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CHAPTER 8

ALCOHOLISM IN THIRD-WORLD LITERATURE

Buchi Emecheta, Athol Fugard, and Anita Desai

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ALCOHOLISM IS A MAJOR PROBLEM IN MOST COUNTRIES; yet in only a few countries has it become a social issue and a topic to be discussed seriously and openly. Within universities, substantive knowledge about alcoholism appears to be confined mainly to medical and sociology departments. Certainly, alcoholism is a neglected topic in literary studies. Almost all critics and teachers of literature are blind to its impact on a surprising number of characters and their relationships—even when alcoholism is the primary cause of suffering. Unless a teacher is a recovering alcoholic or knows well someone who is, ignorance or self-censorship evidently prevents much discussion of alcoholism in the classroom. Because of the shame and secrecy so long associated with alcoholism, revealing any interest in it seems almost taboo (Gilmore 6). Silence about alcoholism allows the kind of abuse and violence that frequently accompanies alcohol addictions to continue.

Until a few years ago, I knew very little about alcoholism. I certainly did not clearly understand the damage it does to physical health and family life. But then, quite unexpectedly, I witnessed a seizure caused by withdrawal from alcohol. The shock of this event raised my consciousness and opened my eyes to the nature and consequences of addictions. Gradually I became aware of the extent to which alcoholism permeates both our social environment and the literature I teach. Not to have directed students' attention to the impact of alcoholism on the lives of many characters in literature was, in fact, to have misread that literature.

Despite a preoccupation with the many sources of the protagonists' pain, critics of third- world literature, for example, fail to point to alcoholism as a significant factor in many literary works. In this chapter, therefore, I shall examine the impact of alcoholism on the characters in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood,* Athol Fugard's *"Master Harold" . . . and the Boys,* and Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day.* Although the settings for these works are Nigeria and India, the characters touched by alcoholism suffer in similar ways.

Feminist discussions of Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* reveal the extent to which the female protagonist, Nnu Ego, is the victim of an arranged marriage, polygamy, son preference, emphasis on fertility, and a belief in male superiority. Yet critics ignore the ways in which the alcoholism of Nnu Ego's husband, Nnaife, made her situation significantly worse. Nnaife's drinking impoverishes his family, makes him abusive, causes him to be violent, and sends him to jail.

Nnaife celebrates the births of his sons by serving and "drinking palm wine" (53). For instance, after the birth of his second son, he is "fully saturated with drink" (30). At the celebration of the naming of another son, "palm wine flowed like the spring water from Ibusa streams" (111). Likewise the arrival of his second wife as well as his son's success in obtaining his first job call for celebrations with palm wine and ogogoro, the local gin (111). He also turns to palm wine for consolation when his brother dies and when girls rather than boys are born. When his wife announces the birth of twin girls, he blames his wife for not giving him something better and leaves the house "to drink with his friends" (127).

Nnaife's drinking is not confined to special occasions; he drinks every evening. When unemployed and suffering from hunger, he still has a fat abdomen from drinking palm wine—"too much of it" (94). He is frequently out drinking until "the early hours of the morning" (113). Thus, his drinking causes his wife and children to suffer from hunger. Whereas his senior wife, Nnu Egos, accepts such behavior as normal for males—"Men, they will always have their fun" (130)—his second wife, Adaku, begins to protest—"Look at us, trying to make ends meet, and he squanders his money on drink" (130). Even Nnu Ego recognizes that they "are not given enough housekeeping money" and says, "I am sure he spends more than we get on his drink" (133–34). Finally Nnu Ego confronts Nnaife directly: "What you spend on a keg of palm wine would buy us all a meal" (134). His response however, is hostile: "'I am not adding a penny to that money,' he said adamantly. 'You can starve, for all I care.' With that he strode out, making his way to the stalls of the palm-wine sellers near Suru Lere" (136).

