

WRITERS IN OPPOSITION: Orhan Pamuk & Ken Saro-Wiwa



How obedient must the writer be to the state? Should they always mute their criticisms of the state? These questions are vexing... This article looks at two very different examples of the clash between the writer and the state. It touches on the ethnic, religious, moral, political, national and ecological roots of the writers' stance.

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This article looks at two very different examples of the clash between the writer and the state. It touches on the ethnic, religious, moral, political, national and ecological roots of the writers' stance. The question of how obedient the writer must be in their relations with the state, how muted their criticisms of the state must be, is a much vexed one. It certainly goes back to ancient Athens and the decision to offer Socrates a cup of hemlock rather than tolerate his incessant questioning. That is well documented. The answer in ancient Athens was very simple: if you don't like the way we do things here either you must go somewhere else to live or you must die:

Are you so wise as to have forgotten that compared with your mother and father and all the rest of your ancestors your country is something far more precious, more venerable, more sacred, and held in greater honour both among gods and among all reasonable men? Do you not realise that you are even more bound to respect and placate the anger of your country than your father's anger? That if you cannot persuade your country you must do whatever it orders, and patiently submit to any punishment that it imposes...?¹

The experience of Alexander Solzhenitsyn and his clashes with the Soviet regime, and his eventual exile, are also well known. However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellites after 1989, it seemed possible that the most blatant examples of writers clashing with the state would now be avoided.

However, this is not the case: the grounds for these conflicts have simply shifted. Now writers rarely seem to clash with the state over issues of ideology in the way that used to be so common in the old Soviet bloc. Targets for writers have become much more difficult to identify and in general politics, in reaction to globalisation and the power of multinational companies, has become increasingly local. Instead, with globalisation, religious belief has become a growing area of increasing conflict with individual rights. Also, recently writers have clashed with the state over issues of local ecology, animal welfare and over the issue of history. Two such cases are those of Nigerian playwright Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk.

Ken Saro-Wiwa

Ken Saro-Wiwa (Kenule Beeson Saro-Wiwa 1941-95) was a successful businessman, novelist, television producer, political and environmental activist in Nigeria. He was a member of the Ogoni community, an ethnic minority whose homelands in the Niger Delta had been targeted for oil extraction since the 1950s by Shell and BP and by successive Nigerian governments.² He served briefly as Regional Commissioner for Education in the Rivers State Cabinet, but was dismissed in 1973 because of his support for Ogoni autonomy. In the late 1970s he established a number of successful business ventures in retail and real-estate, but then in the 1980s concentrated on writing, journalism and television production. His best known novel, *Sozaboy: A Novel in*

¹ Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates* Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1969, 91.

² A. Rowell, J. Marriott & L. Stockman, *The Next Gulf: London, Washington and Oil Conflict in Nigeria* (London, 2006).

Rotten English, tells the story of naive village boy recruited to the army during the Nigerian civil war (1967-70). His war diaries, *On a Darkling Plain*, documented his experiences during the war, when he served as the Civilian Administrator for the port of Bonny in the Niger Delta. His satirical television series, *Basi & Co.*, is said to have been the most watched soap opera in Africa.



In 1990 Saro-Wiwa founded MOSOP (Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People). As president of MOSOP, Saro-Wiwa led a non-violent campaign against the environmental damage caused by multinational oil companies Shell and BP. Around 400,000 Nigerians took part in protests against Shell and BP. At about the same time in an unpublished article for the Nigerian *Sunday Times*, he wrote an article entitled 'The Coming War in the Niger Delta' in which he predicted that if the military government and the international oil companies did not take notice of the protests of local people and meet their reasonable demands for a larger share of oil profits and measures for the protection of the environment wide-spread violence would result.³

Saro-Wiwa, who urged non-violence in the style of Ghandi and Martin Luther King, helped to write *The Ogoni Bill of Rights*, which set out the movement's demands, including increased autonomy for the Ogoni people, a share of the proceeds of oil extraction and repair of environmental damage to Ogoni lands after more than 37 years of oil extraction. In particular, the bill demanded clean air, land and water.

