



The End of the Rights of Man in *Sweetness in the Belly*

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Abstract

Gibb's *Sweetness in the Belly* is as an example of brutal and inhumane behaviour of the state apparatus during the political turmoil in the world after Second World War, especially in Africa. The novel presents the pathetic condition of the inhabitants of the colonized nations and the trauma experienced by people from different roots through the presentation of the major character Lily, who ends up in refugee status. Furthermore, Amina and her husband Yusuf, lives their lives with the psychological and physical imparity even long after their heart rendering dehumanized experience. Aziz, the doctor, despite his pleasant character faces premature death as a consequence of brutal act on its citizens by the nation-state. I, therefore, argue that the novel presents a perfect example of ruthless treatment of imperialism, totalitarian rule, and domination by the exercise of repressive state apparatus resulting in the deprivation of the Rights of Man caused by the Decline of the nation states, to compel major character Lily into refugee status, Amina and her husband, Yusuf into psychological and physical imparity, and Dr. Aziz's unnatural tragic death. Before bringing up the arguments to support my claim, it is important to understand the varied meaning of Human Rights and historical timeline of the novel.

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Jack, Donnelly in his book *Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice* defines Human right as the right possessed by an individual as being a human. He further explicates it to be "the rights of man": "literally the rights that one has because one is human"(Donnelly 7). United Nation advocates for human rights in the similar postulation that human rights shall be treated equally without disparity. United Nation advocates for the access to human rights and ensures that the rights are guaranteed despite differences. Moreover, the basic thirty human rights promises a different rights and provisions merely on being

a human, and the 30th basic human rights guarantees all other basic rights as it states that human rights can't be taken away. Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein. So, those are all Universal Declaration of Human Rights listed by United Nations General Assembly.

Since the Rights of Man are proclaimed to be "inalienable," irreducible to and undeductable from other rights or laws, no authority is invoked for their establishment; Man himself is their source as well as their ultimate goal, but Hannah Arendt states that from the beginning, the paradox involved in the declaration of inalienable human rights was that it reckoned with an "abstract" human being who seemed to exist nowhere, so it doesn't go in practice.

The condition of refugees after world wars is in some ways depicted in the ideas of Stephanie DeGooyer et. all in the book *The Right to have Rights* as she opines, "The refugee crisis after World War II revealed that humans can exist in a place called nowhere: they can be displaced from political community -they can be turned into abstractions" (30). Wars have displaced people from their homelands making them stateless for different reasons ranging from poverty, stately dominance, and exclusion from the triumphed territory.

Characters, like Lily, migrate from Morocco to Haraar and to London being refugee and migrant could never experience the Rights which are achieved only by having the membership of a nation.

Nomads, my father called us, though there was no seasonal pattern to our migration. I was born in Yugoslavia, breast-fed in Ukraine, weaned in Corsica, freed from diapers in Sicily and walking by the time we got to the Algarve. Just when I was comfortable speaking French, we'd be off to Spain. Just when I had a new best friend; the world was full of strangers again. Until Africa, life was a series of aborted conversations, attachments severed in the very same moment they began. (Gibb 7)

Lily experiences statelessness since she is a daughter to nomads and entertains no rights the state nominate. She is called farenji wherever she travels. Therefore, according to Arendt Rights to have rights is a paradoxical project because the Universal Declaration is based on abstract conception of the human being, while there is no guarantee of human rights outside the political community, human rights lose their entire signification as soon as an individual loses her political context and the right to have right should be

recognized as a precondition for the protection of every human rights. Likewise, Amina, a dehumanized character of *Sweetness in the Belly*, shares the similar journey where she has to suffer traumatizing experience of being at camp, loosing husband, raped by officers, and is not assimilated in London where she finally seeks refuge. While facing these traumas of life, these characters often loose "hope" and always have the feeling of "homelessness". Hannah Arendt presents the condition of refugees as losing everything they have which is visible in Gibb's Amina and Lilly.

