

"طائر واحد يكفي لكي لا تسقط السماء": الشعر كشاهد على الأحداث في "جمهورية كالكوتا"
لكريس قباني و"مرايا الغياب" لفرج بيرقدار

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"شعر الشهادة" هو شعر ضد النسيان وعمل أخلاقي وسياسي في مواجهة "التطرف". تسعى هذه الورقة البحثية إلى التحقيق في تجربة السجن في "جمهورية كالكوتا" (٢٠٠٧) لكريس قباني و"مرايا الغياب" لفرج بيرقدار (٢٠٠٧). عانى كريس قباني وفرج بيرقدار من الإضطهاد السياسي والسجن والتعذيب والنفي. فرج بيرقدار كانت تهمته الإنضمام لحزب العمل الشيوعي والسعي لقلب نظام الحكم. قضى خمسة عشر عاماً في سجون المخابرات العسكرية السورية. كتب هذه الأشعار في سجون الظلم حيث أسواط الجلادين لا تتوقف، يقول بيرقدار "أن عدد السياط التي ألهبت ظهره أكثر من عدد الكلمات التي كتبها". كريس قباني قضى ست سنوات في سجن كالكوتا العسكري في نيجيريا بتهمة كتاباته التي اتهم أيضاً بأنها تحض علي قلب نظام الحكم وكتب أشعاره بدماء السجناء علي الأوراق المسروقة ليوثق إنتهاكات حقوق الإنسان التي تعرض لها في السجن مع زملائه من السجناء. تشكل أعمالهما شاهداً شعرياً على التجربة الصادمة التي عاشا فيها، وهي بمثابة خطاب مضاد ضد انتهاكات حقوق الإنسان التي ترتكبها الأنظمة الحاكمة في دولهما. سوف تُقرأ الأعمال في إطار "أدب الشهادة" الذي يوظف الشهادة لتأكيد تعدد كتابة التاريخ من خلال تحدي تاريخ النظام الرسمي. "شعر الشهادة" هو تكتيك للبقاء، يوجه انتباه العالم إلى وجود أنظمة استبدادية وقمعية من أجل العمل علي إحداث التغيير. تتشابه وجوه الطغاة وإن اختلفت جنسياتهم وأسمائهم كما تتشابه قصص التعذيب وإن اختلفت وسائله لكن تظل النتيجة واحدة وهي الحط من قيمة الإنسان وانتهاك حريته والإنتقاص من كرامته. تتشابه أشعار بيرقدار وقباني كما تتشابه القصص والشهادات. "شعر الشهادة" هو رسالة إنسانية بكل ما تحويه الكلمة من معني كتب بالدم ليوثق تاريخ المقهورين والمظلومين، هو صرخة للعالم لينتبه لما يحدث للإنسان من انتهاكات لحريته وكرامته واعتداء علي إنسانيته.

"One bird is enough in order for the sky not to fall": Poetry as witness in Chris Abani's *Kalakuta Republic* and Faraj Bayraqdar's *Mirrors of Absence*¹

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Abstract

"Poetry of witness" is a coherent tradition in twentieth-century poetry. It is an act against oblivion and forgetfulness, willing to speak the truth to power. "Poetry of witness" is an ethical and political act in the face of "extremity". This paper seeks to investigate the experience of imprisonment in Chris Abani's *Kalakuta Republic* (2007) and Faraj Bayraqdar's *Mirrors of Absence* (2007). Both poets endured conditions of historical and social "extremity" during the twentieth century through political persecution, imprisonment, torture, and exile. Their works are poetic witnesses to the traumatic experiences in which they lived, and serve as counter discourse against the human rights violations committed by their regimes. The works will be read within the framework of "witness literature". The paper seeks to answer the following questions: How did these writers challenge the "history" written by official regimes? How did they expose what goes on inside the cells and the "torture chambers" of the political prisons in Syria and Nigeria? The prison poems chosen for analysis provide different insights into the function of poetry as testimony. The paper attempts to highlight these two writers' struggle to retain dignity and sanity in a context that forces them either to conform or resist.

Keywords

Abani, Bayraqdar, counter discourse, imprisonment, poetry of witness, testimony.

A: Witness Literature a Survey

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at The Third International Conference on "Liberty and Human Rights" Faculty of Arts, Cairo University in 2017.

In the dark times will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing.
About the dark times²

"Witness literature" is a genre of literature that retells historical events from an eyewitness perspective. In December 2001, the Swedish Academy organized a symposium entitled "Witness Literature" in which the discussion primarily alternated between two aspects of the topic: the particular claim to truth that witness literature puts forward, and the process that leads from catastrophe to creativity and that turns the victim into a writing witness with the power to suspend forgetfulness and denial.³ "Witness literature", which is also referred to as "testimonial literature", is explicitly concerned with articulating a process of recognition and a resistance to oppression that not only calls for the awareness of violence, but also documents survival and self-determination. It began in Latin America in the 1970s and 80s, according to Roger N. Lancaster, it was intended "to convey salient sociological facts to a Northern audience through an exemplary life history, and to thereby solicit moral, political and economic support for local struggles" (4). As a noun, the word "witness" has two denotations: it can signify a person who sees an event; or the evidence, proof, or testimony of that event. Both denotations are used in this paper depending on the context. Dori Laub discusses the key term "witness" in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992). He describes it as "a witness to the truth of what happens during an event" (80). The witness (person) recounts a "life or a significant life experience" that involves "an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, and so on" (Beverley 26). Horace Engdahl in "Philomela's Tongue: Introductory Remarks on Witness Literature" defines the witness not only as a mere observer (eye-witness) or as a participant to a certain event, but also as the one who can speak up and does so in testimony: "I was there, I saw it, I can tell people!" (6) This threefold definition of the witness as person, simultaneously fulfils three main characteristics - that of presence, that of perceiving, and that of speaking up and communicating. As such, "witness literature", emerges as an act of speech having the capacity of reproducing the empirical circumstances of the real event (Sasu 8).

