

# IFTEKHAR SAYEED

## Freedom and *Freedom*

### 1. Individual and Collective Freedom

December 6, 1990. The General announced his resignation. The student revolt had finally blossomed into *freedom*. They rejoiced in their *liberty*. Do these words mean anything in Asia—or are they “only words”?

Before answering the question, let us note that the words do mean something: they connote *collective freedom*. When Rabindranath Tagore, in his celebrated *Gitanjali* cycle of poems, intoned

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high; ...  
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake<sup>1</sup>

he had collective freedom in mind. India’s colonial experience would explain the quest for collective freedom.

*The Quiet American*, the novel by Graham Greene, explores the consequences of trying to impose an alien view on another culture. A bizarre conversation on political philosophy takes place between Thomas Fowler, the narrator, and Arden Pyle, an







and the mastership of slaves, and the political and royal rule, as I was saying at the outset, are all the same.”<sup>13</sup> In this, he is merely echoing Plato:

“Well, then, there are to be found in other cities rulers and the people as in our city, are there not?”

“There are.”

“Will not all these address one another as fellow citizens?”

“Of course.”

“But in addition to citizens, what do the people in other states call their rulers?”

“In most cities, masters, in democratic cities, just this—rulers.”

“But what of the people in our city. In addition to citizens, what do they call their rulers?”

“Saviours and helpers, he said.”

“And what term do these apply to the people?”

“Payers of their wage and supporters.”

“And how do the rulers in other states denominate the populace?”

to be subject to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary will of another man:  
as freedom of nature is, to be under no other restraint but the law of nature.<sup>18</sup>

Notice the similarity with Aristotle's conception of liberty above: to rule and to be ruled

The nations, not so blest as thee,  
Must, in their turns, to tyrants fall:  
While thou shalt flourish great and free,  
The dread and envy of them all.  
“Rule, Britannia, rule the waves;  
Britons never will be slaves.”<sup>22</sup>

Other countries would be ruled by kings—dreadful fate!—but Britain would enjoy Lockean liberty, and enslave black people, while herself remaining free.

### 3. The Iberian Distinction

In 1856, George M. Stroud, an abolitionist, provided the following legal enchainment of the master-slave relationship:<sup>23</sup>

1. The master may determine the kind and degree, and time of labour to which the slave may be subjected.
2. The master may supply the slave with such food and clothing only, both as to quantity and quality, as he may think proper or find convenient.
3. The master may, at his discretion, inflict any punishment on the person of his slave.
4. All the power of the master over his slave may be exercised not only by himself in person, but by anyone whom he may depute as his agent.
5. Slaves have no legal rights of property in things, real or personal; but whatever they may acquire belongs, in point of law, to their masters.
6. The slave, being a *personal chattel*, is at all times liable to be sold absolutely, or mortgaged or leased, at the will of his master.
7. He may also be sold by process of law for the satisfaction of the debts of a living, or the debts and bequests of a deceased master, at the suit of creditors or legatees.
8. A slave cannot be a party before a judicial tribunal, in any species of actions against his master, no matter how atrocious may have been the injury received from him.
9. Slaves cannot redeem themselves, nor obtain a change of masters, though cruel treatment may have rendered such change necessary for their personal safety.
10. Slaves being objects of *property*, if injured by third persons, their owners may bring suit, and recover damages for the injury.
11. Slaves can make no contract.
12. Slavery is hereditary and perpetual.







hardly human. (Incredibly enough, Diodotus, a royal slave in the Seleucid household, seized power in the kingdom of Syria and was accepted—albeit temporarily—as a ruler;<sup>30</sup> the episode highlights the level of tolerance under Hellenistic absolutism, discussed below.)

## 5. Freedom and Slavery

What, then, of the antonym of *slavery*—*freedom*? The meaning of this word too must be inextricably connected to the historical experience of the people. Thus, freedom and democracy have tended to mean little in the Iberian world—Spain and Portugal were both dictatorships until the other day, and Latin America, as noted, has the perpetual *caudillo*—whereas some form of participatory government and the associated idea of liberty persisted throughout Greek, Republican Roman and Western European history as the reflex of slavery and exclusion.