Our Optimism, indeed, is admirable, even if we say so ourselves. The story of our struggle has finally become known. We lost our home, which means the familiarity of daily life. We lost our occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in the world. We lost our language, which means the naturalness of reaction, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expression of feelings. We left our relatives in the Polish ghettos and our best friends have been killed in concentration camps, and that means the rupture of our private lives. (Arendt 110)

Amina and Lily both leave their home and takes refuge in London, They start using English language and celebrate festivals of Christianity. They are forced to leave their loved ones, (Yusuf for Amina and Dr. Aziz for Lily) in the concentration camps resulting into irreparable loss to the characters. Agamben's pronouncement, that we are all refugees and the concentration camp is the dominant paradigm applies to every human and equally to characters in the novel, as it isn't really enough to exercise every rights being only a human. Even the citizens of the country are all not treated equally, so we can easily assume the discrimination faced by refugees.

In the novel, Human Rights seems a Utopian idea for non-citizens as they do not get to practice it, the very project as Hannah Arendt claims is the claim of citizens only. Because as soon as refugees lost their homes they lost their natural rights, inalienable rights and therefore they became right less and lost the right to have rights. The qualification of being human is insufficient to receive rights in nation states. As we can witness the very inhuman activities done against non-citizens by the nation-state,

People dragged from houses and gunned down in the streets in front of their families. Or they lined them up in city squares-yes, even in Harar-and in less time than you can say a prayer, the ground is covered with red.....And those who were merely sent to prison? I had seen reports by Amnesty and Human Rights Watch: nearly one in fifteen Ethiopians was in prison by then, and prisons were notorious

as houses of torture where men were hanged by their testicles and women were raped and sodomized with red-hot rods in order to elicit "confessions." (Gibb 14)

Declaration of Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789): Arendt claims that both 1789 and 1948 codification of human rights are misused by nation states in that they selectively discriminate against non-citizens, those who do not qualify to have rights and provides no rights to asylum seekers and refugees. The condition of refugees losing everything is presented by Arendt which is visible in Gibb's Amina and Lily,

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The humiliation that Arendt felt by losing her dignity cannot be differentiated from what refugees like Lily, Amina, and million others migrants felt. As it happens too often that they knock on closed doors that will never open, they are rejected and left to their own destiny. It seemed that they had forgotten to be human. So it is necessary to help refugees who truly need it, and never forget the horrible experience of war history. Arendt quotes, "We must not forget that we are all human beings." But the treatment regarding refugees are not at all equal rather they have no way round as Arendt clearly mentions their thoughts regarding how they are treated, "If we are saved we feel humiliated, and if we are helped, we feel degraded" (Arendt, *We Refugees* 114).

Hannah Arendt herself was a refugee, born in Germany; she had to face real Nazi's in her life. Luckily she could escape to America, but unluckily that she always had to face the reality of being 'other'. Characters like Lily and Amina could also fly to London but are never accepted as citizens of the nation. As Arendt says, "Being a refugee has nothing to do with what you did but simply with who you are". "Without paper, passport and citizenship you have no human rights to exercise" (Arendt, 268-302).

Refugees not only lose their home, family, and country but also their culture, education, and their dignity, their hopes and their dreams. The concept of 'home' here in the novel is used as the negative counter meaning 'homelessness', according to Arendt. Throughout the story the meaning of home takes on different meanings in different context. As in these lines she

seems to be in the process of adjusting to the concept of home as she always is in search of it,

In this country they called home, I became a nurse and began, fairly early on in my career, to bring my work back to the estate, to administer tetanus shots, treat head lice, sew stitches, and mete out pain-killers and counsel wives on the sofa in my sitting room in my off-hours. I hold my neighbour's children, listen to their stories, reflect in their silence and, in the most serious cases, insist on the hospital, and accompany them there: men with fractures and hernias, women haemorrhaging from botched abortions, even one poor boy that'd lost the tip of his penis while his parents argued about whether or not he should be circumcised. (Gibb 9)

This very idea changes in the novel many times because Lily did not have any home as such wherever she travelled from Morocco to Ethiopia to London, but the feeling she has towards home is very strong, she says, "Home is where you read Quran with your family around you". Without home, the felling of 'hope' was also in crisis, as hope was only means by which the refugees were fighting their battles.

