

DOI: 10.7596/taksad.v4i3.479

**Shh, Respect Freedom of Speech:
The Reasons Why Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ismail Kadare
Have Not Been Awarded the Nobel Prize¹**

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Abstract

The terrorist attack on the satirical French magazine, Charlie Hebdo, at the beginning of this year, intensified the unremitting debate over the right to freedom of speech and expression, as well as its limitations. Nonetheless, it was almost unanimously agreed that the human right to express personal beliefs, regardless of the fact that they could be in deep disagreement with or even insulting towards the values of certain individuals, groups, or worldviews, should be defended and promoted by the whole human community. It goes without saying that the role of intellectuals and, especially, that of the academia, in promoting tolerance, diversity, and dialogue is essential. However, this does not seem to have been one of the criteria on which the Swedish Academy based its choices, over the past years, for the awarding of the Noble Prize in Literature. Focusing on the literary contributions of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ismail Kadare, two repeated nominees for the Noble Prize, this paper will attempt to shed light on the reasons why these two "heroes" of free speech and representation have not been awarded the prestigious prize.

Keywords: intellectual marginalization, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ismail Kadare, Nobel Prize for Literature, Charlie Hebdo.

¹ This paper was presented in the 2nd English Studies Conference which was held between 8-10 May 2015 in Karabuk University.

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Known for lampooning primarily Islam, but also other religions as well as political figures, Paris-based satirical weekly magazine, Charlie Hebdo seems to have been deemed by many as a symbol of free speech, which, as a concept, is widely considered exclusively western. Therefore, the terrorist attack on Charlie Hebdo, at the beginning of this year, was concluded to be a direct attack on the West and on what it signifies. This is obvious in *Washington Post*'s headline of the time, "Charlie Hebdo stands solidly for free expression. The West must do not less." Written by the editorial board of the newspaper, in this article, it was maintained that "media in democratic nations must also consciously commit themselves to rejecting intimidation by Islamic extremists or any other movement that seeks to stifle free speech through violence" (2015).

Beyond the Islamophobic nuances, the debatable suggestion that freedom of expression is exclusively a western value, the Orientalism-rooted stereotyping of Muslims, and the indirect marginalizing approach to the non-western communities in the First World incorporated in this article, the *Washington Post* editorial succeeds to emphasize the importance of the right to freedom of speech and expression, both on a national and international basis. It also sheds light on the prevalent intellectual and mediatic approach that defends the human right to express personal beliefs, regardless of the fact that they could be in deep disagreement with or even insulting towards the values of certain individuals, groups and communities, or worldviews. It goes without saying that the role of intellectuals and especially that of the academia in promoting freedom of expression is essential. It is mainly through the contribution of intellectuals that the achievement of tolerance-based and diversity-respecting coexistence could be possible. In the article, it is also suggested that freedom of speech should be non-discriminatively defended and promoted, as an essential right of being human in a world that aspires democracy.

However, the defending and promotion of freethinking and freedom of expression under all circumstances without any discrimination, as suggested and presumably implied by the vast majority of massmediatic but also academic informative means of communication in Europe and Overseas, does not seem to apply to the Swedish Academy. The awarding of the Noble Prize in Literature, over the past few years, suggests different selection criteria. This is suggested in their lack of appreciation for Kenyan writer and intellectual Ngugi wa Thiong'o and the Albanian one, Ismail Kadare. The literary contributions of these two repeated nominees for the Noble Prize remain unacknowledged by the Swedish academic community,

although they are widely accepted as ‘heroes’ of freethinking, free speech, and, above all, realistic representation.

The news that Ngugi or Kadare’s respective literary struggles would be finally officially recognized and rewarded by the Nobel Committee has been expected for the past few years. This assumption was supported even by the discussions preceding the announcements of the annual winners of the prestigious prize that pointed to both Ngugi and Kadare as shortlisted candidates. However, this was not the case. In 2013, for instance, the Nobel was awarded to the Canadian writer Alice Munro, as a “master of the contemporary short story,” (Nobel Media AB, 2013) whereas in 2014, it went to Patrick Modiano “for the art of memory with which he has evoked the most ungraspable human destinies and uncovered the life-world of the occupation,” (Nobel Media AB, 2014). Without attempting to undervalue Munro or Modiano’s contributions, the reasons behind the “absence of merit” on Ngugi and Kadare’s behalf remain obviously unrevealed and open to speculation.

