

A Literary Approach to The Human Rights Discourse: The Case of Zimbabwean Literature

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Abstract

The article explores the interface between human rights and Zimbabwean literature. It discusses the possibility of demystifying the notion of human rights by making human rights discourse accessible to ordinary people through literary works. The argument stems from the realization that human rights discourse is couched in unusual terms and expressions which makes it a privileged discourse from which various individuals are alienated. This is unfortunate in the sense that human rights are universal and they emerge within culturally specific contexts. An understanding of specific literary works is therefore crucial to an understanding of a society's grasp and mediation of human rights issues. Through a re-reading of selected Zimbabwean literary works, the researchers argue for the need to make human rights discourse more accessible through literature. In this endeavor, literary works are seen to play a pivotal role in addressing human rights concerns by familiarizing the reader with those values sections of Zimbabwean society consider valuable and pointing out incidents of human rights abuses. The researchers note that human rights are values that are distinct to all societies and so is art in general. The relationship between the two needs to be explored for a better recognition of the rights of all people.

Key Words: Human Rights; Zimbabwean Literature; Discourse; Culture

Introduction

Human rights and development are inextricably bound up...the ultimate objective of humankind's endeavors is the enhancement of the standard and quality of life of the people in economic, socio-cultural and spiritual terms.(Walter Kamba- Foreword to *The Southern African Human Rights Reader: Towards Creating A Sustainable Culture Of Human Rights*, Windhoek 1998)

Literature is articulate energy, and though people can live for a time without it, they cannot develop without it. (Arnold Kettle- an Undated Inaugural lecture)

Admittedly, the above statements come from two men who belong to very diverse backgrounds- one a law professor and the other a literary critic. But what challenges one's mind is their preoccupation with the topical subject of development, which the former sees as impossible to realize in the absence of human rights and the latter in the absence of literature. The question that crops up is what link exists between literature and human rights? Of the two (human rights and literature), which is the purveyor of the other? Or to be more specific to the objective of this article, what is the role of Zimbabwean literature in the dissemination of human rights consciousness and in what ways does it stimulate development? The thrust of this article is to underscore the oft-neglected critical role that Zimbabwean literature plays or can play in making the individual or groups of individuals aware of the life-sustaining values that humanity strives to uphold.

Existing Perceptions on Human Rights

The notion of human rights has its roots in Western liberal political theory. In brief, this theory holds that the rights of individuals are inseparable from the development of the human being and society (Dawes, 2009). Nevertheless, there exist various perceptions about human rights which are informed by different cultural and ideological factors. It is therefore important to interrogate some of these perceptions of human rights held by the generality of people, especially in the developing world. One cannot help but agree that the observation of human rights is key to the development of any society. Yet it is disturbing to note the pervasive nature of human rights abuses and the general ignorance concerning these rights, how they can be enjoyed and who is responsible for defining them.

At worst human rights advocacy has widely been perceived in the developing world as a blatant excuse for political meddling on sovereign issues by the West. Human rights are seen as having a foreign origin, as new parlance hatched in the imperial project to maintain dominance over the developing world (Mamdani, 1991; Wa Mutua, 2002; Chatterjee, 2004). Wa Mutua (2002, p. 19) explains that although the notion of human rights has a European origin "it is today a civilizing crusade aimed primarily at the Third World." Chatterjee (2004), on the other hand, emphasizes the part played by Non-Governmental Organizations in disseminating the human rights agenda. This agenda is seen as part of an imperialist ploy to spread Western influence over non-Western societies. The universalizing thrust of human rights campaigns is therefore viewed with suspicion as a ploy meant to make the developing world kow-tow to Western hegemony. Human rights are seen as Western imposed values, a fact that can be understood given the uneasy relationship that has always characterized Western dealings with the developing world. That the West, owing to their advanced state of development, have largely

articulated and defined these rights is even viewed with more suspicion. One should of course hasten to point out that the articulation of these rights by no way means the non-existence of such human values in the developing world.

