

Literary Freedom and Human Rights was written for a public meeting held in Edinburgh April 1995, organised by Amnesty International. It was in support of the Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasrin 'notorious' advocate of women's rights. A fatwa had been declared upon her in 1994 by religious leaders in her own country. Time Magazine had quoted her comment that "Koranic teaching still insists that the sun moves around the earth. How can we advance when they teach things like that?" In the same year she was accused of "saying the Islamic holy book, the Koran, should be revised to give women more rights" but Ms Nasrin denied she had said any such thing.

She had travelled to Scotland to take part in the Amnesty event. Also on the platform was Vincent Magombe representing the PEN International Writers in Prison committee. I have misgivings about some of these public meetings; often the reality of life in the United Kingdom is ignored, no reference to the racism faced by thousands of people on a daily basis, nor to the outrageous and shameful treatment of asylum-seekers and refugees once they reach so-called 'safe havens' in Wales, Scotland, England and Northern Ireland.

Shortly before this meeting I had taken part in another in Edinburgh, also organised by Amnesty International. That was in support of Ken Saro-Wiwa then held in detention by the Nigerian authorities. Seven months later the Nigerian authorities murdered him and seven other activists. Could the United Kingdom and the United States of America have exercised sufficient leverage to prevent it happening? It would have been very surprising if the answer to that was 'no'. He was alive when this particular meeting took place and we still retained hopes that he might have survived. By their failure to act appropriately both countries, the UK and the USA, were guilty of collusion in the murder of the great Nigerian writer.

While she was in exile in Sweden Taslima Nasrin continued to speak out and in one lecture delivered in Ireland she discussed the role of the state in relation to the violence perpetrated against women.

Later she was able to return to Bangladesh but then in 1999 she “fled the country for the second time.” It had been made public that \$5000 would be paid “to anyone who killed her.” Around the same period her friend Shamim Sikder, a sculptor and teacher at Dhaka University, had to seek “police protection after Islamic extremists denounced her work and threatened to torture her to death.” No doubt Shamim Sikder is another 'notorious' advocate of women's rights. The murder threats against her followed an exhibition of her sculpture which “featured Bangladeshi women who fought for the country's independence against Pakistan in 1971.” It is essential to recognise her family's place in that liberation struggle, the part played by her brothers, Badsha Alam and Siraj, and the full penalty each was to pay.

When the fatwa was declared originally on Taslima Nasrin those responsible were not being described as 'Islamic extremists', instead they were said to be 'religious leaders'. The mainstream media are typically sensitive to the needs of the British State at any given time. Some 'fatwas' are more important than others and how 'reality' is described is the difference between live and death.

Twenty five years have passed since Taslima Nasrin fled from her home country of Bangladesh. She continues to live in exile, nowadays in India. The point has been made in the past, that no matter the religion the first attack by any fundamentalist is on women.

Literary freedom and Human Rights

(April 1995)

Taslima Nasrin is not safe inside her own country and like countless other human beings has been forced to seek sanctuary abroad. She is now living in exile in Sweden. Only months ago I attended another

meeting here in Edinburgh held on behalf of a writer: Ken Saro-Wiwa, now in detention in his own country of Nigeria. I suggested then how it might occur to some people to wonder what would happen should the Nigerian writer manage to escape and somehow land here in the United Kingdom in search of asylum. Would he get further than passport control? I doubt it. And if he landed at Heathrow Airport probably they would call Securicor or whatever private force is winning the contract these days. They would come and dump him straight into Pentonville Prison. Then, having been refused entry by the British immigration department, he would be returned into the hands of the Nigerian authorities, the very forces he had escaped originally. But maybe not, maybe he would have been found dead in a Pentonville Prison cell, in mysterious circumstances, like so many other black people. Or perhaps because he was a writer his case would be taken up by individuals with a modicum of political or media clout. So he might well have been granted sanctuary at long last, and released onto the streets of Great Britain, maybe to land here in Edinburgh, like Ahmed Sheikh, another asylum seeker. No, better not like Ahmed Shek, he was murdered by racists only about a mile away from this very building.