Goa Xingjian argues that testimony blends history and literature and helps convey historical experiences. He criticizes history writing and its relationship to authority, claiming that "history inevitably bears the imprint of an authority and is, therefore, revised with each change of authority" (118). Xingjian believes that "through retrieving lost memories, the [creative] writer seeks the truth that [official] history has concealed" (118). This latter view is also evident in Yúdice George's words in "Testimonio and Post modernism" that "truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or exorcising and setting aright official history" (49). Xingjian claims that testimony serves as a "necessary supplement to history, the preservation of memories that had been neglected by history" (119). However, testimony is a retelling of historical events of silenced voices, and thus cannot be seen simply as a "supplement," but instead as valid history in itself. Testimony is used to invoke historical events that otherwise would not have been told, stories of the past of oppressed peoples. Kimberly A. Nance in *Can Literature Promote Justice?* (2006) posits the idea that testimony "is not only a text, it is a project of social justice in which text is an

² Brecht, Bertolt. "Motto to the 'Svendborg Poems'" (1939), trans. John Willett in *Poems, 1913-1956*, p. 320

³ Talks in this symposium were given by speakers from Asia, Africa and Europe, including three Nobel laureates in literature: Nadine Gordimer, Kenzaburo Oe and Xingjian.

instrument" and its goal is "not only to educate readers about injustice, but to persuade those readers to act" (19). Two case studies are used here to prove the significance of testimony: Chris Abani's *Kalakuta Republic* (2007) and Faraj Bayraqdar's *Mirrors of Absence* (2007).

Felman in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), presents poetry as an exemplary instance of testimony; poems can best operate as testimony as they work through the effects of suffering that are not yet fully understood (21). One of the most important characteristics of testimony is its focus on the epiphanic moment of witnessing. Antony Rowland in *Poetry as Testimony* (2014) asserts, "Poetry is adept at describing such epiphanies, briefly and illuminatingly, since the lyrical tradition has always focused on such intense moments of subjective experience" (5). Felman discusses poetry as an important instance of precocious testimony: "the fragmented, 'breathless gasps' of such poems grapple with meaning in a testimonial process; they attempt to work through the 'ill-understood' but devastating effects of traumatic events" (21-22). Likewise, Rowland states "testimony can only be performed through form and genre, and poetic forms are adept...at conveying the epiphanic moment, truncated traumatic recollections, silences beyond the black print, and the emotive space that need not be repressed behind the supposed objectivity of testimonial facts" (5). Doran Larson in *Witness in the Era of Mass Incarceration* (2017), states that "poetry can also offer an additional moment of witness. It can record the first utterance that emerges from the most intimate moment of posttraumatic experience" (27) In Emmanuel Levinas's words, "Where common language abdicates, a poem . . . speaks" (117).

It would be impossible to contemplate the category of witness poetry without Carolyn Forché's groundbreaking anthology *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* (1993). Forché spent fourteen years compiling this anthology which was praised by Nelson Mandela as "itself a blow against tyranny, against prejudice, against injustice". In an interview with Jane Wells in 2009, Forché describes the kind of poems she wanted to publish in *Against Forgetting*. She recounts that in 1944 the Hungarian poet Miklós Radnóti was force-marched among two thousands slave laborers from Yugoslavia back into Hungary with a unit of German soldiers. They got across the Hungarian border and there were only twenty two survivors of that march, among them Radnóti. The German soldiers wanted to get back to their units and they saw a hospital across the Hungarian border. They tried to leave the prisoners in the hospital, but the Hungarians refused. So the German soldiers took them to the forest and executed them. They buried them in a shallow grave. Two years after the war, Radnóti's widow went with the other villagers to this site in the forest. They exhumed the bodies themselves and laid them out on the field. Radnóti's widow went from corpse to corpse until she found her husband. She went through the pockets of his clothing, pulled out a little notebook full of poetry, peeled the pages apart, and dried them in the sun. These rescued pages, which held the last of Radnóti's poems written on the forced march, represented the type of poetry Forché wished to include in her anthology. Forché gathered poems by over a hundred and forty poets who "endured conditions of historical and social extremity during the twentieth century—through exile, state censorship, political persecution, house arrest, torture, imprisonment, military occupation, warfare, and assassination". The work of these poets is a "witness to the dark times in which they lived" (*Against Forgetting* 29).

In the introduction to the anthology, the term "poetry of witness," was first coined by Forché who argues, that "poetry of witness arises out of the impress of extremity upon the poetic imagination" (30). In addition to theorizing the genre, Forché also writes witness poetry: the opening line of her poem, "The Colonel", in *The Country between Us* (1981) casually states: "What you have heard is true" (1). In the poem, Forché describes a dinner at the home of a wealthy man. After the meal, the officer leaves the room and comes back with a grocery bag full of human ears, which he spills onto the dinner table. He, then, attacks her people who expose human rights violations, and finally raises his glass in an ironic salute while saying, "Something for your poetry, no?"(23)⁴ Forché refuses to accept the divergence between personal and political poetry; instead, she embraces a notion of the 'social' that describes human rights conditions. She defines "the social" as "a place of resistance and struggle...where books are published, poems read, and protest disseminated. It is the sphere in which claims against the political order are made in the name of justice" (*Against Forgetting* 31).