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The very meaning of *freedom* derived from its antithesis—*slavery*. In Asia, large-scale chattel slavery had never been practiced.<sup>31</sup> Egypt, as we have seen, had no concept of slavery, and slaves, in any recognisable form, never appeared until the Egyptian Empire—yet even then were only a minuscule part of the labour force;<sup>32</sup> household slaves were easily assimilated.<sup>33</sup> In China, slaves comprised only 1% of the total population and had a very different status from that of Roman slaves.<sup>34</sup> The corresponding ratio for Attica around 431 BC is between 25-33%.<sup>35</sup> However, in Greece, too, Hellenistic despotism entailed the disappearance of slavery<sup>36</sup>—and its re-emergence with the Roman Republic and, again, its disappearance with the Empire.<sup>37</sup> *Freedom* has no meaning unless the possibility of losing it is real.

The idea of freedom had been born, then, of the experience of slavery. An idea, however, travels, without the baggage of attendant experience. In the process it becomes a word, disconnected, dislocated. The connotation changes; and there emerged two connotations, a Western and an Asian sense.

## 6. A Philosophical Aside

I owe the distinction between idea and word to Descartes, who made such a distinction in a few telling cases. He said there is no idea corresponding to the words “nothing” or “rest” or “darkness.”<sup>38</sup> These ideas are mere negations of their positive counterparts.

Descartes was groping towards a sense-reference distinction, first made explicit in his seminal essay ‘On Sense and Reference’ by Gottlob Frege. We understand what “darkness” means, but the word does not correspond to anything—it has sense, but no reference. However, Frege also made a third distinction:





Africa. Only when the Berlin Wall collapsed did donors feel safe enough to allow multi-

## 8. The Freedom Industry

We still have to explain why so many African and Asian countries have adopted multi-party democracy, in the teeth of opposition from their culture and their history. Let us go back to the quotation from Chabal and Daloz: “It cannot simply be a coincidence, that, now that the West ties aid to democratisation under the guise of multi-party elections, multi-party elections are taking place in Africa.” Donors want democracy; they are willing to pump money and prestige into the idea. Therefore, a “freedom industry” has developed: indeed, Chabal and Daloz devote many pages to articulating how “Africa works”—how Africans are systematically using the resources of their donors. Take civil society and NGOs:

The political significance of such a massive proliferation of NGOs in Africa deserves closer attention. Our research suggests that this expansion is less the outcome of the increasing political weight of civil society than the consequence of the very pragmatic realisation that resources are now largely channelled through NGOs. It would thus be naive to think that the advent of NGOs necessarily reflects a transition from the ponderous world of state bureaucracy to that of more flexible ‘civic’ associations operating beyond the clutch of the state. In our view, it is rather the reflection of a successful adaptation to the conditions laid down by foreign donors on the part of political actors who seek in this way to gain access to new resources.<sup>50</sup>

They observe that “there is today an international ‘aid market’ which Africans know how to play with great skill. Indeed, there is very little doubt that NGOs spend an excessive proportion of their budget on furnishing their members with sophisticated and expensive equipment (from computers to four-wheel drives), leaving all too little for the development projects which justify the work of the NGOs in the first place.”<sup>51</sup> This observation can be made of Bangladesh verbatim.





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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali*, <http://gutenberg.net/gitnj10.zip>

<sup>2</sup> Graham Green, *The Quiet American* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), 93, 97.

<sup>3</sup> J. M. Roberts, *Twentieth Century: The History of the World: 1901 To The Present* (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1999), 481.

<sup>4</sup> Graham Green, *The Quiet American*, p. 97

<sup>5</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), II.37.

<sup>6</sup> Thucydides, VII.69.

<sup>7</sup> "Politics," trans. B. Jowett, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 1275b19-20.

<sup>8</sup> Politics, 1317b1-13.

<sup>9</sup> Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade* (London: Papermac, 1998), 596.

<sup>10</sup> Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto The Third, XIX – XX, <http://gutenberg.net/chpl10.zip>

<sup>11</sup> Aeschylus, *The Persians*, , eXX,

