly commitment to promoting equity and justice, drawing especially on the works of Edward Said and Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

### Keywords

Academic isolationism, genocide and mass murder, direct and indirect victims of oppression, the Palestine question, Edward Said, Ngugi wa Thiong'o

### Introduction: Direct and Indirect Victims of Tragic Events

A few years before my birth in what is now Bangladesh, its people witnessed a nine-month long war that, according to one estimate, cost lives of 269,000 people (*The Times of India*). I have heard and read about violence during the 1947 British-orchestrated Partition of the South Asian subcontinent, as a result of which

[t]welve million people were displaced.... Nearly one million died. Some 75,000 women were raped, kidnapped, abducted, forcibly impregnated by men of the 'other' religion, thousands of families were split apart, homes burnt down and destroyed, villages abandoned. (Butalia 44-45)

Some others regard the above figures as conservative and put the death toll of the bloodletting of the Partition at 2,000,000 (Talbot 420). I read about World Wars I and II which took their tolls of tens of millions of lives. During my lifetime, genocides or mass murders have occurred in Afghanistan, Algeria,

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Bosnia, Cambodia, Chechnya, Iraq, Libya, Kashmir, Kenya, Myanmar, Palestine, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Xinjiang, Yemen, and other places. All such tragic events caused large numbers of preventable deaths and untold human suffering. But the rest of us who witness those massacres from a distance are also affected as indirect victims.

While direct victims of systematic slaughters, carnages, or scorched earth policies get killed or have traumatic stressors, indirect victims – in cases of such prolonged tragic events – gradually become desensitised to violence and subliminally cease to be concerned or empathetic to the pain of those who suffer. Multiple media exposures to pain and suffering of others lead to decreased humane responses and to increased desensitisation. As in a different context, one study suggests: “Because a large segment of our youth are exposed daily to the media’s graphic depictions of violence and horror, they have become desensitized to violence in their everyday lives” (Evans and Butler 8). Similarly, when people watch gruesome scenes of unbearable human suffering on social media and the TV screen, or listen to stories of indescribable devastation and destruction on the radio, they slowly and steadily become less shocked by violence and aggression and more indifferent to the suffering of the direct victims of wars and hostilities. In other words, their moral sense becomes numbed by continuous exposure to the relentless news of death and destruction. As a result, we all lose empathy and humanity to a considerable extent.

Perhaps, this is what WH Auden describes in the following lines of a post-WWII poem titled “The Shield of Achilles” (1952):

A ragged urchin, aimless and alone,  
 Loitered about that vacancy; a bird  
 Flew up to safety from his well-aimed stone:  
 That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third,  
 Were axioms to him, who’d never heard  
 Of any world where promises were kept,  
 Or one could weep because another wept. (Lines 53-59)

According to Michael Hennessy, Auden “sees the victims of collective ideologies” of war in this “ragged urchin” purposelessly lingering in a land that is made artificially infertile (“weed-choked field”) through the preponderance of detrimental forces – all these contribute to the “indifference of collective life” to the sufferings of others (Hennessy 572). In an earlier poem – “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” (1939) – that Auden wrote following the death of the Irish poet and dramatist Yeats and in the run-up to WWII, he talks about the responsibility of writers during the times of war and human suffering. Auden says:

Follow, poet, follow right  
To the bottom of the night,  
With your unconstraining voice  
Still persuade us to rejoice;

With the farming of a verse  
Make a vineyard of the curse,  
Sing of human unsuccess  
In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart  
Let the healing fountain start,  
In the prison of his days  
Teach the free man how to praise. (Lines 54-65)

What Auden perhaps suggests in these lines is that, if poets or writers cannot “prevent or delay the ascendance of the soulless world” dominated by wars, war-mongers, and warriors, they should at least use the pen to vie “with the sword, if not for victory and glory then at least for the last word” (Corley 221). They should record truthfully the events and happenings of war, depict images of war brutality, tell stories of blood, and acknowledge shared experiences of suffering and oppression in order to create a collective awareness among contemporary and future readers. Given this observation, in what follows, I shall broach our shared anxiety of authorship and writerly responsibility and moral obligation at a time when what many call a genocide is taking place in Gaza.