In a similar vein, James Soular argues, "poetry of witness" embodies three elements: "the experience of trauma or extremity, the urge to bear witness to that experience, and a sense of community, within which and to which one can witness" (103). He states that "poetry of witness" is not "a call to arms against the state, rather, it is a *documentation* of experience and an *exhortation* against forgetfulness" (103). "Look!" poetry of witness seems to say. This is what happened. This is what can happen again. What are we going to do about it? Forché first affirms a poetics of extremity in which language and form are traumatized. She supports her idea even more emphatically in "Reading the Living Archives", where she asserts that "writing in the aftermath" and from the "ruins" is writing marked by "wounds," "rupture," and "fissures". Forché revises her initial sense that witness poetry often attains a paralegal status in which the poet "imagines him or herself before a court of law" opting against witness poetry identified with "poetic reportage" in favor of witness poetry marked by the traces of trauma (*Against Forgetting* 26, "Reading the Living Archives"). Brenda Carr Vellino in her essay "Beyond the Trauma Aesthetic: The Cultural Work of Human Rights Witness Poetries" states "For Forché... the capacity of witness poetry to gesture towards the 'unspeakable' and 'ineffable' in its broken language, form, and figuration, is often its distinctive quality" (9). Similar to Forché, Rowland reinforces the exclusionary division between documentary prose and poetry of witness asserting the lyrical quality of poetry which can "convey epiphanic moments of witnessing" more appropriate to engaging in "ineffable experiences" arising from atrocity than prose testimony which is assumed to submit facts at the service of juridical or historical truth claims (5-6).

B: Abani and Bayraqdar

The Nigerian writer Chris Abani (b. 1966) and the Syrian poet and journalist Faraj Bayraqdar (b.1951) are human rights activists, public intellectuals and political prisoners who actively opposed their systems and participated in movements calling for free expression and non-violent political action. They have both been opponents of

⁴ In 1981, Forché published *The Country between us*, a collection of poems about the civil war in El Salvador. That conflict was just beginning when Forché travelled to El Salvador to work with Amnesty International.

oppressive regimes in their countries and endured conditions of historical and social extremity through political persecution, imprisonment, torture, and exile and were both released in response to international campaigns to free them. The Nigerian poet Chris Abani was imprisoned three times in Nigeria for his work exploring political coups and human rights abuses. Abani was arrested in 1985 and again in 1987 when plots of his novels were said to be plans for attempts to overthrow the government. Abani began writing at a very young age and published his first novel, *Masters of the Board*, (1984), at the age of sixteen. Because the narrative recounts the attempt of an ex-Nazi officer to seize power in Nigeria, the country's authorities accused Abani of providing the blueprint for a failed coup against General Ibrahim Babangida regime in late 1985 ('A Reading by Chris Abani'). Following these allegations, Abani was sent to prison, where he spent a total of six months ('Author's Note', *Kalakuta Republic* 9). As Abani reports, the publication of his second novel, *Sirocco* (1987), again elicited a violent reaction from the authorities. The government destroyed all copies of the book, closed down the publishing house that had issued it and arrested him once again, holding him for a year at KiriKiri maximum security prison in Lagos ('Chris Abani: Interview', *Creativity in Exile*). In 1990, he wrote a play, *Song of the Broken Flute*, for the University's commencement which the military head of state and military governor were scheduled to attend. The staging of his play, a series of monologues that criticized government corruption and its effects on the people and which challenged the regime's position on human rights, once more led to his arrest and imprisonment. This time, he was sentenced to death without a trial. He spent another year and a half at KiriKiri, among which six months in solitary confinement ('Author's Note', *Kalakuta Republic* 9; 'Chris Abani: Interview'; *Creativity in Exile*). The memories of his experience as a political prisoner in Nigeria between 1985 and 1991 are represented in his first collection of poetry, *Kalakuta Republic* (2007).⁵

On the other hand, Syrian poet Faraj Bayraqdar was imprisoned several times by the Assad regime for his political activities. He spent fourteen years in three different prisons in (the Palestine Division, Tadmur, and Saydnaia). The Digital Freedom Network called Bayraqdar "one of the world's forgotten prisoners". Bayraqdar was held prisoner in 1987 for six years without charge or trial, and was severely tortured. In 1993 he was tried for belonging to an unauthorized organization and sentenced to another nine years in Tadmur prison. Amnesty International considered him a prisoner of conscience and campaigned for his immediate release. He was accused of being a member of the Communist Action Party, and was released in 2000 after a successful international campaign that involved human rights and free speech organizations as well as writers and artists. (*Betrayals* 11-12). Out of the experience of imprisonment, he wrote a poetic memoir *Betrayals of Language and Silence* (2006) and a book of poetry entitled *Mirrors of Absence* (2007).⁶

⁵ Recipient of honors including the PEN USA Freedom-to-Write Award, the PEN Hemingway Book Prize and Guggenheim Award, Abani gives voice not only to the importance of human rights but also humanity's responsibility to protect them. Chris Abani won the Hellman/Hammett Free Expression Award in 2003.

⁶ An honorary member of American, English, Netherlands, and Slovak PEN Centers, Bayraqdar won the Hellman/Hammett Free Expression Award in 1998, the 1999 PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award, the 2004 Free Word Award from NOVIB – Netherlands, the 2006 PEN Freedom of Expression Award Netherlands, the 2007 Tucholsky Prize – Sweden. In October 2017, Bayraqdar won Vercelli International Festival of Poetry Award for his book *Mirrors of Absence*.