Interestingly, as emphasized by *The Huffington Post* article on the occasion, Munro is the 17th Nobel laureate born in Canada, (2013) while Modiano is the 15th French writer to win the Nobel ([Owen, Brown, & Flood](#), 2014). If Ngugi had won the Nobel, he would have been the second colored writer from the whole African continent, after Wole Soyinka, to have his contributions to literature recognized by the most prestigious association in the field. Similarly, if the honor had been awarded to Kadare, he would be the second writer from (Euro/non-European) Balkan, after Bosnian Ivo Andrich, to receive the prize. Geographies have nothing to do with talent and idealism, which are launched as the main criteria on which the Nobel is based and, at the same time, imply pure commitment to free intellectualism as well as its unconditioned but also stylish expression. However, these numbers could be shown as evidence for G. Ch. Spivak’s rightfulness, when she implies the lack of scholarly support for the literary contributions produced by representatives or members of marginalized communities (Spivak, 1993, p. 3-4). This does not mean that any undeserved recognition should be rendered to anyone just because s/he belongs to an othered community, in an attempt to ‘soothe the primitive’ or just to make justice for the robbed dignified existence. Discrimination remains the same even when it is nurtured with good intention. However, the negation of deserved recognition, a tradition rooted in a biased understanding, is similarly unfair.

The recipient of ten Honorary Doctorates, Ngugi wa Thiong’o is a many-sided intellectual (Chandler, 2014). His fictional works shed light on the encounter of his people with British colonialism, the atrocities of British colonization, the struggle for decolonization,

the corruption of independent Kenya and its neo-colonial situation respectively in *The River Between* (1965), *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), *Weep not, Child* (1964), *Petals of Blood* (1977), and *Wizard of the Crow* (2006). Indeed, his fiction is such a loyal reflection of colonial and postcolonial Africa that one realizes how right V. S. Naipaul was when he declared that “facts can be realigned, but fiction never lies,” (Naipaul, 1981, p. 67). Similarly, through his non-fiction, Ngugi managed not solely to open new dimensions in postcolonial studies, but to also bring new insights to contemporary literary studies as a whole, with works such as *Decolonizing the Mind: [The Politics of Language in African Literature](#)* (1986), *Moving the Center: The Struggle for Cultural Freedom* (1993), and *Globalectics: Theory and Politics of Knowing* (2012).

During his literary and intellectual career, Ngugi never gave up idealism or ceased his right to freedom of expression. He represented the chaotic condition of his country, pointing his finger to the responsible ones, and he did not allow the oppressive regime to intimidate him, even though this meant an endangered existence. In “Why Ngugi wa Thiong'o Should Have Won the Nobel Prize for Literature,” an article published in 2010, just after the Nobel Prize was awarded to Mario Vargas Llosa, African scholar Emmanuel Tsegai observes:

Soyinka and Ngugi both lived through colonialism as children, were shaped by the promise of decolonization, protested their subsequent political disillusionment and paid dearly for their writing in prison. Both were deeply committed to public engagement through performances of their plays; both have written movingly about the consequences of their beliefs. But what separates Ngugi from his Nobel predecessor is his brave and polemical decision to write in his first language, Gikuyu (Tsegai, 2010).

Obviously, the article does not demand the honoring of Ngugi with the Nobel just because his childhood passed under the odious colonial rule, neither for being a member of an ill-treated community. On the contrary, the article pinpoints Ngugi's determination to enlighten audiences through loyal representation. Besides his well-known talent, it emphasizes that Ngugi's writing was so effective and so reflective of the truth in his country that the corrupted political elite, frightened by him, attempted to silence the writer. That is, Ngugi was detained without a trial for several months, his loved ones were violated, and he went in exile to escape his planned assassination, (Ngugi, 1989, p. 204) as related in details in *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*.

However, the continuous assaults do not seem to have intimidated Ngugi; on the contrary he made his voice heard by publishing his most daring and controversial works, such

as *Devil on the Cross* (1982) and *Matigari* (1986), after his strenuously-obtained release and decision to write in the mother tongue. Deliberately accepting the risk of more limited profit from his literary work on which he financially depended, (Gikandi, 2000, p. 3) Ngugi decided to abandon English and to write in the language of his people (Ngugi, 2006, xiv). Ideally, this was his method of appealing to them directly. The English translations of Ngugi's works, in deep disagreement with the imposed Western ideology as they are, continue to be published for the international audience. These two facts clearly reflect Ngugi's idealism that went beyond both economic and professional benefits. Even after this bold decision, Ngugi's gripping prose remains widely read and appreciated both in his country, where his books were often banned, and beyond national borders.