### **Israel’s Latest Genocide against Palestinians**

Israeli colonial land confiscations and demolition orders have dispossessed Palestinians from their homes and sources of water for many decades. Israel has been brutalising and massacring Palestinians militarily, and has been dehumanising, stereotyping, and rendering them non-existent culturally. Especially, “Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are living under an apartheid-like regime” (Zreik and Dakwa 683). The Israeli government has been committing both violent and non-violent, “slow-motion” genocides “against native Palestinians since 1948” (Nijim 6). In October 2023, a group of Palestinians sought to reverse the trend of defending themselves and their land against continuous Israeli onslaughts. This time they attacked Israel.

The Palestinian group Hamas launched a dastardly, short-lived surprise attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 which killed over a thousand Israelis. The attackers kidnapped over two hundred Israelis – some of whom were/are

perhaps sympathetic to the suffering of Palestinians. The blunt truth is that, despite being in possession of sophisticated technology and heavily armed-to-the-teeth military, the Israeli government failed to protect its people on that day. As a modern state, through international law and other measures, Israel could easily seek to bring the perpetrators of the 7 October assault to book. Unfortunately, its government chose not to take the lawful route and refused to live up to its (international) legal and humanitarian obligations. It started committing war crimes in Gaza from that very day. Self-defence, in my understanding of the term, entails defending oneself and others in their own territory. But for a very long time, Israel has been wearing the veneer of self-defence and perpetrating atrocities in the lands of Palestinians. It is perhaps worth mentioning here that, in a speech at Australia's National Press Club in Canberra on 15 November 2023, the UN special rapporteur Francesca Albanese dispelled the Israeli myth of self-defence "against a threat that emanates from the territory [Israel] occupies" (quoted in Hurst).

Partly to divert public attention from its failure to protect its citizens on 7 October, the Israeli government has launched an inhumane campaign of bombing residential blocks, schools, hospitals, masjids (mosques), refugee camps, UN establishments, and other human habitations in Gaza and the West Bank. In this flare-up of violence since 7 October 2023, Israeli forces have demolished much of Gaza and killed (as of 18 December 2023) "more than nineteen thousand four hundred" Palestinians (BBC Radio 4) almost half of whom are children. As I am writing this essay, the death toll continues to climb. Needless to say, according to the Geneva Convention, "no person can be punished for an offense that he or she has not personally committed. Collective punishments and any measures of intimidation are prohibited" (Moore 120). The bombings that Israel has launched in Gaza since 7 October are comparable to those it did during its 1982 invasion of Lebanon. Like the episodes and tales of Israel's 1982 slaughter in Lebanon, those of its mass murder in Gaza will remain in our memory for years.

### **Writers' Responsibilities: Said and wa Thiong'o**

As I have been editing and preparing various manuscripts for this issue of *Asiatic*, Israel's madness and mayhem in Gaza has continued to cast a dark shadow over the global conscience. Some people may have stopped watching news to avoid being exposed to unbearable human conditions. Friends of mine in the US have told me that the mainstream media misrepresentation of Palestinians caused them enormous mental anguish and helplessness, which, in their eyes, has decreased the credulity of information provided by mainstream US media industries. Others

understandably refuse to read or watch extensive, graphic coverage of human sufferings in a far-away land. While direct victims of murderous acts of aggression are face-to-face with the brutal realities of large-scale devastation, avoidance of news coverage to maintain our psychological wellbeing, peace of mind, and tranquillity may not be justified from an ethical perspective. So, what should writers and intellectuals do in times of gargantuan human suffering because of gargantuan greed and wanton acts of gargantuan cruelty?

Palestinian-American public intellectual and professor of comparative literature, the late Edward Said (1935-2003) delivered the 1993 BBC Reith Lectures, focussing on the roles and responsibilities of intellectuals. He argues that, in their calling to “advance the cause of freedom and justice,” intellectuals should not aim to make their “audiences feel good: the whole point is to be embarrassing, contrary, even unpleasant” (Said 12). Many writers and intellectuals are “in the possession of non-material advantages” (Said 5), as they have access to corridors of power and decision making. They are honoured with the privilege of having the ear of politicians and war strategists who are involved in perpetrating aggression towards vulnerable groups. Duties of such influential and privileged (pampered) intellectuals – the educated elites – include exposing the wrongs of those who run the government and send bomber jets, drones, and boots to other places to kill men, women, and children in their homes, hospitals, schools, and refuge centres. If writers and intellectuals steer away from speaking truth to power, they will become complicit in the wrongdoing of state actors.