Both Abani and Bayraqdar experienced the horrors of political imprisonment and faced dreadful obstacles in daring to expose these horrors. How did the two poets present the heinous nature of imprisonment and its many unspoken, forgotten, or ignored realities? How did their works gesture towards what Forché calls the "unspeakable" and "ineffable" experiences? How did they "convey epiphanic moments of witnessing"? These and other related questions will be explored by reading a selection of poems from Abani's *Kalakuta Republic* (2007), and Bayraqdar's poem *Mirrors of Absence* (2007).

C: Abani's *Kalakuta Republic*

Abani's *Kalakuta Republic* (2007) is devoted to a horrific description of his life in prison. It takes its title from a wing of Nigeria's infamous maximum security prison where Abani and other political prisoners were tortured. Abani's prison poems in *Kalakuta Republic* act as a counter-discourse and uncover the coercion and atrocities he suffers from. Much of his stories; the events that he experiences, specifically, extreme physical and psychological torture, lie far outside the normal human rights frame of reference. Harold Pinter, in his praise for the book jacket, called Abani's prison poetry "the most naked, harrowing expression of prison life and political torture imaginable" and asserted that "reading Abani's poems is like being singed by a red hot iron." Tanure Ojaide, writing in *World Literature Today*, noted that Abani "portrays the experience in indelible lines that haunt the reader as well as himself." Ojaide added that the poet "succeeds in elevating art and humanity above the meanness and inhumanity of tyrannical leaders and their cohorts" (309).

One of the pervading themes in *Kalakuta Republic* is an overwhelming sense of loss and lack of identity. Abani is completely aware of the intimidating space of prison. He is trying to find a sense of meaning while in prison. In the poem, "Tattoo", Abani says:

Saddam.
Even the guards call me that. Few people
want to know my real name.
Here everybody goes by an alias.
Perhaps it is to avoid intimacy.
Dangerous
when you may be burying your
best friend the next day,

.....
Invisibility

Stalks our every step. Some men brand,
With cashew sap, their names on buttocks, stomachs,
Hidden
From view. A welt to remind them of
Who they really are, their past, their only hope. (1-8, 22-27)

As shown in the above quotation, prisoners even hide their real names from other inmates in the prison cell; they use a false and assumed identity. By being allocated a prison number, the prisoners are aware of being nothing more than bodies in the eye

of the regime. In taking away their names, personal belongings and all that make them unique individuals, the prisoner loses a personal sense of uniqueness. Prisoners defiantly tattoo their names on their body skin to preserve their identity, "A welt to remind them of / who they really are, their past, their only hope" (26-27).

In another poem, "Heavensgate", there is juxtaposition between: "politicos, privileged by class, education, family" and "other heroes... with no power, no privilege, and no class, nothing to gain" (1-3, 10-12). Abani makes the readers sense righteousness in the prisoners by placing them side by side to characters that are mostly corrupt. In other words, goodness in the prisoners is highlighted by baseness in the politicians. The choice of words is skillful; "politicos" is a derogatory name for politicians and it emphasizes the poet's resentment towards them; on the other hand, he uses the "heroes" as counter discourse to describe the prisoners. Confined within the prison cells and rendered "nameless", those prisoners become "heroes" in the poem; they endure ineffable torture for speaking truth to power. Abani says:

And one of these *nameless*
Crawled into my cell at night via sewer pipe
To give me a jar of his own blood
And paper, stolen inch by inch, hidden up
Trained rectums and glued together into sheets with mango sap.
'To take write our suffering' (16-22)

The prisoner's request '*to take write our suffering*' emphasizes the persona's/Abani's role as a witness to the truth of what happens in prison. Abani uses the homophones write and right, in "to take write our suffering", he seems to be alluding to the prisoner's "right" which redresses the wrongs leveled at him. In the act of bearing witness to suffering, writing, as noted by Stoppard in his forward to the book *Writers under Siege* (2007), allows the prisoner "to create an emotional distance from the horror they suffered" (xxiv). For Abani, writing poetry offers a way to cope with pain in its many forms, from psychological torment to physical torture. Poetry becomes a means of survival, whether this is during or after the experience of imprisonment.

Torture and physical brutality are common horrors to which the prisoners were subjected. Torture is part of the mechanism the state uses to impose its tyrannical rule and suppress resistance. Elimelekh asserts that "the dictatorship attacks the prisoner's body in order to enhance its control over the mind and spirit, to strengthen its rule and repress any opposition" (32). Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain* reminds us that the most important thing we must know about torture is "*that it is happening*" (9). Poems in *Kalakuta Republic* describe, in graphic detail, the horrors the writer witnessed there, particularly the various methods of torture used upon the inmates. On September 18, 2015, Amnesty International (AI) released a report about human rights practices in Nigeria alleging the systematic practice of torture and other mistreatment by security services. AI reported that prisons had "torture chambers" where guards used a wide range of brutal torture methods, including beatings, shootings, nail and teeth extractions, and rape and other sexual violence (4). "Torture in prison", Franklin asserts, "force[s] each prisoner to become either a broken, cringing animal, fawning before all authority, or a resister, clinging to human dignity through defiance and rebellion" (xiii). He reveals "the dirty secret that, under torture, human beings do in fact break, tell what they know, name names, and finally even wish that they knew more to tell" (Nance 39). Abani's poems glaringly gesture towards what Forché calls

the "unspeakable" and "ineffable" experiences. He intensely describes the physical violence in terms of sexual assault. This exposure to violence ties with a constant awareness of death, which is apparent in his poems. In the poem, "Koro", dark alley in Yoruba slang, Abani retells how prisoners were raped and sexually assaulted. He says: "We can hear the screams clear /across the courtyard, even with dirt/stuffed in our ears" (13-15). Abani refers to the actions of one of the prison guards with whom he came into contact in Kalakuta Republic prison. The brutality and cruelty of the guard is clearly illustrated in the poem "Boddhistava". He states:

There are others....
 Lieutenant Hyacinth Leviticus Nwankwo.
 Officer in charge of torture and
 Interrogations, self-appointed redeemer.
 What does it profit a man to gain
 the whole world but lose his soul?
 He asks, coaxing confessions with a pair of pliers. (1-7)

The guard is the one in charge of torture and interrogations; he believes that he is a redeemer who urges the prisoners not to die in sin but to confess their crimes. He tortures the prisoners by beating them with a whip or "coaxing confessions with a pair of pliers" (7). Other times, he sits watching his apprentices torturing the prisoners, "while mumbling prayers, fingering a rosary made from the teeth of / his favourite dead prisoners" (20-22). In Buddhism, the term "Bodhisattva" refers to someone on the path to awakening. A "Boddhistava" is an ordinary person who takes up a course in his life that moves in the direction of Buddha (Uchiyama). Abani, thus, uses an ironic inversion whereby this sadistic guard is compared to a "Boddhistava" who mumbles prayers while watching the torture of prisoners! The sarcastic tone of the poem created in the title is thus maintained in the body of the poem.

In the powerful poem, "Ode to Joy," Abani describes in horrific and appalling details the death of John James, a fourteen-year-old boy who was severely tortured. The poem remains the only trace of his dying and illustrates Forché's description of a witness poem as "evidence". He was nailed to the table for three days until his death, "handcuffed to chair, they tacked his penis / to the table / with a six inch nail / and left him there" (4-7). The poem concludes:

Risking death, an act insignificant
 in the face of this child's courage,
 we sang:
Oje wai wai
Moje oje wai, wai.
 Incensed,
 they went
 on a
 killing rampage. (11-19)

The prisoners revolted "and many men / died singing / that night" (29-31). Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* argues that torture "is intended to deprive a man of his dignity and freedom and to leave permanent scars on his body" (38). Abani recounts intensely the mental and physical torments he himself endured while imprisoned in that infamous place. The image he uses to describe prison life shows

that it is very hostile and intimidating. In the poem, "the Box," he retells how he was tortured by the hot sweat box. The box is a method of torture and solitary confinement ; a prisoner would experience extreme heat, dehydration, exhaustion, even death, depending on when and how long he was kept in the box .

In another poem, "Caliban", Abani intensely describes the psychological consequences of fear and prolonged imprisonment on one of his prison inmates, Akula, who:

Kills and eats nearly all his room-mate. The guards find him
Picking his teeth with small finger
They kill him slowly, cutting him up piece
By piece, forcing him to eat himself (9-12)

The prisoner has lost his mind into complete insanity. The choice of the title is significant. Caliban is a deformed, brutish creature, the slave of Prospero, in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Caliban is "cannibal in verbal disguise" (Vaughan 31). Cannibalism is the practice of humans eating the flesh of other human beings. The poem shows the appalling savagery of the guards and reflects the shocking consequences of torture and long imprisonment. The diction is simple and the tone is heartbreaking and depressing. The gross abuse of human rights in prison knows no limits, and Abani graphically and boldly displays powerful and appalling images of human rights violations. There is nothing more painful than these lines that end the killing rampage in the poem "Mango Chutney":

I never get used to the amount of
blood; bodies droop like so many flowers.
Eyes stare, bright and alive, into
another world. And death becomes some men.
.....
Daily epiphanies bloom as angels walk among us,
the few, the chosen. (27-30, 53-54)

Abani and his fellow inmates have learned ways to deal with their scary prison life; they were forced to learn methods to survive. In the poem "Smoke Screen", Abani states the different methods, "humor" and "laughter", the prisoners use to cope with the severe experience of imprisonment and torture. He writes:

Humor here swells, filling our nostrils.
Percolating senses. It is not bravery
In noble round-table tradition,
But the best disinfectant against death's rankness. (1-4)

Moreover, Abani highlights his persistence to struggle by quoting lines from Dennis Brutus' poem, "Letters to Martha" and Soyinka's poem, "I anoint my Flesh". Abani opens the second section of *Kalakuta Republic* entitled "Roll Call", with a verse quotation for the South African poet and human rights activist, Dennis Brutus, who was dismissed for his activism against the apartheid government of South Africa in the 1960s. Brutus was imprisoned for eighteen months on Robben Island, alongside Nelson Mandela. "Letters to Martha" was written while Brutus was in prison. He says:

I remember rising one night

After midnight
And moving
Through an impulse of loneliness
To try and find the stars (qtd. in *Kalakuta Republic* 37)

Brutus emphasizes the fact that the prisoners are devastated by their separation from the outside world. He refers to his "impulse of loneliness" and his attempt to touch the stars. Brutus is looking for the stars, yet cannot reach them. By trying to reach the stars, he feels he will be able to make contact with the outside world. Similar to Brutus, Abani is aware of the distressing effects of imprisonment. He states in his poem "Egwu Onwa":

At night, squinting off to the left
Just so,
Stars corral across the barbed wire
On the top of the high walls. (1-4)

