



# CLIMATE OFFEAR

The Quest for Dignity  
in a Dehumanized World



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Recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature

# Climate of Fear

*The Quest for  
Dignity in a  
Dehumanized World*

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*King Basayev and the  
Massacre of Innocents*

PREFACE

*The sacred—including the infant crèche—appears to diminish  
by the day. . . .*

The above line, an admission of my fears for an emerging pattern, appears in “ ‘I Am Right; You Are Dead,’ ” the last of the five Reith lectures published in this volume. Those fears would be hideously realized in Belsan, in the Russian Federation, through the agency of no less an individual than the warrior Shamil Basayev, to whom I called attention in 2000, after his invasion of Dagestan. Regarding his exploits and pronouncements, I wrote:

Let me take your minds back to an incident in the Chechnyan war that you may all have forgotten, since that episode has long become subsumed un-

der the culture of competitive atrocities that has marked the war between the Chechnyan nationalists and the Russian state. I was quite sympathetic to the aspirations of Chechnya for some form of self-determination. I still am, but I could not help taking apprehensive note of this minor episode; it was illustrative of much of the conditioning that goes with certain wars of liberation whose declarations warn one, in advance, of the oppressive transformation that would inevitably take place after the phase of liberation is over.

Taking a little time off from his insurrectionary war, a war that sought to carve out further pieces of Russian territory, the Dagestan, and unite them with Chechnya to create a Greater Islamic Republic, the warrior Basayev declared: "When people ask me who's going to benefit [that is, from the war, with all its slaughter and suffering], I say God. Allah will get a new part of the world." Note, not Basayev, not Chechnya, not Dagestan but—Allah! The disruption of life, the kidnappings, general mayhem, rape, and bloodshed had to be understood as sufferings undertaken on behalf of—God! And what arguments can any mere mortal propose against a privileged leader who is evidently in direct satellite communication with God? Well then, a piece of real

estate for the unreachable God, but what is in it for God's representative on earth?

The answer of course is Power! The Ecstasy of Power. The Space of Domination. Basayev's response would have been worthy of General Franco, or Mussolini. Or Pinochet. All of them great churchgoers, never known to miss a Sunday morning mass or neglect the pomp of the cathedral on national occasions. ("The Banality of Power," *Lettera Internazionale* 80)

Basayev's territorial ambitions on behalf of Allah finally engulfed the little town of Beslan, and with it the sense of pious fulfillment. When anticipation of, and salivation over, the trickle of power sinks to the level of cruelty to helpless children, one is tempted to accept that all that is left to say is—nothing. *The rest is silence*. It is an admission that humanity has finally touched the peak of apprehension and the nadir of impotence. In a grim irony, however, this may even spell the end of fear, since what many—across cultures—hold as a universal barrier to the unthinkable has surely, definitively, been breached, and there is nothing left to dread.

It is not the first time that children have served as sacrificial lambs. There are thousands of infant skulls in the open-air museums of Rwanda, they litter the killing

fields of Cambodia, children's throats are piously severed in the classrooms of northern Nigeria, children are abducted and forced into military service all over the African continent, and even infants were not spared the Nazi gas chambers of Germany. Beslan, however, was a graphic, unraveling event, a gloating performance before the eyes of the world, and the images remain to haunt human conscience. The retentive power of those images is not allowed to dissipate through considerations of an accidental triggering of a tragic chain of events. No, it is reinforced by the self-commendation of the mastermind himself as he recounts, in a statement published on a Lithuanian website, details of preparations for the assault, and the promise of more to come: "The fight continues without any rules, and without the connivance of the entire world, so we are not bound by any obligations to anyone and we will fight the way we find comfortable and beneficial."

Basayev's chilling itemization of the cost of the operation—eight thousand euros for close to a thousand lives, half of them children's—compels one to withdraw inward and reexamine every proposition that has hitherto governed human coexistence. When the mind touches the emotion that is so inadequately conveyed in the words *the rest is silence*, therefore, it must be understood that this is not a literal silence. It does not equate

to resignation. Each language, I am certain, carries its own equivalent, a collective sign that is the residuum of immobilizing experience, each one defiant of a literal translation, because it is always colored by the triggering experience itself. Drawing from mine, I would find an equivalent in *Oro p'esi je*: "The end of discourse." The events of Beslan have profoundly impoverished normal discourse, even to the point of near extinction.

The gray zones of moral definitions where relativity reigns and remote causes are evoked to justify the abhorrent will continue to haunt certain casts of mind. The rest will insist on the primacy of an ethical will, one that dictates that some deeds demand to be judged within an identifiable and shared moral universe, however restricted. For clarity, therefore, on behalf of the latter position, with which I identify, we have to define just what constitutes the compass of morality that makes it possible to judge the events of Beslan.