In 1992, Saro-Wiwa was imprisoned for several months, without trial, by the Nigerian military government. In January 1993, MOSOP organised peaceful protest marches of around 300,000 people - more than half the total Ogoni population - through the four major Ogoni towns. The Nigerian government responded brutally by razing 27 Ogoni villages, killing 2,000 and displacing 80,000 people. This drew international attention and Shell temporarily ceased operations in the Ogoni region. However in June 1993 Saro-Wiwa was arrested again. He was released after a month, but in May 1994, he was again arrested, 'framed' for inciting the murder of four Ogoni elders who were believed to be sympathetic to the military. Saro-Wiwa denied the charge, but was found guilty and sentenced to death by a specially convened tribunal. The trial was widely criticised by human rights organisations. In his closing address to the Tribunal, Saro-Wiwa said:

³ Ike Okonta, 'The Prophecy of Saro-Wiwa', *The Guardian* (11 November 2006), 35.

I repeat that we all stand before history. I and my colleagues are not the only ones on trial. Shell is here on trial and it is as well that it is represented by counsel said to be holding a watching brief. The Company has, indeed, ducked this particular trial, but its day will surely come and the lessons learnt here may prove useful to it for there is no doubt in my mind that the ecological war that the Company has waged in the Delta will be called to question sooner than later and the crimes of that war be duly punished. The crime of the Company's dirty wars against the Ogoni people will also be punished. In my innocence of the false charges I face here, in my utter conviction, I call upon the Ogoni people, the peoples of the Niger delta, and the oppressed ethnic minorities of Nigeria to stand up now and fight fearlessly and peacefully for their rights. History is on their side. God is on their side. For the Holy Quran says in Sura 42, verse 41: 'All those that fight when oppressed incur no guilt, but Allah shall punish the oppressor. Come the day'.

Following the confirmation of the sentence by the Nigerian Ruling Council, Shell called for 'quiet diplomacy in the 11th hour'. But this did not ring true. Shell had ample opportunity to demonstrate its concern over the 17 months between arrest and trial. Their choice was widely seen as 'cosying-up' to the Nigerian government in order to secure profits from oil, rather than condemn an unjust arrest and the execution of non-violent environmental campaigners. Before his execution Saro-Wiwa made a statement which was widely published:

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On 10 November 1995 Saro-Wiwa and eight other MOSOP leaders were hanged in Port Harcourt by the Nigerian military government of General Sani Abacha. This provoked the immediate suspension of Nigeria from the Commonwealth. Greenpeace

International, who feared that further protest by the Ogoni people would be met with escalating violence, issued a statement: 'The blood of Ken Saro-Wiwa will permanently stain the name of Shell.' Thilo Bode, Executive Director of Greenpeace International, said:

His only crime was his success in bringing his cause to international attention. If Shell and the Nigerian military think that the hanging of Saro-Wiwa has removed national and international outrage, they're wrong. Greenpeace today reaffirms its dedication to continue the campaign against environmental destruction by the oil industry.

In 1999, after thirty years in power, the military government handed over power to civilian President Obasanjo. However, he seems to have been unable or unwilling to address the issues of corruption, pollution and exploitation. In 2006 unrest and protest at the activities of the oil companies and the Nigerian government in the Delta region resulted in the kidnapping of several foreign oil workers and the abandonment of all drilling in the Delta region by Shell Oil. Youth militias took over and controlled the creeks and mangrove swamps of the delta, abducted Nigerian oil workers, blew up several oil installations and staged a series of bloody shoot-outs with the Nigerian Army. By the end of 2006, as oil prices surged upwards, global warming and pollution proceeded unchecked and 70% of the Nigerian population, in the run up to national elections, existed on less than \$1 per day, it was clear that violent insurrection and the possibility of succession still gripped the Nigerian Delta region.