We should not fool ourselves when we consider the plight of somebody like Saro-Wiwa, or like Taslima Nasrin, our guest this evening. It is within the context of present-day reality that meetings such as this should take place. Unfortunately that context cannot be guaranteed at meetings. Far too often certain myths are allowed to go unchallenged, like the one that says literary freedom and human rights are part and parcel of the British way of life. In this country we are bedevilled by myths and propaganda, and disinformation, and the revision of history. Almost every debate or discussion programme that appears on television or on the radio is premised on that fallacy - to repeat, that literary freedom and human rights are part and parcel of the British way of life. And unfortunately many meetings hosted by well-intentioned bodies cannot break out of that thinking and when

we sit down and listen to people talk we become aware that such is the presumption, here we are in the land of the free! Oh, aye, okay.

But there is so much extraordinary nonsense being peddled via the mainstream media that you sometimes wonder right enough. What the hell is going on! People in high places come out with the most outrageous crap yet it goes unchallenged. We now have a new President of the International Bar Association. No doubt we should feel proud of the fact he is Scottish, only the third president ever chosen from the U.K. in fifty years. I saw him quoted in a recent newspaper article where he said that “the problems in other countries put everything at home in perspective.” Oh yeh, okay, fine. And drawing a lesson from a recent trip he had made to Turkey he concluded with the following comment: “One sees clearly throughout the world that it is lawyers who are the last bastion of liberty.” I beg your pardon? What did that guy just say there? Let me draw a breath.

Communication can be difficult when we meet up with writers and activists from other countries. Some of them suffer the same delusions about life in the United Kingdom. Some who are a bit more realistic still manage to suppose that okay, we might have our problems, but really, in the face of the iniquities being faced in other parts of the world what goes on here does not matter all that much.

Yeh, tell that to a black or Asian family living on a British housing estate.

Unless we content ourselves only with the fate of individual writers suffering oppression, as opposed to each and every individual human being, then it is difficult to see how anything of lasting significance can ever be achieved. Nothing truly worthwhile can happen until the debate is opened up properly, until we face the reality of life in our own country for the black and Asian communities, and in overseas countries the reality of British intervention and British aggression.

Of course there is censorship and of course there is suppression, here in Scotland just as there is in the UK as a whole; there is

distortion, there is disinformation, and it is surprising we still have to keep saying it at Public Meetings such as this, that we are not allowed to take this as given, that we have to spend valuable time stating what should be obvious. We have a variety of government departments and State institutions issuing their daily doses of propaganda, designed to disguise reality, whether historical or actual, and of course we have the media to contend with, aiding and abetting the State at every level, the diverse ways in which they collude toward the manipulation of public discourse.

On BBC Radio Scotland yesterday afternoon (6th April 1995) a forthcoming programme was being advertised and the voice-over referred to a few countries where freedom of speech is suppressed and went on to remark how in this country people have the freedom to 'speak out' - in fact I think that was the name of the radio programme, Speaking Out. It was quite odd though, listening to this guy. As I say, that was yesterday afternoon, while I was taking a break from my work on this paper. Even now, beyond the imposition of the Criminal Justice Bill, there are still many many people who insist on the existence of freedom as a premise of everyday reality in this country and get irritated when you suggest otherwise. Often they refuse to discuss the matter or else they accuse you of nitpicking, of being pedantic, of always complaining, and they ask how you would like to be a writer in Turkey - well, not Turkey, usually they choose a tyranny that is not supported by the British State.

No doubt the radio broadcaster who was referring to the freedom to 'speak out' in just never thinks about what he is saying. There again maybe he believes what he is saying. In that job he will have been university-educated to high level and Chomsky is probably correct, that the most indoctrinated community in society are those who have gone through the higher reaches of the Education System. It seems logical enough, given the ideological nature of the education system, that those who have spent so much of their life subject to it will be the more influenced.