As shown in the above quotation, the poem taps into an important theme, freedom that is so essential to every human being. Stars gather on top of the high walls of prison. The word "stars" symbolizes freedom and is related to heaven and direction. The third section of *Kalakuta Republic* entitled "Still Dancing" opens with the third stanza of Soyinka's poem "I anoint my Flesh" which Soyinka wrote in solitary confinement on cigarette papers. He writes:

I anoint my heart
Within its flame I lay
Spent ashes of your hate-
Let evil die. (qtd. in *Kalakuta Republic* 77)

The above quotation reflects Soyinka's struggle for physical strength and sanity. Soyinka undergoes the ritual of spiritual anointment in order to cleanse himself of the impurities of body and soul. Similarly, Abani highlights his struggle for freedom in his poem "Birds of Paradise", he writes:

But in insolent defiance, a bird of paradise
runs
amok
with colour. Screaming in ancient tongue
my spirit to fray.
Even pain cannot breach
My conviction that the best in us cannot die. (6-12)

Abani compares himself to "a bird of paradise" that grows in spite of the harsh conditions of prison life. The bird of paradise is a tropical beautiful flower that symbolizes freedom and joy. The poem, "Birds of Paradise" reflects an indomitable spirit of the persona / Abani. In "Mantra," Abani asserts "I will build me a ladder / wrestling eagles on every rung / I will myself to live, so hard, until / the darkness crumbles, ash on my tongue" (4-6). His choice of the word "ladder" is significant. It suggests his determination to resist and fight back. He will not surrender to his imprisonment. He will climb the ladder to ascend the high walls. The poem holds a tone of optimism and hopefulness. In the poem, "Dream Stealers" he writes:

Refuse to give in to it, the nothingness

That smears ice on your soul,
numbing life out.
Unlike Peters from Calabar who died after 2 days,
Screaming: 'they stole everything!'
And they will if you let them:
Memories, dreams, hope (1-7)

The poem is, in Forché's words "a plea against despair" and "a call for strength" (*Against Forgetting* 32). Indeed, Abani's *Kalakuta Republic* is a poetic witness to the traumatic experiences in which he lived. It unfolds the atrocity and injustice suffered by political prisoners and acts as a counter-discourse against the human rights violations committed by Nigeria's military regime in the late 1980s. It conveys the message: Don't forget and never again!!

D: Faraj Bayraqdar

From Nigeria to Syria, the song of the political prisoner bears a similar message. It comes out shrill and loud as both poets lament their personal plight and face dreadful obstacles in trying to expose the unspeakable nature of imprisonment. In his poetic prison memoir *Betrayals of Language and Silence* (2006), Bayraqdar offers an account of his imprisonment in a number of prisons in Syria where he was routinely tortured. The choice of the title is significant as it highlights the failure of language to communicate his horrific experiences at prison. Bayraqdar describes the torture he suffers from upon arriving at prison and relates the horror of witnessing prisoners killed outside of the dormitory cell during what was supposed to be a break, and he retells a gruesome story of a prisoner forced by a guard to swallow a dead rat as a form of torture. This prisoner, Bayraqdar recounts, did not die after the incident; he merely lost his sanity (52- 54). Similar to Abani, Bayraqdar recognizes the value of writing in prison and the belief that any act to create meaning through writing is a mode of challenging prison and its effects. For Bayraqdar, writing poetry in prison was the moment of true freedom. Poetry freed him from the walls, tunnels, chains and locks that surrounded him. During his first years in prison, he learned to write without pen or paper, composing small paragraphs and then memorizing them. Prisoners were not allowed pens or papers in Tadmur prison but he managed to train his memory and also got other inmates to memorize some of his poems instead of trying to remember them all himself. He also invented ways to make ink from tea and onion leaves, and used a wood splinter as a pen. The first time he actually used a proper pen and paper was when he was transferred to Saydnaia. Later he managed to smuggle his book with one of the officers (*Betrayals of Language and Silence* 12-13).

Bayraqdar becomes a witness to the truth of what happens in the Syrian prisons. Originally published in Arabic, Bayraqdar's *Mirrors of Absence* (2007) is a long poem of hundred short stanzas that encompasses all aspects of human rights. It was written in Saydnaia prison (1997-2000) in a condition of "extremity". In effect, *Mirrors of Absence* is a witness poem, "a documentation of experience and an exhortation against forgetfulness" (Soular 103). Bayraqdar bears witness to the atrocity and hideousness of imprisonment and discusses three subjects: imprisonment that affects identity, survival and self-determination in prison, and freedom that is so essential to every human being. Prison has an obvious negative impact on the prisoners. In *Mirrors of Absence*, Bayraqdar focuses on the mental and psychological suffering of the prisoners. Geula Elimelekh in *Arabic Prison Literature* (2014) affirms

"Imprisonment severely affects the mental equilibrium of the imprisoned. They suffer from anxiety, solitude, trauma, depression, injustice, helplessness, violence and insecurity- the major elements of their prison life" (125). In the tenth stanza, Bayraqdar writes:

All the cracks you see on the wall
Were carved by my eyes
They have been looking at them
For years
No use counting them. (26)

The above quotation expresses the length and the roughness of the road that Bayraqdar had patiently trodden. Time is an important aspect of prison experience. For a prisoner, time becomes a principal point of his existence, whether it is the time that passes slowly daily, or the time left in prison. In fact, in prison, time does not pass. It accumulates over the prisoners and suffocates them. In the twelfth stanza, Bayraqdar says:

Prison is time
You mark the first days on walls
The following months on memory
But when you become
A long train
Tired of whistling
Despairing of a station
You try something else:
Forgetting (27)

