



**Ain Shams University
Faculty of Women for Arts, Science, and Education
Department of English Language and Literature**

**"Speaking the Truth to Power": Resisting the Dictator
in Selected Poems by Amal Dunqul and Odia Ofeimun**

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
---------------------------	----------

Chapter One: <i>The Role of the Intellectual under Dictatorial Regimes: The Rise of new Oppositional Voices.....</i>	27
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Chapter Two: <i>The Poetics of Egyptian Spartacus: The Upcoming Testament of Revolution</i>	47
--	-----------

Chapter Three: <i>Ofeimun the Rebellious Griot: The Poet who did not Lie.....</i>	113
--	------------

Conclusion	154
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Works Cited.....	164
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Introduction

"Speaking Truth to Power" is a tool of political activism, opposition, and resistance against the norms imposed by the authority. Poets/intellectuals, like Amal Dunqul (1940-1983) and Odia Ofeimun (b.1950), are believed to play a vital role in reflecting, and instigating sociopolitical changes in their own societies. They do so by highlighting the incompetence and the tyranny of the governing authorities in Egypt and Nigeria. Not only do they document the atrocities of the authority, but they also empower the masses to ask for their rights. As such, they qualify not only as poets but as also intellectuals.

The Objectives of the Study

The main purpose of the present study is to juxtapose the selections from the poetry collections of the Egyptian poet Amal Dunqul and the Nigerian poet Odia Ofeimun in an attempt to find out how each of them managed to "Speak Truth to Power" through their writings in the dystopian hegemonic political atmosphere in post-colonial Egypt and Nigeria.¹ Accordingly, Amal Dunqul's *Al-bukā' Bayna Yaday Zarqā' Al-Yamāma* [*Crying Before Zarqā' Al-Yamāma*] (1969), *Al-'ahd Al-'aty* [*The Upcoming Testament*] (1975), and *Aqwāl Jadida 'an Ḥarb Al-basūs* [*New Testimonies on the Basūs War*] (1983); and Odia Ofeimun's *The Poet Lied* (1980) and *Go Tell the Generals*

(2000) will be analyzed. These selections aim at highlighting the antagonistic relationship between the poet/intellectual and the governing authority. The analysis will also exhibit the use of poetry as a counter-discourse that defies the pervasive hegemonic power fearless of any consequences.²

The thesis is divided into an introduction, three chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction displays the background of the two writers and the sociopolitical circumstances in which the texts were written. It also illustrates the rationale behind choosing both writers and their texts. Furthermore, it highlights the relationship between rhetoric and resistance which goes back to ancient civilizations and the historical background of the term "Speaking Truth to Power".

Chapter one attempts to define the concept of "Speaking Truth to Power" from the point of view of different thinkers like Edward Said, Barbara Harlow, Michael Foucault, and others. Additionally, the chapter deals with the role of the intellectuals, especially under atrocious regimes.

Chapter two illustrates the role of Amal Dunqul as a dissident intellectual whose poetry fearlessly spoke truth to power. Selections from Dunqul's collections, Al-buka'

Bayna Yaday *Zarqā' Al-Yamāma* [*Crying Before Zarqā' Al-Yamāma*] (1969), *Al-'ahd Al-'aty* [*The Upcoming Testament*] (1975), and *Aqwāl Jadida 'an Ḥarb Al-basūs* [*New Testimonies on the Basūs War*] (1983), are analyzed to exhibit the sociopolitical changes took place in Egypt after the 1952 revolution. The analysis of these poems also highlights the poet's representation of the 1967 defeat, the October War, and the Camp David Treaty.

Chapter three illustrates how Odi Ofeimun managed to "Speak Truth to Power" in two of his poetry collections, *The Poet Lied* (1980) and *Go Tell the Generals* (2000). It also shows how his poetry functioned as a manifesto of anger, and how it advocated democracy and human rights in Nigeria as a representative of the second post-colonial literary generation.

The conclusion sums up the findings of the thesis in addition to recapturing the salient features in the poetry of both writers.