I was invited onto a live-radio programme to discuss a new feature-length documentary film on the life of Noam Chomsky [*Manufacturing Consent*]. Often what happens in live-interview style programmes is that the interviewer will discuss things with you beforehand, giving an outline of the questions, then when the actual programme starts s/he will hit you with something that was never discussed earlier, something they hope will leave you high and dry. I have had first-hand experience of this tactic on a couple of occasions. On this one the opening bolt-from-the-blue question was designed to preempt any blast from myself re the block on freedom of expression. So the first question thrown at me was along the lines of why does Chomsky complain about media suppression all the time when he seems to be appearing everywhere and anywhere saying whatever the hell he likes. And while we are on the subject Mister Kelman, if it comes to it, why do you continually complain about the same thing when here you are sitting in a BBC studio doing a live broadcast and thus have the freedom to say whatever you want!

Only days before this I had been along to the Edinburgh studio doing another BBC radio programme in which I was to read a brief section from my last novel. There were only a limited number of sections I could read because of what media people describe as ‘the swear-word problem’. They use infantile phrases like that to dismiss ‘the problem’, suggesting that people like me are being childish for insisting on using language we know to be offensive to other people. Anyway to give an example of the lack of freedom of expression I explained how it had not been possible to read honestly from the novel. I would have to have censored myself. So, for this current programme I suggested to the interviewer that I read from any page I opened at random in the novel. He conceded that it would be better if I did not do that, ‘swear-words’ were not quite the thing.

It sounds as though I had proved the point. In a sense I had. The trouble is that media people in general deny that the issue is important; some even deny that the suppression of ‘swear-words’ is

suppression. They are surprised when people take the matter seriously and regard them as a bit silly, which is consistent with their use of childish language, downgrading the issue as one unworthy of mature debate.

Of course genuine creativity is by its nature subversive, good art can scarcely be anything other than dissident. It challenges convention, not by intention necessarily, but simply because good art is also the expression of one individual's perception, it cuts through cliché and stereotype; and our society is premised on stereotype. Hierarchies like ours can only exist by taking advantage of that, by exploiting difference.

We should accept that a great many people who genuinely are supportive of Amnesty International have swallowed these myths about freedom, human rights and the British way of life. These people believe that what happens here in Scotland or the United Kingdom as a whole is insignificant in relation to our guest this evening, Taslima Nasrin, who has had her work banned by her government and has been condemned to death by a section of her home community. However, I am arguing that there will never be an end to these brutal assaults on freedom of expression unless we begin from what exists under our nose. I am talking primarily about two things, the absence of freedom in this country, and the reality of racist violation.

Some people become upset when you make these points. When they are not accusing you of living in a fantasy world etc., they accuse you of being unpatriotic. Yes, freedom does exist in this country, if we restrict ourselves to literature. But this is not the rule, it is the exception. It will be argued against me how come I spend time discussing freedom and suppression when here I am able to stand up in public and say whatever I want. In other words we not only can write what we like we also have freedom of speech and so on and so forth. This is that same sort of argument that searches for a particular and makes it a general principle, it seeks out the exception and calls it the rule.

When we talk about rules in regard to literary freedom there is only one; that writers are free to uphold the cultural values of our dominant ruling elite. Once we try to challenge these values then freedom can no longer be taken for granted. It can still exist but it has to be fought for, and it is not a battle that ends with someone else's victory. As in so many spheres of civil life precedents go for nothing, you might think you have won a war but you have not. It is a continuing struggle and one which perhaps must be fought for in every generation, for as long as governments continue to rule as servants of the rich and powerful, whether in Britain or Bangladesh

Now when it comes to human rights we should also be clear about what we are talking about, or what we are not talking about. I quote from Rajani Desai of the Federation of Organisations for Democratic Rights (in a recent edition of *Inqilab*; the journal of the South Asia Solidarity Group):

There are certain basic differences between human rights, civil liberties and democratic rights. Human rights is a term best left to refer to what the United Nations has incorporated in the Charter of Human Rights and to understand the motives within that Charter. It relates to the notion that certain atrocities should be objected to on grounds of humanity.