What makes the human rights discourse even more problematic is that it is couched in legalistic terms which place them beyond the scope of the pedestrian men and women who are more often than not taken advantage of. In effect, legal discourse combines archaic English and Latin thereby creating a mystique around the discipline. Resultantly, the discourse becomes an elitist discourse, available to a select few who are then entrusted with representing others in legal circles. Human rights are disseminated in the form of United Nations instruments and other international charters which do not make them immediately appreciated by the downtrodden of the human society. They sound remote, even awkward, like a new outfit that one is asked to try. They are, couched as they are in the formal legal jargon, not readily consumable, let alone digestible, by the target group which is at the mercy of human excesses. Such groups naturally look upwards to the state for protection, when in actual fact their protection should lie in self-awareness of what is right and what is wrong, what is life-sustaining and what is not. This is to say that the best approach is to make communities aware that human rights are values that evolve from their day to day experiences, their sense of justice and aspirations. Thus human rights have to be demystified so that they are readily appreciable by individuals who then can guard against abuse of their rights jealously.

L. Henkin (as cited in Chanda, 1998, p. 71) posits that “human rights are those benefits deemed essential for individual well-being, dignity and fulfillment, and that reflect a common sense of justice, fairness and decency.” This is a most solid point to the fact that human rights are values that inhere within human nature. The need for dignity, personal fulfillment, justice, fairness and decency characterize the basic aspirations of every rational society. Human rights are therefore rights we strive for everyday, whether in the first world or in the third world, rich or poor. They are a dominant theme in proverbs, songs, folklore, poetry, drama and fiction as will be partly demonstrated in the following passages. Chanda (1998, p. 71) adds weight to this by arguing that human rights “inhere in human beings regardless of sex, race, national origin, tribe, marital status, state of economic development, culture, history, geography, religion or social status.” This means that these values we call human rights must not be made to look like they are gifts from the state, but values that evolve from society. The approach to use in their propagation must therefore be from the bottom, where the individual must be made to identify with the life sustaining values from their cultural milieu, and these are abundant in their various art forms. The generality of people should be

disabused of the notions in which they see human rights in legalistic terms, where the state or the United Nations is the custodian of these rights.

A human rights culture should be nourished from the people's cultural values and beliefs. The people must be able to identify, define and safeguard the positive values from their own culture. These form the basis of the values commonly referred to as human rights. Boko and Mothobi (1998, p. 50) have a valid point when they observe that human rights are "not creatures of statutory enactment." They go on to note that statutory instruments "merely recognize human rights." This recognition does not translate to utility. Unless and until human rights are demystified, they will remain abstract. Herein lies the importance of literature in human rights awareness.

The Role of Literature

The question that is central to any discussion of human rights and literature is: how does literature embody human rights and in what ways does it articulate the violations of these rights? It should be noted that literary and cultural artefacts materialise from, and more than often intervene in issues to do with human rights. Dawes (2009, p. 394) illustrates this relationship by drawing attention to the narrative aspect of humanitarian work when he says:

After years spent interacting with human rights and humanitarian fieldworkers, I have come to believe that human rights work is, at its heart, a matter of storytelling. Many of the most recognizable organizations that intervene in humanitarian crises do so in large part by using language instead of food, medicine, or weapons; the most important act of rescue for them is not delivering supplies but asking questions, evaluating answers, and pleading with those of us who observe from a distance. Indeed, for those in need of rescue and care, the hope of being able to tell the story is sometimes the only hope.

Certainly, if human rights advocacy depends on narrative, the part fictional narratives can play in this regard is enormous. Hunt (2008) makes the important argument that the human rights movement was enabled by developments in narrative practices especially the rise of the epistolary novel during the enlightenment period from where modern conceptions of human rights are derived. In particular, the novel is thus seen as "an artistic form that is dependent upon a certain conception of the human (individualistic, autonomous, defined less by status than by valuable interior feelings which, implicitly, all can share)—a conception that is likely also a prerequisite for the modern, liberal conception of (natural, equal, and universal) human rights" (Dawes, 2009, p. 397).

Developments in literary theory, be they feminist, Marxist, poststructuralist or postcolonial, have retained an important tenet of literary criticism; storytelling which is essential to our understanding of individuals and society. Only a few redundant theories, such as Russian formalism, have attempted to divorce literature from day to day issues, albeit with little success. Early literary critics such as Plato and Aristotle foregrounded the importance of literature to human development. This tradition is carried on into the contemporary period where art is considered a human right, protected by Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In fact, human rights are the sum product of human endeavor and hope for a dignified existence. The challenge then is to understand that literature can better crystallize these aspirations so that they become every individual's self-awareness. It can make man understand his relationship not only with other human beings but with his environment. It is this harmony between man and man, and man and his environment that lies at the core of human rights. It is also this harmony that can propel sustainable development. Human rights by definition must entail the conscious effort not only to acknowledge the basic needs of others, but to facilitate easy access to those needs in the interactive process between man and man, and man and his environment. It is essentially in this respect that literature as art looms high as the carrier of those important values called human rights.