As Forché claims, "the demon of freedom...is a torment to a man in solitary who is alone and most distinctly unfree." Relief from tiredness and despair is brought at a very dear price: "the fleeting forgetfulness of who and where he is" (34). In stanza (23), Bayraqdar says:

Whose funeral procession is this?
I asked the old man
While I am going away
It is for meaning my son
He replied and stood there like a headstone. (28)

The word "meaning" in this stanza indicates the reason for the prisoner's death; he dies trying to find a sense of "meaning" while in prison. The harrowing conditions of the prisoners' lives cause them to look for some "meaning" in their bleak existence. The word "procession" is sarcastic, because "funeral procession" indicates respect for the dead that stands in sharp contrast with the humiliation the prisoners undergo. The poem acutely captures the inner turmoil of the speaker. In Stanza (29) of *Mirrors of Absence*, Bayraqdar writes:

Here
And there
On the wall
On my heart

On the night and wind
On doors, dates and sidewalks
On fear, despair and nothingness
Eyes
Deep like blackness
Black like catastrophe
Catastrophic like silence
Silent like howling
Nothing before or after them
Except fallen banners,
God and I
In adjacent cells (28)

The poet is too angry, too traumatized that he starts to lose his faith in God. His eyes are deep and black. They are described as silent and catastrophic at the same time. The stanza ends oddly with "God and I / in adjacent cells" (28). Bayraqdar imagines that he and God are locked up in one prison. He seems to ask: Why did God allow this? The stanza is composed of short lines that impose juxtaposition between anger and sorrow. The lines cast this sorrow toward God who is silently watching the plight of inmates at Syrian prisons. The lines lay bare the poet's suffering, which is not only anchored in his physical torment, but also in the denial of his freedom. Loss of freedom leads to a deep sense of insecurity and fear. Victor Hassine states:

Prisons are uniquely designed to instigate fear in so many creative ways that fear has become a kind of language all its own, silently but relentlessly commanding specific inmate conduct and behavior. Prison designers and managers have developed a precise and universal alphabet of fear that is carefully assembled and arranged -bricks, steel, uniforms, colors, odors, shapes, and management style - to effectively control the conduct of whole prison populations. (180)

The norm in prison is to suppress identity under the threat of severe torture. Bayraqdar recounts how his country blessed him with countless lashes that only God could count, with the passage of time and after repeated slaps, curses and beatings, Bayraqdar learnt to present himself as "prisoner number 13" ("Documenting Darkness" Par.12). Torture becomes the machinery for systematically demolishing a prisoner's humanity. In Stanza (30), Bayraqdar intensely describes the mental and physical torments suffered by prisoners. There is juxtaposition between "And the match goes on bloody and mad / between the wolves of death / and the gazelles of life" (27-29). In other words, savagery of the oppressors is highlighted by the beauty of life.

Furthermore, Bayraqdar explores the collapse of the human mind in prison through observing various prisoners and their ways of survival and coping with their terrible status. Deprived of the necessities of life and prevented from watching objects of nature like stars and birds, some prisoners take recourse in dreaming. Many find peace from their plight in the private world of the insane. Yet through agony, Bayraqdar not only survives the numerous hardships, the fate of prisoners, but also matures through contact with so much hideousness and suffering. He acknowledges the status of the political prisoner and from that premise continues to fight and resist the regime. This quality develops intimacy with the reader, and creates a sense of empathy. In stanza (57), he states:

Her mouth smiles

Her eyes teary
She calls out
In the photograph:
Daddy! (33)

The above stanza unfolds the loneliness and despair of isolation in prison. The stanza is heart wrenching and painfully beautiful. It focuses on separation from family and friends. Bayraqdar's daughter was just three when he was arrested in 1987 for his political activism and by the time he was released, she was at university. Robert Johnson in "Art and Autonomy: Prison Writers under Siege" states that "survival in prison has paradoxical dimensions to it...since much of prison life is a study in absence and emptiness, in deprivation of the sort of content that gives meaning to life and presents discrete challenges that can be gauged and addressed" (165). Bayraqdar states: "Nothing is present / except absence // I am in no state / whatsoever" (26-27).

Bayraqdar's *Mirrors of Absence* lays bare his affliction, but, in fact, his suffering is not anchored only in his psychological torment and severe torture but more so in the denial of his freedom. The poem taps into this important subject, the concept of freedom that is so essential to every human being. Political prisoners suffer deprivations of freedom precisely because they aspire to political freedom and to freedom of thought and expression. Of all the grave torments they are subjected to, the most damaging is loss of freedom. Fyodor Dostoyevsky in his semi-autobiographical novel, *Notes from House of the Dead*, affirms that prison inmates are both dead and alive since they are denied their freedom.⁷ Bayraqdar's *Mirrors of Absence* confirms Dostoyevsky's view to the effect that to live without freedom is not to live at all! Bayraqdar's poem is permeated with death. He states: "there is no graveyard / in this world or the next, bigger than this one / what I call my country" (3). This stanza bears the trace of "extremity" within it and holds the tone of rage against the regime's brutality. The choice of the word "graveyard" is significant; it introduces the reader to the awareness of death and connotes darkness and suffering. Variants of this theme emerge in the poetry of Chris Abani. In the ninth stanza, Bayraqdar says:

There is no freedom
Outside this place
But it cries
Whenever it hears keys
Laughing in their locks. (26)

The richness and compression of the language is striking: the freedom is described as absent, yet crying. The banality of these two metaphors is redeemed by the novelty of the whole image of freedom crying every time it "hears keys / Laughing in their