In 2011 the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) reported that vast areas of the Nigerian Delta region were unsafe for humans to live in and recommended that 1 billion US\$ be allocated by Shell and BP to clean up the area. However, the companies and the Nigerian government failed to act, until pressure from UNEP eventually forced them to pledge an initial sum of US\$10 million.⁴

Orhan Pamuk

Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk (born 1952) studied journalism and architecture at Istanbul University and graduated in 1977. He started to write in the 1970s, and was resident at Columbia University in New York 1985-88. Based in Istanbul, Pamuk has received wide international attention and several international literary prizes. His books have been translated into more than 24 languages. Pamuk has consistently refused Turkish state honours for his writing. In 2006 he was awarded the Nobel Prize.

Pamuk is best known for the novels *Snow* and *My Name Is Red*, which deal with the clash of rural and urban cultures in Turkey, and with the relationship of Islam and secular nationalism. He has always been an outspoken critic of Turkey's treatment of its minorities and its poor record of human rights. In 2005 he was arrested and put on trial, charged with 'insulting Turkish-ness'. Pamuk was charged with telling a Swiss newspaper in February 2005 that in 1915 '30,000 Kurds and a million Armenians were killed in these lands, and nobody but me dares talk about it'. These are no more than

⁴ G. Uyi-Oja 'Ken Saro-Wiwa the man who took on Shell', *Earthed* (FOE), no 15, Spring 2016, pp.8-9.

statements of historical fact. Indeed the death and expulsion of thousands of Greeks and Jews should be added to the victims of the purge of Turkish identity that took place in the months before the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. However, the Turkish state's line is that events in 1915 have been greatly exaggerated and that these deaths should be classed as war casualties, rather than genocide.



Pamuk had been arrested under Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code, a new 'anti-terror' law that made 'insulting Turkish-ness' an offence. This included any perceived insult to the republic, parliament or any part of the state, but it was clearly used to prevent any mention of Armenian massacres of 1915-17 any attempt to elevate Turkey's Kurdish, Armenian, or Jewish minorities. Under the existing law, journalist Ocar Isik Yurtcu was arrested and sentenced to 15 years in jail for reporting on the new article, pointing out that it classified all mention of oppression and rebellion within Turkey as either propaganda or 'incitement to racial hatred'. The law achieved emblematic status in branding anyone who challenged the state or the military as a traitor. However, the new article of the law broadened the definition of terrorism to an incredible degree and stated that anyone found guilty of 'insulting' the Turkish people, the Republic or the Turkish Grand National Assembly could face a prison sentence ranging from six months to three years.

The new law inevitably made it very difficult for journalists and writers to peacefully express opinions and alternative points of view and offered support to those who wish to slow or stop reform and modernisation in Turkey. The new law allows not only for the punishment of all writers who dare to question the official line on Turkey's history, but also those who want to contribute to the development of its future culture and political life in a way that is not 'approved' by conservatives and ultra-nationalists.

After the charges were made public, a public rally in the town of Bilecik (150 km south of Istanbul) burned Pamuk's books. In the town of Isparta Pamuk's books were ordered to be seized from the local library. It subsequently emerged that none of the local libraries in fact stocked copies of his books and the order was withdrawn. However, at a demonstration in Isparta in early April 2005 local trades unionists tore copies of Pamuk's photographs to pieces. The threat to Pamuk was clear.

His trial opened in December 2005 but was immediately suspended for legal arguments. In January 2006 the Ministry of Justice abandoned the case and ruled that it could not proceed simply because Pamuk had made his comments before the new law was passed.

Pamuk's name is now inextricably linked to the issue of Turkey's commitment to freedom of speech as part of the entry requirement for EU membership. Pamuk could have faced up to three years in jail, but the outcome of the trial could also have affected Turkey's entry into the EU. Pamuk's case had a very high international profile, but there are more than 60 other writers and publishers facing similar charges.

Pamuk's works, often featuring issues of confusion around the loss or redefinition of cultural identity, have often stirred controversy in Turkey. He has insisted that he is part of a liberal intellectual tradition with Islam and within Turkey that does not aspire to forget the past in the rush to westernise and modernise. His insistence is that repression of the past always means that the present and the future are haunted by unresolved, half understood issues.