Fischer (1963, p. 7), defining art in general, observes that it is a "means of putting man in a state of equilibrium with the surrounding world." Logically, it can be argued that human rights abuses are testimony of the disequilibrium or disharmony within societies, or even the psycho-emotional make up of those who perpetrate those abuses. Literature, used here in a restrictive sense to refer to the concept of fictional imaginative or creative writing, strives to take men and women out of the individual compartment so that they can live other lives; other experiences which otherwise would be beyond their own. Through this process the universal strivings of human beings become clear because we begin to realize that individual needs are human needs which must therefore be extended to everyone. These rights thus become some kind of a human commonwealth. Literature celebrates the noble aspirations of man, as well as exposes his follies.

Useful literature affirms the positive values that lie at the core of human continuity. This is what Zis A. (1977, p. 67) refers to when he says "art constitutes the affirmation of specific fundamental principles of human life." Human rights are indeed fundamental principles of life. The place of art in the development of human society is a subject that has received widespread scholarly attention. However, it is unfortunate that, in a practical sense, this subject has not quite provided the springboard from which the human rights discourse is propagated. This is despite the fact that literature itself is a creative response of man to his realities and

experiences, which reflect his/her finer aspirations. These very “finer aspirations” that lie at the core of art are the very same values that go by the term human rights. Fischer (1963, p. 12) has a succinct point when he argues that art “represents humanity in as far as it corresponds to the ideas and aspirations, the needs and hopes of a particular historical situation.” The thrust of this argument is that the concept of human rights must not sound like some ‘Martian’ phenomenon because these values have always been celebrated in various cultures through art. It follows then that one alternative to teach human rights is through the appreciation of art from various cultures and identifying those humane, life sustaining values carried in such art. This must consequently bring about a metamorphosis in man’s apprehension of the world, in his relationship with other individuals or groups in society. It is a truism that art in any society assumes “the role of illuminating social relationships, of enlightening men in societies becoming opaque, of helping man to recognize and change social reality” (Fischer, 1963, p. 14). The most important issue here is that literature is at the disposal of human beings in their efforts to demystify the ideals that ensure human continuity and development.

The obvious advantage of a literary approach to human rights is in its attempt to shift the human rights discourse from the political and legal terrain where it apparently has always been located. Nevertheless, this is not an attempt to downplay the importance of political and legal implications in the human rights discourse. It is only to emphasize the fact that human rights can be readily understood and observed if nourished in specific cultural environments where individuals can identify with the values. There can be no gainsaying that literature articulates the cultural norms and values of the society it reflects. Thus, if read and taught well, it must enlighten its recipients and readers of the positive values of society. It must disgust them when these core values of human society are denigrated. Literature, therefore, has the potential to activate the readers into wanting to change the world for the better. In the words of Fischer (1963, p. 10) it “must grip the audience not through passive identification but through an appeal to reason which demands action and decision.” Literature is therefore an energizing agent that makes the reader want to live and to live justly. It conscientizes the individual of the noble aspiration of human life, that is the ‘beautiful’ in life, as well as relegates the ‘ugly’ to the deep abys of historical obscurity. It is the ‘beautiful’ in life that in today’s parlance is called human rights.

Rethinking Literature

The lessons a literary approach to human rights teaches us are that we no longer need to be told that certain art forms are obsolete or inferior and that some literatures belong to a literary canon to which ‘third world’ literatures aspire. The

folktales collected by Hodza in *Shona Folk Tales* (1987) embody a unique expression of a people's cherished values and the befitting attack against the negation of these values. The text is not archaic in today's discourse of human rights. Instead, it is bedrock to the new forms in which rights have come to be expressed and experienced in a contemporary and global world. At this point it is worth noting that human rights as they have come to be codified in various instruments today had their origin in specific cultural locations. In light of this, it is imperative to study human rights as they are articulated by cultural art forms.