Similarly, considered the single Albanian writer that succeeded to indirectly criticize the Enver Hoxha communist rule and to actually survive, Ismail Kadare's attitude is not different from Ngugi's. His fiction, such as *The General of the Dead Army* (1963), *The Siege* (1970), *The Three-Arched Bridge* (1978), *Palace of Dreams* (1981), and *The Pyramid* (1992), which were all written under the communist dictatorship, deviated from the recommended socialist realism path, as a modest attempt of opposing the regime. Through the literary escape in history and employed parallelism, these works represented the suffering of a people under an oppressive regime and reflected Albania's isolated and impoverished situation to the international audience. Kadare's fiction also functioned as subtle propaganda for the Albanian awakening against the oppressive rule. His attitude is mostly clear in one of his many banned works, the poem, "Pashallaret e Kuq" (The Red Pashas):

Shtetet s'prishen kurre nga catite
 Shume shume mund te pikojne diku
 Nga themelet ata prishen
 Ketij ligji,
 Shteti socialist i bindet gjithshtu. (Kadare & Shehu, 2014)
 Countries are never brought down from the roof
 At most they could drip somewhere
 They are brought down from their foundations
 To this law
 The socialist state, as well, obeys.³

³ My translation from the original.

As these lines illustrate, although he lived and wrote in a country where the suppression of dissent was the law, Kadare strived to remain loyal to intellectual idealism. Under a dehumanizing regime, he attempted to employ his human rights of freedom to speech, which remains an important element of his work even after the collapse of communism. In the post-communist era and after his self-imposed exile to Paris, Kadare's work focused on the reestablishment of the Albanian identity, the country's 'reconciliation' with the outer world as it coped with the inherited underdevelopment, and the problems the three nations of Albanian majority faced in the Balkan Peninsula. In studies such as *Albanian Spring: The Anatomy of Tyranny* (1995), *Three Elegies for Kosovo* (2004), *The European Identity of Albanians* (2006), *The Dispute: On the Relationship of Albania with Itself* (2010), Kadare deals with the most polemical issues of his country and the region, maintaining a perspective quite 'disturbing' for the new system.

In "Why Ismail Kadare Should Win the 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature," an article evocative of that of E. Tsegai on Ngugi, Nina Sabolik attempts to demonstrate the reasons why Kadare deserves the honor. Sabolik claims that she is supposed to hate Kadare. Besides the hostile feelings her Macedonian people and the Albanians have nurtured towards each other, quite often expressed in concrete armed clashes, Kadare has openly refused to sign the petition to recognize Macedonia under its constitutional name. Additionally, to many, Kadare's defiance towards Hoxha's totalitarian regime was supposedly not strong enough. However, Sabolik (2013) maintains that she wants to nominate the Albanian writer for the Nobel Prize in Literature, although she is aware of all his 'sins' and privileges during the dictatorial regime in Albania. In spite of these, the Macedonian scholar admits that Kadare's life under the communist regime was not easy. As previously noted, several of his books were banned, while his family and he remained under frequent surveillance, fearing for their life (Kadare H, 2011, p. 420). Sabolik contends that Kadare's novels, such as *Palace of Dreams* and *The Siege*, were eloquent narratives that demonstrated the real faces of the communist systems of Yugoslavia and Albania, these satellite rules of Stalinist Soviet Union. To her, these works nurtured the dream of freedom, condemned isolation, and rejected the practice of denationalization. Despite his subtle opposition and "all his freethinking, Kadare not only survived but flourished in a country where writers were routinely exiled, imprisoned, or executed for much smaller ideological offenses" (Sabolik, 2013). Obviously, this was not a to-be-ignored achievement, on Kadare's behalf.

Sabolik also underlines another important issue regarding the works of Kadare after the fall of communism. Providing the example of one of his most recent novels, *Aksidenti*

The Accident (2010), the Macedonian scholar maintains that Kadare's struggle against submissive regimes continues. To her, this novel describes the corruptive influence of distorted Western values in post-communist southeastern Europe. According to Sabolik, in *The Accident*, the obvious antagonist is the ideological assault the 'swallowing' of Western values had on Albania. In the name of freedom, the unquestionable acceptance has demolished the moral core of post-communist Albania (Sabolik, 2013). In Sabolik's perception, as the critical review of James Wood in *The New Yorker* shows, it is precisely this attitude that has impeded Kadare from receiving the deserved honor of the Nobel Prize for Literature. Wood concluded that *The Accident* was "an allegory about the lures and imprisonments of the new post-Communist tyranny, liberty" (Wood, 2010). Kadare, like Ngugi in his work written after Kenyan independence, has dared to shed doubt on the magnitude and magnificence of the foundation stone of the West: its concept of freedom, as interpreted and imposed in the non-Western rest of the world. Moreover, similarly to Ngugi, he has openly expressed his delusion in his work.