However, this court case placed conservatives, the military and ultra-nationalists in opposition to a great many liberal 'westernisers', intellectuals who want to see Turkey join the EU, who oppose what they see as a stifling and insular nationalism, believe in greater freedom of expression and who seek to modernise the Turkish state and Turkish society. Those who oppose this point of view fear that entry to the EU will, in spite of the obvious economic advantages, roll back Turkish state power and loosen state control of cultural and historical expression. They are part of what has been called an 'ultra nationalist tsunami', unleashed by Turkey's efforts to join the EU. Kemal Keriņçsik, the prosecution lawyer with links to the ultra-nationalist MHP (Nationalist Action Party) who is currently leading the assault on the writers, has pointed out that the states of the EU are mostly the inheritors of the powers that broke up the huge Ottoman Turkish Empire in 1918-21.

The new anti-terror legislation became the site of an almost farcical confrontation between these opposing parties. In July 2006 the writer Elif Shafak was charged with 'insulting Turkish-ness' and 'denigrating the Turkish state' for remarks made by a fictional character in her novel *The Bastard of Istanbul* - her character used the word 'genocide' when referring to the death of his Armenian ancestors. She was due to go on trial, but at the last minute, and five days before the birth of her first child, the Beyoglu Court of the First Instance in Istanbul dropped all charges against her for lack of evidence.

However, since then, with further death threats made against her and other writers, Shafak is said to be too afraid to leave her home. Her husband is reported as saying that she is so scared she has been unable to breast feed her new child.⁵ After Pamuk's trial, 80 writers were prosecuted under this law. By September 2006 a further 45 were awaiting trial, and in the week when charges against Shafak were dropped, fifteen journalists were arrested under the same law.

However, it would seem that Pamuk and Shafak escaped rather lightly. In January 2007, the Armenian-Turkish writer and editor Hrant Dink, who had also recently been prosecuted under Article 301, was shot three times as he left his office. He died almost immediately. He too was accused of 'insulting Turkey' by referring to the 1915 Turkish massacre of Armenians as 'genocide'. According to the Turkish Committee to Protect Journalists, Dink was the eighteenth journalist to be assassinated in Turkey in less than 15 years. Since then several leading writers have asked for police protection and the

⁵ N. Birch, 'Speaking out in the Shadow of Death', *The Guardian* (7 April 2007), 30.

offices of *Agos*, Dink's newspaper, have been placed under police guard. The writer Baskin Oran, who has a bodyguard, is reported as saying that the threats and legal restrictions on freedom of speech were part of the growing pains of Turkish democracy: 'The road to paradise passes by hell, and we are walking'.

Since then Kemal Kerinçsik, the lawyer who led Pamuk's prosecution has been implicated in what has become known as the Ergenekon case. This is an alleged ultra-nationalist coup conspiracy involving death threats and assassination, including the murder of Hrant Dink. While Turkey's official military and nationalist culture celebrates Turkish-ness, its unofficial literary culture celebrates ethnic and religious diversity. While the motto 'Turkey in all its colours', which was used by the government to cover the Turkish contribution to the autumn 2008 Frankfurt book fair, may seem bland and innocuous to outsiders, those who know the tensions it hides feel it is rather revolutionary and definitely a challenge to the nationalist military rulers.

Turkish President Abdullah Gull has been working on amendments to the law, but his critics say this is merely a cosmetic alteration to help Turkey get into the EU.

Follow Up Work

- How is this topic relevant to the theme of Responsibility?
- Solzhenitsyn once remarked that writers are like an alternative government – particularly threatening to repressive and authoritarian regimes. What do you think?
- What, if any, are your obligations to the state?
- What can the state legitimately require of you as a writer?
- Are there times when it is wiser for a writer to keep quiet, or do you think writers must always speak up?
- What would you sign a petition for?
- What would you actively campaign for?
- What would you consider was sufficient cause for civil disobedience?
- For a writer is it ever a case of 'my country right or wrong'?
- How do you think this applies to writers who are first generation born in Britain or the USA, and who might also have loyalties to the place of their parent's birth?
- Do you think it is a good or bad thing to have a complex national identity?
- Do issues like exploitation, colonialism, pollution and global warming take precedence over a writer's other loyalties? If so why?
- In what ways might having more than one set of loyalties be an advantage or disadvantage for a writer?