It is plainly the opposition of the strong, as aggressor, to the weak—unsuspecting, unprepared, and innocent. A band of heavily armed, battle-seasoned adults invades a sanctuary of children. They deprive them of water and food, watch impassively as they drink their own urine in desperation, subject them to physical and psychological terror, bayonet one, shoot others in the back as they flee certain death, and finally incinerate them in the hun-



dreds. The children were robbed of their dignity and deeply scarred in their very vulnerability. Once again, in a most harrowing setting to which the world was summoned as audience, we saw enacted the rhetoric: *There are no innocents*. Such rhetoric cannot be permitted to constitute the language of the world or delineate its moral compass.

Lapses in governance must be objectively examined, flawed and cruel policies of state identified and changed—in short, all remote causes, especially the political, subjected to a remedial process. To have these preponderate over a basic ethical imperative, however, is the beginning of the corrosion of the ethical will, a surrender that coarsens and then deadens humane sensibilities, reconciles society with absolute evil. The ethical will is the redeeming assertion that, even when all other considerations of social conduct are subjected to the fortuitous, one, an ethical core, remains inviolate. The matter of taking children as hostages does not require much exertion in the application of such a will. There has to be a guaranteed zone of the sacrosanct, even among the self-righteous, a zone that, when breached, draws down a sustained universal response. The zone of children is one such, and remains beyond expediency. Acceptance of any such violation makes moral cowards of us all, and leaves us in complicity with other cowards of any struggle who lay siege on the helpless.

For those who claim the authority to pronounce a fatwa, even on nonbelievers, this is surely a moment for a universal fatwa, binding on all faithful, no matter their political convictions. No, I do not intend the terminating fatwa that, regrettably, has become most commonly identified with this word, but its original, broader intent—a binding injunction. Such a fatwa would mandate all faithful to embark on the religious and political ostracism of all who were involved in this deed, and declare Basayev's misnamed Riyadus Salikhin—"Garden of the Pious"—the poisoned garden of impiety. The world requires a practical expression of the ethical will that moved numerous spokesmen of the faith to denounce the Beslan atrocity as a distortion of the moral compass of Islam. This is a latter-day King Herod, desperate to preserve his patch of power, one who surely defiled the justice of Chechnyan aspirations, transgressed the last bastion of toleration, and corrupted the shrinking ethical space that is still left for humanity. The Community of Faith on behalf of whom this "liberator" claims to exercise his mandate should take the lead in subjecting him and his cohorts to the mandate of universal justice.

*Wole Soyinka*  
*September 2004*



## INTRODUCTION

“A Changing Mask of Fear,” the first of the five-lecture series *Climate of Fear*, was delivered at the Royal Institution in London in March 2004. During the question-and-answer session, I offered a view that the president of the United States had deliberately exaggerated suspicions of the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. By contrast, I cautioned, it was impossible, and dangerous, for him or anyone else to underestimate the menace posed to the world by al-Qaeda. A voice from the audience vehemently disagreed with the second part of that comment. Yes, without question, George Bush had gone chasing shadows in Iraq, but to suggest that there was any more substance to al-Qaeda, a force that had been definitively routed from Afghanistan, was merely buying into a warmonger’s fantasies.

Virtually the morning after that exchange, the “corpse” of al-Qaeda unleashed a horrendous attack on the civilian population of Spain, littering the railway tracks of Madrid with human parts. Once again, the surprise of the event was that anyone could have been taken by surprise.

Much more happened in that vein, not always so bloody perhaps, during those widely spaced lectures, and more has happened since. Such incidents have been merely symptomatic of the dilemma of our times. As the lecture series continued, several events would strike me—and others also, from their comments—as unrehearsed but deadly or cautionary counterpoints of reality to the series. These would include statements from world leaders, government policy decisions, self-justifications, self-reversals, military scandals, religion-inspired massacres and reprisals, and so on. A number were spurts of deadly interjections from those entities that, in this series, I have described as the quasi-state. My mind could not help, for instance, but revisit the postlecture exchanges on the theme of dignity when the scandal of the maltreatment, abuse, and torture of Iraqi prisoners and detainees at the hands of the coalition forces broke. What is so often hushed up had finally entered the public domain, and with a brutal efficacy that could only shock and bewilder.

There they were, the would-be liberators, dehumanizing their prisoners and evidently relishing the experience. At once the contention of power and dignity was bared—literally—in blistering images. The world was treated to the performance of power when it becomes suddenly accessible to the powerless in relation to the even more powerless: the result was a graphic demonstration of the indiscriminating arrogance of power, manifested in the personal and sexual humiliation of the weaker, those who were made so only by circumstances, not by any intrinsic qualities, not by others' social or economic superiority—simply by circumstances that could be reversed at any moment.