"Speaking Truth to Power": History of the Concept and the Term

Originally, "Speaking Truth to Power" is not a recent term; it was adopted in ancient times in Athens in courts, peoples' assemblies, and in theaters by famous playwrights

at that time.³ "Parrhesia" refers to speaking frankly what is in one's mind; a primitive way of expressing one's thoughts to his/her people in a quasi-democratic atmosphere (*Fearless Speech* 12). It is translated from Greek into English as "free speech", while "parrhesiastes " is the who uses parrhesia (11).

Based on the aforementioned postulation, parrhesia becomes an earlier representation of "Speaking Truth to Power", and "parrhesiastes " is the intellectual/writer is who is supposed to speak the truth (11). Foucault assumed that in classical times parrhesia had two meanings one pejorative, while the other one is positive. In fact, it was Plato who developed the pejorative sense in referring to parrhesia; he regards parrhesia as the act of simply chattering about something without any criterion which may eventually distort the democratic structure of the country. Foucault believes also that it gives everyone the right to speak even if he/she is the most stupid or irrational ideas that may endanger the country's political stability. The positive sense of the term, however, comes from a religious standpoint; speaking truth needs to be in accordance with one's moral and religious integrity, or else lack of Parrhesia will be an obstacle to the worship of God (13-14).

Parrhesia thus becomes an activity performed by "real

intellectuals" to describe their fearless efforts in facing power. Such intellectuals employ their own rhetoric in a rather clear, direct, and frank way to avoid misleading the audience. Accordingly, "frankness" is one of the key features of the "parrhesiastic activity" that must be embraced while facing authority by intellectuals, Foucault asserts (11-13).

Parrhesia, Foucault concludes, is a "verbal activity" that has a relationship with both truth *and* frankness through employing one's skills of criticizing authority and keeping in mind ethics and duty (19). It is a term that involves danger; if the intellectuals chose to face tyrants refusing their injustice, they would be in danger. Being in danger may be the lowest cost paid by the intellectuals, as they may get prosecuted or assassinated due to their endeavors. Intellectuals, however, have the power to criticize even the most dictatorial authorities with the aim of adjusting its own performance. Parrhesia assumes that the intellectuals or the citizens must speak their opinions depending on his/ her moral truthfulness; "says what is true because he [or she] knows that it is really true", depending on "coincidence between belief and truth"(14).

Accordingly, parrhesia, as thoroughly explained by Foucault, can be an early intellectual representation of

"Speaking Truth to Power" that was used since ancient times. Therefore, since antiquity, the intellectuals must employ their moral integrity along with their own courage, frankness, and truthfulness to perform their own duty of combating power (19). As a result, the activity of "Speaking Truth to Power" turns to be an ultimate risk, even in the most democratic societies, as intellectual may end up being exiled imprisoned or punished severely (18-19).

Although the concept of "Speaking Truth to Power" can be traced back to Ancient Greece, the modern usage of the idiom goes to the Quakers in 1955. The American Friends Service Committee of the Religious Society of Friends (Quaker) coined the phrase "Speaking Truth to Power" in which they declared their aims at searching for alternative strategies other than violence to resolve conflicts, particularly after the United States adopted military power and violence as a central policy in exercising authority (Quaker.org). This was an early pacifist call against fascism and all forms of totalitarianism.

Speaking Truth to Power: An Intellectual Endeavor

The twentieth century witnessed a growing interest in studying the role of intellectuals, and their ability to incur change in their societies. In *Representations of the Intellectuals*, Edward Said (1935-2003) defines the

intellectual as an individual gifted with a special "faculty" to convey a certain message or a vision to the public (11).⁴ He also pinpoints that "in the Arab-Islamic world, the two words used for intellectual are *muthaqaf* or *mufakir*, the first derived from *thaqafa* or culture (hence, man of culture), the second from *fikr* or thought (hence, man of thought)" (*The Public Intellectual* 21). Similarly, Raymond Williams in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* describes intellectuals as those who perform a "mental effort" that causes ideological or cultural impact in their societies (170). Hence intellectuals, as men of culture and thought, mainly employ their intellect to produce a cultural or an ideological output, hoping to cause a change.