"For all the brutality that is inflicted upon us, we still possess the desire to be polite to strangers. We may have blackened eyes, but we still insist on brushing our hair. We may have had our toes shot off by nine years old, but we still believe in the innocence of children. We may have been raped, repeatedly, by two men in a Kenyan refugee camp, but we still open ourselves to the ones we love. We may have lost everything, but we still insist on being generous and sharing the little that remains. We still have dream." (Gibb 265)

Hannah Arendt in her essay "We refugee" shares that being refugees without any rights was difficult to keep on being hopeful. But Ethiopia is veering toward revolution, and hope of Lily for a future with Aziz is dramatically threatened when the country is thrown into political turmoil and for Amina hope was changing into despair as Amina says, "There are only two feelings left in Ethiopia now: fear and paranoia"(Gibb 14).

Hannah Arendt quotes Aristotle's statement, "Man is political animal", which according to Aristotle is not because we have some biological impulse or instinct that derives us to participate in politics, but because we are possessed of the power of speech and reasoning. It is the reason or speech, not instinct that makes us political. But that concept is no more valid according to Arendt because as soon as political membership or citizenship was brought into practice, humans no more could exercise their natural rights and inalienable rights too. Humans lost the public domain but it is the public life

which allows what rights one can have. As soon as the public life is taken away from them the right to have rights is suspended. For instance let's take the example of Lily; she could not exercise her rights anywhere she goes because she did not have the citizenship of belonging to any nation. By what Aristotle says, Lily should have been able to exercise every right wherever she travelled merely on the basis of being human.

Hannah Arendt also have similar opinion regarding this unit as she critiques to hand over all the power which has been misused as she writes,

The nation-state, incapable of providing a law for those who had lost the protection of a national government, transferred the whole matter to the police. This was the first time the police in Western Europe had received authority to act on its own, to rule directly over people; in one sphere of public life it was no longer an instrument to carry out and enforce the law, but had become a ruling authority independent of government and ministries. (Arendt 287)

It goes without saying that the totalitarian regimes, where the police had risen to the peak of power, were especially eager to consolidate this power through the domination over those who did not had rights, who are refugees, and stateless. The impact of police and their harassment to Yusuf in the refugee camp is irreparable.

Yusuf was arrested by the Kenyan police, handed over to Mengistu's agents and taken by helicopter to Addis, where he was jailed and tortured for years. He had no idea his wife was pregnant with Sitta when he was spirited away. Because she wasn't. This is the secret Amina has kept from him and only recently confided in me. (Gibb 151)

The process of repatriation by police and the impact of rape was growing in Amina's womb. The situation and the country in which Amina lives, is evident through the circumstances she goes through. Yusuf describes Ethiopia as

A field of fire: an infernal blaze leaving a trail of charred bodies and scorched earth. The civil war with Eritrea has continued to worsen, the Tigrayans are waging guerrilla war in the north, the Somalis have invaded the Ogaden again and the Oromo continue to operate underground in their fight for independence. Local insurgencies flare up routinely, and military camps form armed rings around every city. (Gibb 161)

He calls Ethiopia "a field of fiure" which clearly denotes that the situation is beyond normal due to political conflict. The issue of Human right is neglected in the war ridden zones. The individuals are tortured with mere suspicion that they are the members of gorillas. No proof is demanded before punishing the

accused. Yusuf goes through unbearable anguish and Amina is even more victimized not only because of what happened to her in refugee camp, but because of the condition of her husband after they unite in London. "Amina is losing patience. She tells me that the other day a car backfired in the street below and Yusuf hurled himself on the floor and tried to crawl under the sofa. The children had laughed "(Gibb 174). There still persists after-effect in Yusuf of the brutality and inhuman behaviour he had faced in refugee camp.

