The City, Hyperculturality, and Human Rights in Contemporary African Women’s Writing

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Introduction

During the early years of multiculturalism in Europe and America, there was the need to challenge the moral and cultural arrogance of the West, and culture was effectively used as a tool of resistance against imperialism outside Western countries and in their former colonies.¹ Even in our times, in the twenty-first century, people still take recourse in arguments that assume a monolithic conception of culture. They resort to relativism to explain issues that require an open, dialogic approach. One prominent example is that of the justification made by Jacob Zuma, the South African President, for his marriage to four women: “That’s my culture. It does not take anything from me, from my political beliefs including the belief in the equality of women.”² Implicit in Zuma’s answer is the effort to erect in the African world an impermeable culture that can be grasped as authentic, whole, and unchallengeable by what is largely seen as the whims of Western postmodernity. Given recent South African history, one might be tempted to bring a sympathetic understanding to his defence of his culture. But that would not remove the fact that the argument is fraught with moral flaws, the most obvious of which is that it can foreclose questions about the human rights of certain groups or individuals within a given culture like the one he defends. Susan Moller Okin raises similar moral issues in a provocative book³ The problem with


the phrase ‘my culture’ is that it presumes that cultures are bounded wholes and can be used to justify decisions in intersubjective relationships. It thus thrives on the existence of a dualism that feeds off a perceived essential difference between cultures and peoples. To that effect, Homi Bhabha asked a pertinent question:

Is our only way out of such dualism the espousal of an implacable oppositionality or the invention of an originary counter-myth or racial purity? Must the project of our liberationist aesthetics be forever part of a totalizing Utopian vision of Being and History that seeks to transcend the contradictions and ambivalences that constitute the very structure of human subjectivity and its systems of cultural representation?

I share Bhabha’s concerns. My reading of contemporary African women’s writings suggests that the writers are no longer satisfied with the “liberationist aesthetics” of their literary predecessors and the anti-imperialist rhetoric of most African politicians. Most of the writers have found out in their own bodies and the bodies of their mothers and sisters that the political liberation of Africa from the West did not translate into their own liberation from the traditional and largely oppressive structures of their cultures. They therefore promote the course of introspection, with the goal of calling attention to human rights in Africa. They seek to achieve this goal especially by situating their narratives in the city as a neutral site in which people can enter into ethical relations without the interference of tradition, heritage or other tropes of autochthony. My discussion of the issues just mentioned centres on the works of three contemporary African women writers: the Ugandan Doreen Baingana (Tropical Fish: Stories Out of Entebbe); the Nigerian Lola Shoneyin (The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives); and a further Nigerian, Sefi Atta (Everything Good Will Come). These writers conceive of the city as a place where identities and the rigid moral attitudes of the writers’ ancestors are interrogated by the hyperlinks of encounters with persons of other backgrounds.

My analyses of the selected texts will be based on their treatment of characters. I will seek to show how the interaction of characters and the city exposes new opportunities for an examination of the human rights of all especially the weaker members of society. I will discuss the main characters’ relations to others, on the one hand, and to the city, on the other. A central question that will guide my discussion is: To what degree does the narrative invite thoughts about human rights? In Tropical Fish, Christine Mugisha travels from Entebbe to Los Angeles and realizes the immense freedom open to her as an individual.

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