But if you actually look at its history and practice, it has been associated with the determination of the imperialist countries, or the more advanced countries as they are called, to use the human rights' issue in order to negotiate better terms, or to impose something on third world countries or on one of their own members with whom they may be having some problems.

Desai also says of Civil Liberties that

they are mentioned in the Constitution of India which is actually an 80% replica of the British Act of 1935 for colonial India, which Nehru said at the time was a document for

imposing slavery on the Indian people. But the ‘fundamental rights’ in the Constitution of India are not available to 95% of the Indian people today...

But through these distinctions we can see that the area of democratic rights might be a way of reaching the real crux because “it asserts the rights of the people to struggle against exploitation or oppression.” We are now talking about something extremely urgent and extremely political: the right to self defence, the right to defend yourself under attack. This goes much further and much deeper than the basic pursuance of either civil liberties or human rights. It offers empowerment, self determination.

Desai also argues that “the democratic rights’ movement cannot be a movement of intellectuals only. It has to have for its backbone the working class and the peasantry, employees, women and students - working people generally.”

Now generally it is not the right of oppressed people to defend themselves under attack. This right is typically denied them. Instead it is the duty of powerful elites to defend them. Or to treat them well. Whatever. That duty takes the form of a moral obligation. Yes, and enough said for anybody who ever had a look at the state of Anglo-American moral philosophy and its effect on the world order, either now or historically. No matter what these powerful elites might decide, well, it is their decision; the rest of the world just has to suffer the consequences.

One other obvious point, in line with the argument offered by Rajani Desai: as opposed to the majority of the population, the educated elite are seldom if ever under personal grievous attack at all, they have armies and security forces and government agencies to safeguard them, on top of that they already have most of the trappings of freedom. Apart from securing these trappings their only obligations are moral.

Meanwhile victims of their security never have to worry about morality and ethics, they are too busy finding ways of defending themselves; and defending themselves in the main against the culture that produced the Human Rights Commission. Yes, our culture, the dominant culture of the West.

There is evidence that “the Bangladesh Islamic fundamentalist party, the Jamat-e-Islam, slaughtered thousands of progressive writers, artists and scientists on the eve of Independence back in 1971.” And also, that in tandem with “its current campaign of violence against women and its recent growth in power it has been openly supported by the West via Saudi Arabia.” We can further hazard a guess that many fundamentalist groups did not exist in any real strength prior to the work of agencies like MI6, CIA and their forerunners and counterparts.

So maybe we should face the fact that the tens of hundreds of thousands of people who are under attack in so many countries throughout the world, are under attack by forces overtly or covertly fuelled and supported by the USA and satellite states such as the UK, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey. For this controlling interest it never really matters which brand of tyranny it is; despotic monarchies or brutal totalitarian regimes, religious fanatics - whoever, whatever, it makes no difference, just that the effects of the tyranny will both secure and advance its own wealth and power.

This used to be described as ‘providing a bulwark against communism’. Nowadays and for as long as it is expedient we have moved through the bogey of Arab expansionsim into ‘confronting the Islamic Threat’.

In fact conventional western wisdom would have us believe that Islam and fundamentalism are synonomous, that it is not possible to be both tolerant and Muslim at the same time. Christian, Jewish or Hindu fundamentalists do not seem to count, not even when they are massacring people. When Muslim people are being massacred in

India these days we can look for it being reported in the west under the heading of communal riots.

The danger here is - just as it was, and remains, in the case of Salman Rushdie - that support can be given to Taslima Nasrin blindly; because she is a writer somehow she is seen as *one of us*. If this happens it is at the expense of the victims of racism here in the United Kingdom, it will serve to reinforce the current criminalisation of the wider Muslim community, both at home and abroad wherever it suits the West and causes minimal diplomatic upsets with the oil-producing kingdoms. This blindness will not admit what is happening right on our own doorstep to those who are arriving constantly in this country in search of asylum, and throughout Europe and all the other so-called liberal democracies. So of course we have to support Taslima Nasrin, but not at the expense of domestic reality.