Likewise, Amina's rape, repeatedly by police officers in a Kenyan refugee camp, which I have discussed briefly above, proves the misuse of power to torture especially non-citizens. The incident of Lily and her friends, in the market, is yet domination in the form of bully done by police force. When these women went to visit market place, they were harassed and bullied by officers. This entails that, instead of providing human rights to the right less, the Universal declaration of human Rights (UDHR) lead to opposite result, the refugees are entirely submitted to total control of the repressive status apparatus and other organs of power of the nation state. For Arendt, it is not the fact that rights belong to man because of his mere birth, but World War II showed that the power of nation states determine who has the right to have rights because the ideal of Universal human rights that being a member of humanity suffices to be protected by human rights, comes down to a situation in which the nation-state determines who is a part of humanity. The number of refugees and stateless people grew massively and they could either be sent to asylum or assimilated, but they did not want any of it, they had wanted to go through the process of neither repatriation nor naturalization, which were the only options left for them. What is unprecedented is not the loss of home, but the impossibility of finding a new one. Suddenly, there was no place on earth where migrants could go, so without home they were without any rights.

According to Arendt, people could not exercise rights because they do not have rights, and the state uses media power to decipher the message that country is prospering. The totalitarian rule stay secured by deceiving people as well as by pleasing the missionaries to continue the authoritarian rule. Haile Selassie, the emperor in the novel, changes his religion to Christianity in order to please the West and rules over Islamite. This event happens in both the history of Ethiopia and novel *Sweetness in the Belly*. Agamben, while dealing with the issue of human rights, bifurcated rights into citizen rights and human rights, citizen rights for state people and human rights for stateless. This is seen by Arendt and Agamben as the loss of the political space, whereas Ranciere claims that in order to be a politics there must be "dissensus" or a break with established order and disruption is dissensus. He regards that consensus has reduced rights of man as mere idea

and handed over to humanitarian organization which is depoliticization. So, he claims that there is need to put the rights back to where it belongs, in the arena of politics, where refugees and stateless can claim over them with the presupposition that they have been dispossessed of the right what they were supposed to have possessed. So dissensus can be one possible solution to the problem seen regarding human rights as Ranciere seems to offer a more pragmatic version of human rights.

If we take the incident of Dr. Aziz's tragic death which Lily was unaware of and could not acknowledge even after she knew the reality can be another example to prove that the decline of the nation state resulted in the end of the rights of man. According to the letter written by Munir, it clearly states the condition of Dr. Aziz years ago when they were together. In the letter he writes that he walked with a crutch because of his injured toes, and Aziz's eyes were injured. They did not work in the prison because of their will but because they were forced to, and the consequences they are led to is what nation is responsible for. Later after many years, Lily came to know he was killed in the prison serving the victims there. Neither Aziz was involved in any violence against the country nor he had committed any crime, but he had to face the consequences because of the decline of the nation state. This was another consequence of being stateless since a growing number of people had to live outside legal protections, and had no right to residence or right to work; they had to live outside the law. They were liable to jail sentences without being convicted of a crime: "Since he was the anomaly for whom the general law did not provide, it was better for him to become an anomaly for which it did provide that of the criminal" (Arendt, *Decline of the nation state* 286). Arendt argues that the best way to see if someone lives outside the law is to ask if their legal position would be improved by committing a crime. They remain an exception, but it is an exception provided for by the law. The stateless criminal is not treated worse than others; he is treated like every other criminal:

The same man who was in jail yesterday because of his mere presence in this world, who had no rights whatever and lived under threat of deportation, or who was dispatched without sentence and without trial to some kind of internment because he had tried to work and made a living, may become almost a full-fledged citizen because of a little theft. Even if he is penniless he can now get a lawyer, complain about his jailers, and he will be listened to respectfully. He is no longer the scum of the earth but important enough to be informed of all the details of the law under which he will be tried. He

has become a respectable person (Arendt, Decline of the nation state 286).

Therefore, the novel *Sweetness in the Belly* by Camila Gibb presents the violation of Human Rights on different characters Lily, Amina, Aziz, Munir, and Yusuf in different situations and other because of the nations' authoritarian rules backed by totalitarianism and imperialism causing the decline of the nation state which results in the end of rights of the characters, especially Lily, leaving her as a refugee among refugees despite her trial to get along with the neighbours and country. She is even discarded from the process of assimilation and integration. On the one hand, she is not accepted and she denies the acceptance in other, she is deprived of human rights which are not guaranteed to her by the nation, regarding her as outsider because she is a refugee.

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