Given the important and undeniable corrective role of writers and intellectuals in addressing the human condition, Ngugi wa Thiong’o compares them to surgeons, stating: “Writers are surgeons of the heart and souls of a community” (ix). If the writer does not function as the conscience of their society or, what Doris Lessing calls, “as an architect of the soul” (11), they will end up being part of what wa Thiong’o calls “a corpus of state intellectuals” (2 & 102) who act as peddlers of injustice. As shameless opportunists, these writers, journalists, and commentators act as purveyors of misinformation and disinformation and thus provide coverups for oppressors and war mongers. They distort facts and manufacture and “spew out propaganda” in order to “disguise the truth of what [is] occurring in the name of institutional ‘expediency’ or ‘national honour’” (Said 6). Such propaganda campaigns are in turn exploited by unscrupulous politicians and military officers to wreak further havoc on oppressed communities. Conversely, according to Said, morally upright, true intellectuals “cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations” and should “represent all those people and issues who are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug” (Said 11). This does not necessarily mean that an intellectual

should always be “a critic of government policy” but should be in “a state of constant alertness, of a perpetual willingness not to let half-truths or received ideas steer one along” (Said 23).

Physical violence and epistemic violence against vulnerable groups go hand-in-hand and are equally condemnable. The latter is often sugar-coated but is more entrenched and vicious, as it serves to give illegitimate justification to oppressive and discriminatory practices of the former. In the case of the Israel-Palestine crisis, epistemic violence against Palestinians provides excuses to the Israeli government to confiscate Palestinian lands and water resources and to expand unlawful settlements and expel Palestinians from their land.

The role that the media and intelligentsia play in dehumanising practices and in provoking and/or justifying violence is equally or more brutal and has equally horrible or worse consequences than physical aggression. Describing the complicitous web woven between the warmongers and their intellectual allies, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o states:

But the night of the sword and the bullet [is] followed by the morning of the chalk and the blackboard. The physical violence of the battlefield [is] followed by the psychological violence of the classroom. But where the former [is] visibly brutal, the latter [is] visibly gentle. (9)

As the decades-long, dire, and existential predicament of Palestinians is only exacerbated with time, their resolve and unceasing struggles to regain control over their lives become more intense and embedded in their collective psyche. What has been happening in the land of Palestinian people can be compared to the colonial quandary over the colonised that wa Thiong’o describes with reference to similar human conditions: “[T]heir lands [are] confiscated, their people often killed by a civilisation that had wiped out populations and civilisations in America, New Zealand and Australia” (66).

Classical European colonialism unanimously condemned by all is presumed to be over and regarded as a settled and closed matter. But a comparable process of land confiscation, settlement development, persecution, displacement, exploitation, or expulsion and extermination of native peoples has continued with reckless abandon in Palestine and in other places. Given such neo-colonial and neo-imperial politics, practices, and pretences, can writers, intellectuals, and academics escape *la condition humaine* and isolate themselves from the suffering of the wider public? Can we afford to ignore the cries of 4-year-old, left-hand amputated Palestinian boy Omar, who lost his limbs and “35 members of his family, including his mother, father and grandmother” to an Israeli air strike; or, can we turn our ears away from his questions: “Where is mum? Where is grandma? Where did they go?” (Gritten). Hearing Omar’s cries, an intellectual

must not remain, to use Said's words, "closeted" with "no interest in dealing with the world outside the classroom" and must not "write an esoteric and barbaric prose that is meant mainly for academic advancement and not for social change" (Said 70-71). In this regard, Ngugi wa Thiong'o challenges us all – academics – by posing some rhetorical questions:

In the era of imperialism where do we really stand? In a society built on a structure of inequality, where do we stand? Can we remain neutral, cocooned in our libraries and scholarly disciplines, muttering to ourselves: I am only a surgeon; I am a scientist; I am an economist; or I am simply a critic, a teacher, a lecturer? (105)

Answers to these rhetorical questions are obvious and unequivocally in the negative: conscience demands that we confront the facts and accept responsibility; we move out of academic silos and comfort zones and engage in and listen to stories of violence and human rights abuses.