Hodza's *Shona Folk Tales* (1987) is a reservoir, albeit in written form, of the cultural values and aspirations of pre-colonial Zimbabwe. The folktales' various appreciations might demonstrate the cultural chauvinism that can befall Western critics in their encounter with local art forms. Folktales are usually taken to resemble primitive societies and their now defunct values. Yet a human rights approach to the tales would attest to the evolutionary nature of values in all societies. The tales also provide insight into the rich cultural heritage which has laid the foundation of what have now come to be recognized as 'human rights' in the Zimbabwean constitution. The practice and importance of marriage is retained in the constitution with numerous traditional formulae enshrined in the folktales. "Girls and the Boys Who Turned into Lions" and "The Mischievous Man" reflect the cherished values of traditional society concerning marriage. The stories capture the essence of marriage in Zimbabwean societies, an essence covered under article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) which states that men and women "...have the right to marry and found a family." Another folk tale "The Famine Year" implies that human rights, best translated to attainment of basic rights such as food and shelter, cannot be enjoyed self-interestedly. They are best enjoyed through a mutual recognition and respect of the rights of others. Hushambiri, a character in the story, selfishly indulges in a ritualistic enjoyment of his rights at the expense of his family. During a famine, he enjoys satiation alone while his wife and children hunger at home. Eventually, he is punished. Such experiences and sentiments captured in the literature affirm the need to educate the individual about human rights as well as the need to protect these rights.

Moreover, issues portrayed in local literatures are not considered from an exterior point of view, that is, one which sees the alien or the strange instead of the familiar. Today where human rights have been internationalized, it will be prudent to regard violations to the dignity of individuals in any way, not as local problems, but as global issues. This is what Malcolm X (1968) advocated when he declared that to reduce the Afro-American's predicament in America to a civil rights issue would localize it. Such an approach would make the rest of the world complacent. In

contrast, he defined the 'negro problem' as a human rights issue. What will this lead to with regards to Zimbabwean literature then?

Hove's *Bones* (1990), we have been taught, focuses on the impact of colonialism in Zimbabwe and the ensuing oppression and exploitation of farm workers by whites. It vividly portrays a uniquely Zimbabwean atmosphere in both form and content to the extent that a reader who is not Zimbabwean will find it novel and unfamiliar. A human rights approach to literature challenges this view. It seeks to internationalize the abuses portrayed in the text. There is no abuse highlighted in *Bones* (1990) which is distinctly Zimbabwean. The economic exploitation perpetrated against the farm workers by Manyepo and articulated by Hove was fore-grounded much earlier by other human beings everywhere in the world and articulated famously by Marx and Engels (1947). This is not to trivialize the experiences brought out by Hove, rather it is an attempt at raising them to global awareness as abuses which are not confined to Zimbabwe, but ones that 'speak' an international language common to all humanity.

Barthes (1978, p. 160) views the text as consisting of multiple writings drawn from a range of discourses already in circulation. He asserts that the text should be seen as woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages (what language is not?) antecedent or contemporary, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony. What this entails is that literary texts are not autonomous. They are in constant dialogue with one another. Even experiences, when considered as texts are engaged in an intertextuality of their own. They belong to a structure which is already present. The experiences in *Bones* (1990) which include the humiliation of Chisaga, the physical assault on Marume, the rape of Janifa and the terror, among others, therefore become part of an existing structure of human rights violations. This is why it is easy to make references to a text from another part of the world and draw similarities in the nature of violations. One can think of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (2003) and draw parallels between the abuses she suffers and Janifa's. V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1969) dwells on the issue of belonging and the land as much as *Bones* (1990) does. *Great Expectations* (1997) by Charles Dickens explores the discomfort of capitalist societies. Literature, in other words, collapses physical and spiritual barriers and bonds humanity through shared stories and experiences in a way that constitutions do not.