Those circumstances were indeed reversed, and with an even more sickening escalation of horror, as a hostage was offered up to the world as a sacrificial lamb. The gruesome beheading of a hapless hostage in the name of reprisal, carried out in a manner that was clearly orchestrated toward global consumption, leapfrogged the incontinence of the U.S. Army reservists in its barbarity, its arrogance and intensity of visceral laceration.

Was this killing *purely* an act of vengeance? If it were, the event would be recorded simply for periodic savoring of the wages of vengeance and/or sadistic pleasure by the perpetrators. Staged deliberately for global instruction, however, it can be read also as another statement of

power, directed at the world. The quasi-state sets its own laws and strikes at will. This exhibitionist act was of a different nature from the mob fury that was unleashed on the four American contractors, the mutilated corpses of two to be later hung upside down over a bridge in an ultimate act of desecration. That was a blood frenzy that belonged more within the psychopathology of mob susceptibility than to the statement of power. The bloody execution of a hostage, by contrast, the manner of its staging, was the communication of power, however desperate and transient.

I doubt, however, that this very act has raised the general level of fear in the mind of the average individual or, indeed, in the minds of the community. Certain acts are so far beyond the pale that they arouse the opposite emotions—anger, loathing, disgust, and contempt. Contempt for the cold-blooded competitors in the stakes of human degradation.

Alas, we can hold to account only those who accept, are bound by, or can be compelled to adhere to our code of accountability. The American forces of occupation belong within these categories; thus it is possible to express the view that they belong, like Milošević and others, at a tribunal for crimes against humanity. If the comparative status of this crime appears not to warrant the attention of that eminent body, however, then perhaps it is time

to revisit the Rome Convention and set up lower courts for crimes of lesser magnitude that nonetheless fall within the category of dehumanization, although not quite on the scale of genocide or "ethnic cleansing." The essence of this is to make the accused—wherever and whenever—undergo a structured passage of international opprobrium, as opposed to in-house disciplinary action that only ends with the convicts selling their stories on prime time for hundreds or thousands of dollars. Already, the spectacle of the identified perpetrators strutting around their hometowns, making free with the American media, giving self-justifying interviews, is almost as revolting as the very crimes over which the world has risen in uproar.

Is the spiral of antihumanism now unstoppable? If so, where will it lead? Constantly immersed in the cumulative denigration of human sensibilities, only to have one's most pessimistic predilections topped again and again by new acts—or revelations—of the limitless depth to which the human mind can sink in its negative designs, one is tempted to declare simply that the world has now entered an irreversible state of global anomie.

However, in addition to the existence on the same globe of communities that stubbornly set their course on a faith in the redemptive potential of the social being as a creature of lofty aspirations—the existence of nations

and organizations that establish structures for contesting inhuman acts not merely on moral but on agreed-upon legal principles—there are also reminders here and there, on both major and minor scales, of a constant striving toward the option of healing, and the establishment of just and humane communities. It is for this reason that I consider it perhaps of some value, however limited, to co-opt, as the final word of this brief preface to a rather gloomy exposition, the following excerpt from a letter I recently received in response to the lectures.

The author was one of our contacts during the trip of a group of writers to the Middle East, referred to in the fourth lecture, "The Quest for Dignity." She wrote to inform me of the remarkable impact of the visit of the Jewish musician Daniel Barenboim to Ramallah, where he and a newly trained orchestra of Palestinian youths performed in concert. The resultant fervor of human belonging described in the coverage of Barenboim's presence and activities among the Palestinians evoked, for me, memories of our own visit two years earlier, one that culminated in a magical night of poetry and music that welled into the euphoria of sheer human solidarity in the ancient theater of Ramallah.

The letter was not, however, all about that conjured space of the transcendental, when all things seem possi-



ble because of a collective immersion in an artistic experience, leading to a rare glimpse of the oneness of our universe—"Everything is linked," said an enraptured Barenboim onstage; "everyone is linked, all our actions have ramifications, and music is a teacher of this interconnected reality." There was, however, in the letter a mundane, prosaic footnote that nibbled at the very edges of possible understanding, since understanding must always be preceded by human curiosity. Perhaps it will vanish in the charged space between one suicide bomber and the next military bulldozer that buries human beings alive within the imagined security of their own homes; perhaps it will join other shards of recollected moments of curiosity and discovery, to weld into a vessel of receptivity and response. No matter, here it is, and most especially for the edification of that recalcitrant lobby, frozen in time, locked in negative memory, whose responses to this series sadly indicate that they cannot yet commence the journey of curiosity across a dividing wall. She writes:

I am glad that for once I can send good news from Palestine. The enclosed articles bear witness to something beautiful, hopeful and creative that happened in Palestine last week. Reading your Reith Lecture "The quest for dignity," I thought you would