From a different viewpoint, Kadare has been criticized by Stephen Suleyman Shwartz (1998) for not attacking the former communist rule in his country directly and harshly enough. In a way, this could be concluded to be a critique to his attempt to survive and continue his career as a writer, in totalitarian Albania. Now, Kadare is, apparently, condemned for openly denouncing the problems of post-communism deeply rooted in the corrupted implementation of the new system. Maintaining that this shows that Wood's critique is reflective of an ideological clash rather than of the absence of literary merit on Kadare's behalf, Sabolik contends that it is precisely this fact to point out Kadare's idealism as a writer deserving the honor of the Nobel Prize. She claims:

Finally, to get back to the Nobel prizes, those Oscars of the literary world, what does idealism or a "work of literature in an ideal direction" mean today? Idealists are not people who live in an ivory tower, looking out through their narrow window into a palm-tree-embroidered sky, envisioning a world of calm, peace, and happiness. Idealists are often cranky, and sometimes downright misanthropic [...] they are intensely involved with the present. For Kadare to keep writing bleak-but-safe critiques of a distant communist past would have been the easy way out; it would have cemented his reputation as that great Eastern European writer who criticized those mean communists. Instead, he chose to comment on things that are uncomfortable, for him as much as for us; that raise questions rather than answer them; that have no

resolution in the present, and maybe none in the future. This is idealism. And this is why he should win the 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature. (Sabolik, 2013)

This approach, besides showing that Kadare, like Ngugi, is an idealist, also points out that both of them –Ngugi and Kadare- might be negated the honor of the Nobel Prize precisely because their idealism, was not the “right kind of idealism.” That is, theirs is not an opportunistic idealism, promoted by the mentality that the West and its values are central to the global order, a mindset most probably dominative in the Nobel committee, as well. Consequently, their determination to freely express their opinions and their contributions for the development of their countries also goes ‘unnoticed’. Although they are not intimidated, the freedom of expression they exercise does not seem to be the right kind, as it does not serve the “right kind of idealism.”

At the same time, Ngugi and Kadare’s shared negation for their literary and intellectual contributions implies the similarity of the conditions of intellectuals in postcolonial and post-communist lands. The way they share the titles of articles regarding their merits in the field suggesting their nomination for the prize; Ngugi and Kadare divide the destiny of the marginalized. Symbolized by their ‘non-belonging idealism,’ Ngugi and Kadare share their appertaining to the non-land. They share the ‘dust of denial and forgetting’ the work of the non-central other is frequently condemned to be wrapped with.

To conclude, the terrorist attack on Charlie Hebdo, like preceding fateful events of this kind did, demonstrated that the struggle to obtain and maintain freedom to expression as a basic human right is as mandatory as ever before. Not only the awful act undertaken towards the magazine, but also the succeeding media statements which defined freedom to expression to belong exclusively to the western world, point to this. Nonetheless, the assumption that only westerners respect free speech does not only imply the lack of unconditioned freedom to expression for all; at the same time, it sheds light on an exclusively western tendency to pay attention, defend and promote free speech selectively. This becomes more apparent when a deaf ear is turned to the intellectual contributions of the marginal non-western. Despite their talent and idealism, mostly obvious in the uncorrupted representation of troubled political, social and cultural situations in their respective countries and regions, Kadare and Ngugi’s literary contributions have not been honored with the Nobel. In addition, Ngugi and Kadare’s loyalty to the most essential principles of intellectual independence -freethinking and its unreserved manifestation- is expected to add to their merits and exceptional dedication; on the contrary, this seems to be the very obstacle between the two authors and the Nobel Prize. Ngugi and Kadare apparently hold the wrong type of idealism and vociferously defend it.

Next year, Ngugi and Kadare will probably be again among the nominees and the most pronounced candidates for the Nobel. Not considering whether any of them will ever be awarded the Nobel, or they both, like Tolstoy and Achebe, will pass away with no appreciation on the Swedish academics' behalf, it is good to know that in the world there are still intellectuals who think outside the box: some "mad, bad, and dangerous freethinkers" (Davies, 2014, p. 229) who will disturb and contribute to the amelioration of the *status quo*.

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