Edward Said alludes to French philosopher Julien Benda (1867-1956) whose definition of intellectuals is that "they are a tiny band of super-gifted and morally endowed philosopher-kings who constitute the conscience of mankind" and cannot be "totally disengaged, other-worldly, ivory-towered thinkers, intensely private and devoted to abstruse, perhaps even occult, subjects" (Said 4-6). Accordingly, writers should take cognisance of the wretchedness of human suffering and take an inner journey which would lead them to concrete moral action. They should work for peace and "turn ... justice into a passion" (wa Thiong'o 106). On this matter, there is a convergence between Islam and the ideas of writers like Said and wa Thiong'o who promote justice. The Qur'an (7: 29, 10:47, and 57:25) states unequivocally that justice is the core and kernel of the Islamic faith and covers all aspects of life. In an earlier essay, with reference to Qur'an 26:227, I have discussed the responsibilities of poets and writers which include defending the wronged and the oppressed and removing injustice (Hasan "African and Islam" 9).

Concerning the question of justice, true intellectuals must transcend national boundaries and shun narrow interests. According to Said, they "exist in a sort of universal space, bound neither by national boundaries nor by ethnic identity" (25). In this respect, Said cites the example of French existentialist philosopher and writer Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-80) "who opposed France in Algeria and Vietnam" (Said 14). Another comparable example is Polish-American religious scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-72) who though a rabbi went against the Jewish state of Israel and raised "his voice in support of Palestinians and against Israeli policies that were prejudicial to Palestinians" (Moore 119). In Israel, as opposed to those with "selective sympathy for Israeli victims, and

selective indifference to Israel’s cruelty and to Palestinians’ pain,” there are others who “have raised their voices against Israeli occupation, oppression and apartheid” (Hasan “A Sign of Hypocrisy” 8). For example, as Donald J Moore quotes the former Israeli soldier Yehuda Shaul saying: “You do not treat Palestinians as equal human beings. It’s like putting all your morality and all your education into a blender. After a minute there is nothing left” (Moore 126). Our quest for justice should transcend spatial boundaries, social dichotomies, class consciousness, ethno-racial and ideological differences, or national interests. Writers and intellectuals should set the tone for promoting justice and preventing injustice, especially through their writing and other scholarly pursuits.

### **Conclusion**

Men, women, and children whose lifeless bodies are found sprawling in conflict zones or those who are seen frantically fleeing cruelty and seeking refuge are not the only victims of tragic events. People in distant places who gradually lose empathy to feel compassion for the physical victims and become desensitised to gruesome events are victims too; they are moral casualties. Direct victims of oppression lose their lives and properties while the indirect ones, their humanity and ability to relate to other human beings. One group is subject to physical death and the other, to spiritual death. In this essay, I have alluded to desperate situations in Gaza; but there are many other places – such as Myanmar and Ukraine – where human beings are going through gruesome experiences. I have argued here that researchers, writers, and intellectuals should not inhabit their academic cocoons and should not remain focussed only on advancing their careers, turning a blind eye to the suffering of victims of injustices. They should rather embrace the moral imperative to be agents of change and seek to transform the desert of oppression into a garden of compassion.

Edward Said and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o are among the scholars who reject the culture of academic isolationism. There are others from various disciplines who strike a similar chord of deep resonance with them and believe that writers and intellectuals should have concern about the spectre of miseries surrounding the human condition. What is important in discussing issues of justice and injustice is to rise above one’s local affiliations and narrow interests – individual, national, political, ideological, religious, and others. In an earlier essay, I have argued that sound “conscience does not perish the moment victims of injustice belong to one or the other group” (Hasan “A Sign of Hypocrisy” 8). In the event of oppression, selective condemnation, selective sympathy, and selective indifference do not help mitigate human suffering.



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