In this regard, literature can be an intellectual pursuit that has a cultural and ideological role (Barber 6), due to involving what Williams called an intricate "mental effort". Said states that the writer/ intellectual is "someone who ought to be listened to as a guide to the confusing present" (*The Public Intellectual* 20). As such, intellectuals are expected to conceptualize their society through their cultural production; encountering injustice and oppression triggered by the authority has given the intellectuals an adequate subject matter for their writings. Literature, then, as an intellectual pursuit turns out to be a medium for presenting

an "alternative narrative" other than the one presented by the officials (*The Public Intellectual* 37).

Amal Dunqul is one of the most renowned poets in modern Arabic literature. He was called 'amīr shu'ra' alrafḍ [The Prince of Refuseniks]; for steadfastly standing against the despotism of the post-revolution Egyptian authority.⁵ His poetry was not merely a testimonial writing or documentation; it was a way of writing back against oppression, and a manifestation of anger and revolution.⁶

Odia Ofeimun was born in 1950 in Irukekpen-Ekuma, Edo State, Nigeria. He is a prolific poet, political activist, literary and social critic and columnist. His massive written output ranges from poetry, literary criticism, and political essays, in addition to editing two Nigerian poetic anthologies.⁷ His works have been translated into many languages and he has received many literary prizes such as "Fonlon-Nichols Award for literary excellence and propagation of Human Rights by the African Literature Association in 2010" (Poetry International Rotterdam). As a politically committed writer, he worked as a private secretary to Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the national leader of Action Group at his early career (Ojaide 121).⁸

The poetry of Dunqul and Ofeimun tries to expose the increasing corruption and the cultural and political hegemony practiced by the governing regimes in their newly independent countries. In this context, the thesis explores the overlapping roles of the intellectual and the political activist who uses literary production to fight back authoritarianism, an endeavor to write back against what "a dominant or established discourse" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 56-57).

Studying Dunqul's and Ofeimun's poetry reflects the role of the poet/intellectual in confronting autocratic regimes. It also attempts to reveal the way poetry was a manifestation of Edward Said's "Speaking Truth to Power" which stresses the role of the real intellectual as the voice of the voiceless, who courageously faces the authority and reveals its violations and incompetence. The poetry of Dunqul and Ofeimun, as will be revealed in the analysis, is not a mere documentation of historical events at their time, it rather presents a medium for social mobilization that urges people to resist oppression and dictatorship.

The thesis, as such, discusses Dunqul and Ofeimun in terms of being "guerrilla fighters" who employed their poetry to serve the notions of freedom and justice instead of simply commenting on the historical events during their

time, according to Barbara Harlow (33). Therefore, in the light of Edward Said's "Speaking Truth to Power", Barbara Harlow's definition of resistance literature, and Antonio Gramsci's definition of intellectuals, selections of Dunqul's and Ofeimun's poetry will be examined in order to understand their written legacy as revolutionary writers. In order to understand Dunqul's and Ofeimun's poetic/political trajectory, an overview of the political context in both Egypt and Nigeria will be highlighted.

Egypt: A Post- Revolutionary Disappointment

In January 1952, rage in Egypt escalated against the monarchy; a savage British attack on an Egyptian police post took place in the Suez Canal causing numerous deaths. King Farouk, however, reacted indifferently towards the massacre; the whole country exploded in protest. Six months later, on July 23, 1952, a group of military officers, called the "Free Officers" or "Tanzīm Al- ḍobaṭ Al-'aḥrar", led by Muḥamad Najīb and Jamāl 'Abd Al-Nāṣir, toppled the monarchy in a revolution which was seen by many as a coup (Gordon 4). The military movement "overthrew the parliamentary monarchy and forced the king's abdication and departure from Egypt" (Jankowski 13-14). The movement claimed it was putting an end to the increasing corruption of the monarchy, atrocious feudal system, abuse