⁷ *The House of the Dead* is a semi-autobiographical novel published in 1862 by Russian author Fyodor Dostoyevsky, which portrays the life of convicts in a Siberian prison camp. In 1849, Dostoyevsky was sentenced to four years at hard labor in a Siberian prison camp for participating in a socialist discussion group. The novel he wrote after his release, based on notes he smuggled out, not only brought him fame, but also founded the tradition of Russian prison writing. *The House of the Dead* depicts brutal punishments, feuds, betrayals, and the psychological effects of confinement, but it also reveals the moments of comedy and acts of kindness that Dostoyevsky witnessed among his fellow prisoners.

locks"! In addition to signaling the insensibility and the brutality of the guards, the laughing of the keys may also signal an existentialist sense of nihilism. Bayraqdar uses archetypal natural symbols for freedom. He captures the significance of freedom by continual references to both birds and flying. There is an implicit reference to birds and freedom in prison poetry throughout different ages and the image of a caged bird is often used to describe imprisonment. The bird, like Byron's "visitant from Paradise" is used as a symbol of freedom because of its ability to fly away.⁸ For Bayraqdar, prison experience can be compared to a flight, a journey where the ultimate destination is freedom. In stanza (53), Bayraqdar declares his stance:

My body was filled with
Swallows and larks
Bee-eaters and herons
Sand grouses, sea gulls and eagles. (32)

Affirming his hope and yearning for freedom, Bayraqdar says in stanza (54), "One bird is enough in order for the sky not to fall down." The stanza itself seems like a bird constructed out of everyday prison life, it is launched, with a triumphant cry, into flight over the walls and into the reader's world. The fact that Bayraqdar allows the bird the triumph of flying over the prison walls clearly indicates his state of mind. At this point, he has not lost hope: hope of freedom and of things to come. This is a stanza about the power of imagination and about the capacity of human beings to survive "extremity". The walls of the prison cannot cage his mind. The counter discourse of the poem is that even when one is locked behind bars without physical freedom, it is still possible to experience freedom of mind and spirit. In the hundredth stanza, Bayraqdar states:

The birds
Which I release
When I shut my eyes
The gazelles
Which I follow to the spring
When I shut my eyes
The slopes
Whose echoes I wipe
When I shut my eyes
The handkerchiefs
I embroider with stars
When I shut my eyes
The roses
I pluck from my heart
When I shut my eyes

⁸ In Lord Byron's "The Prisoner of Chillon," the prisoner awakens from his oblivion to the sound of a bird singing. The song ceases, and then starts up again, and for a moment, the prisoner feels joy at this surprise companion. The prisoner sees sympathy in the bird, itself alone and singing for a companion. He ponders whether the bird is wild or has escaped its own prison—a cage—but hopes that the bird has never known imprisonment such as he is experiencing. He wonders if the bird is a natural creature or a "visitant from Paradise" (34), even going so far as to entertain the thought that the bird might be his brother's soul come to comfort him.

Are all:
Good Morning Freedom! (36)

The above quotation reflects Bayraqdar's struggle for freedom, physical strength and sanity. The word "heart" symbolizes his strong fighting spirit. The use of the first person pronoun "I" reflects a soul continuously seeking truth and justice and highlights the nature of a strong spirit intensely striving to conquer fear. Bayraqdar's use of the first person pronoun "I" in these lines chimes with Forché's assertion that the "I" in witness poetry is "a protest against violence" and "an attempt to redeem speech from the silence of pain and integrity from the disintegrating forces of extremity" (*Against Forgetting* 45). The stanza includes repeated lines –trying to convey the power of words to fully express the violent erasure of voice that is inherent to imprisonment. The poem shows that Bayraqdar clings to life that he has not even surrendered himself to his fate. Similar to Abani, Bayraqdar persistently refuses to give up hope for a better world. He strives to assert with unyielding vitality his vision of brighter possibilities for the future.

In effect, Bayraqdar's *Mirrors of Absence* unfolds a relentless struggle for basic legitimate human rights. It is dedicated to the struggle to be free and to become a full human being with full dignity. Bayraqdar in beautiful heart wrenching lines records his misery and loneliness and combines tenderness with rage. His witness poem fully confirms that his voice, like Shelley's "West Wind", will heroically stir withered leaves and "quicken a new birth" and revitalize this "unawakened earth" (64, 67).

E: Conclusion

"Poetry of witness" is a documentation of an experience of trauma and an exhortation against forgetfulness. It is an act against the distortion of historical facts. "Poetry of witness" is an ethical act in the face of "extremity". It is a process of recognition and a resistance to oppression and coercion. Although Chris Abani and Faraj Bayraqdar come from different regions, their lives, careers and poetics reveal many parallels. This has established a basis for comparing the two poets. Both Abani and Bayraqdar are human rights activists who struggled against the human rights violations committed by oppressive regimes in their countries. Both have endured conditions of "extremity" through imprisonment and torture. Both have recognized the value of writing as a way of survival in prison and a mode of challenging its effects. Reading of the selected poems that were written in conditions of "extremity," has revealed that in their struggle for survival and self-determination, both Abani and Bayraqdar have succeeded to convey the heinous nature of imprisonment and its many unspoken realities. Their witness poems document the unjust imprisonment of opponents of tyrannical regimes and protest against the grave denial of basic human rights and freedom. The moods of "witness poetry" range from the outrageous vehemence of Abani to the painful agony of Bayraqdar. In spite of the variation in their mode, the burden of their song is identical: prison life is horrible, condemnable, and unacceptable. Indeed, their song is a struggle of memory against forgetting, the world must never forget!!

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