Perhaps the most striking difference between human rights as expressed through the genres of legalese and literature is with regards to accessibility. Swales (1990, p. 40) regards genres as being "associated with a disreputably formulaic way of constructing (or aiding the construction) of particular texts, a kind of writing or

speaking by members.” Important to note are the assertions that genres are ‘formulaic’ and associated with a membership. This also means that all genres exclude in as much as they have a linguistic membership. However, some genres are accessible to more people than others. Human rights instruments enshrined in the constitutions of states are physically inaccessible and when one finally manages to get hold of them, one has to overcome the formulas. Literature, on the other hand, articulates human rights in the most exciting way: through story-telling. It demystifies human rights. While legalese remains encrypted, literature’s story is a simplified version of articulation. Okot p’ Bitek (1986) designates the artist a ruler. P’ Bitek’s sustained argument is that the artist appeals more to society than the politician and his rhetoric because the artist’s methods of articulation are more exciting and in tune with the people. This is where literature enables development as it creates a conducive atmosphere for communicating values.

Where *Bones* (1990) articulates the aspirations of man through story-telling and anecdotes, legalese, the genre through which human rights are best known, makes use of technical jargon which can be categorized into four. These are specialized words and phrases unique to law; quotidian words having different meanings in law; archaic vocabulary and loan words and phrases from other languages.

Human rights expressed through legalese remain alien to the needs of the reader. In most cases the reader will need the assistance of a specialist so as to comprehend them. In *Bones* (1990) formality gives way to clear communication. Not only does Hove use simple English, he also makes use of the vernacular and images which appeal to a number of Zimbabwean readers. The opacity and imprecision of legalese does not burden the text. In *Bones* (1990), Article 3 of the universal declaration of human rights (1948) which states that: “everyone has the right to life, liberty and the security of person” is rendered through human experience not detached from the day to day life of the reader through Marita’s challenge to Manyepo who aims at the destruction of this right. Where Marita’s son goes away to fight in the bush, Hove expresses the individual’s right to life, liberty and the security of the person. By giving character and form to values and their negation through characterization, Hove makes the concept of human rights life like. The reader identifies with these values as they are embodied and compares his/her experiences with them. Even where the reader fails to identify the statute captured by an anecdote (which is not the goal anyway), s/he identifies the lived experience which the anecdote renders. The writer sets the tone for the affirmation of certain values and the rejection of others. Janifa’s rape by Chisaga is to be deplored not as the abuse by an indigenous patriarch, but as a violation of what we might call the primary marker of identity: being human. Hence it becomes, by definition, a human rights violation. Hove’s style communicates local values more effectively to the Zimbabwean reader while retaining the relevance of human rights issues to any reader.

The primary marker of identity, "human", is the one which makes a discourse on human rights possible. A look at Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) can illuminate the case further. The text has been hailed in many circles as a feminist text. From that perspective one can say it advocates for the recognition of the dignity of women. Feminism has by far made significant achievements in contemporary societies since women have been enlisted into various formerly male-dominated institutions. This, among others, is the philosophy which has been the motivation of *Nervous Conditions* (1988).

The weaknesses of such a gendered approach have been that women have been enlisted as *women* and recognized as such. The human rights discourse in turn sets aside provisions for the recognition of women since men are already covered under 'human' rights. By recognizing that women's rights are human rights one will not see the need for a separate acknowledgment. This is where the notion of primary identity comes in. There is a human before there is a woman and what connects us best is the human. In reading Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988), one recognizes violations of the rights of human beings. When the reader connects with Tambu and her aspirations, s/he does not see a woman striving to get an education and further independence from male supremacy, but another human being pursuing knowledge and freedom. 'Secondary markers of identity' like race, class and gender shift focus from the goal of a human rights recognition to a recognition of 'secondary' identities. A fresh reading of *Nervous Conditions* (1988) will bring out these humane issues and enhance the articulation of a human rights discourse.

Conclusion

Of course there are numerous instances where literature has been used to justify human rights abuses. Postcolonial theory addresses one such area with greater emphasis on how early imperialist narratives by writers such as Joseph Conrad, Rider Haggard and Joyce Cary were used as justification for the violation of human rights in pre-colonial Africa. This strand in the connection between human rights violations and literature is an area of further exploration. Marxist critics note that literary forms are inseparable from the construction of political hegemony. Nevertheless, they still concede that literature provides a powerful challenge to dominant ideologies (Eagleton, 1990). What is important is that all this while literature in Zimbabwe has been a purveyor of the values of societies without being duly acknowledged. An approach which rewards literature for being a purveyor of human rights as experienced by a people is necessary.

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