Nnaife continues to impregnate his wives although he cannot support the children already born, and he continues to waste on alcohol the money needed for food. Nnaife had wrongly assumed he "would no longer have to work and would lead a life of indolence and ease, drinking palm wine with his friends" once his eldest son, Oshia, graduated (198). However, instead of displaying any willingness to support Nnaife's ever-expanding family, Oshia announces that he is saving his money to go to a university in the United States. His enraged father tells him "I do not wish to see you ever again. . . . Out of my house!" (201). This angry response permanently destroys their relationship. Because of Nnaife's quarrelsome, drunken behavior, the other children also flee the turmoil in their home.

Kehinde rebels against her father's wish that she marry a man from the Ibo tribe instead of the Yoruba man she loves. Her refusal to comply with her father's demand angers him so much that he turns again to the consolation of palm wine, drinking before as well as after his dinner. When Nnaife is awakened to help the rest of the family search for Kehinde, he goes off in a drunken rage to kill the Yoruba man's family. Although Nnaife's son is able to warn the family and help restrain his father, Nnaife does slash the shoulder of one

of the Yoruba sons. Therefore, he is arrested and tried for attempted murder.

Nnaife's drinking habits condemn him; Nnu Ego unwittingly reveals at the trial his failures as an alcoholic husband and father, and his own testimony shows him to be greedy and naive. Because Nnu Ego believes he "owns" her (217), she states that he pays the children's school fees; in fact, the money he pays with is money *she* earns. Indeed Nnu Ego is the family's primary provider. Furthermore, Nnaife admits in court that he desires the bride price and the "twelve big kegs of bubbling palm wine" he would receive if his daughter marries according to Ibo customs (215–16). Should she marry someone from the Yoruba tribe, neither would be forthcoming. Moreover, times have changed; Nnaife never doubts he had the right to take justice into his own hands. Personal revenge was condoned in the traditional, rural world Nnaife grew up in and he is unaware that such behavior is no longer socially acceptable. Nor does society still condone alcoholism to the extent his wife, Nnu Ego, accepts his.

Nnu Ego seldom complained about his drinking because the traditional culture she grew up in saw alcohol consumption as signifying manliness. The prosecuting attorney asks her if Nnaife has a "nasty temper," and the following dialogue ensues:

> He only gets angry when he is drunk.
>
> And he drinks often, every day?
>
> Well, he is a man, isn't he? Men are expected to be like man. My father—
>
> Ahem. We are talking about your husband, not your father.
>
> My husband is like any other man. I would not have married any man who did not behave like a man.
>
> Even to the extent of carrying a cutlass?
>
> He was drunk and his daughter's honour was at stake. (217–18)

The relationship of alcoholism to gender is indeed interesting. Although Nnu Ego does not like the fact that her husband drinks, she tolerates it. As an expert on alcoholism, Robert J. Ackerman,

says: "For the male, there exists a complementary norm of excessive drinking and masculinity" (9). He points out that "a male can become inebriated and engage in drunken behavior and still be permitted to feel masculine. It is difficult for a woman to become inebriated and engage in drunken behavior and feel feminine" (9). This clarifies why a 1983 study showed that, in families with young children, nine out of ten women stayed with an alcoholic husband. Yet, when "the situation is reversed, and she is the alcoholic, only one out of ten males will stay" (9). The alcoholic's wife, like Nnu Ego, is the victim of a variety of patriarchal beliefs that intertwine with the expectation that women should tolerate a man's drinking, no matter what the consequences for her and her children. However, as Nnaife's second wife, Adaku, proves in *The Joys of Motherhood,* Nnu Ego would have been better off without him. A feminist analysis of the ways in which Nnu Ego is victimized by patriarchal attitudes and behavior must include recognition of the destructive role of her husband's alcoholism and of its association with manliness.

Just as alcoholism is intertwined with male dominance in *The Joys of Motherhood,* alcoholism and racism intermingle in Athol Fugard's play *"Master Harold" . . . and the Boys.* Fugard's play is usually analyzed only in terms of South African racial tensions. The play, which is autobiographical, is primarily about a child of an alcoholic. The pain created by the family situation causes the racial conflict that ensues. Hally, the white adolescent protagonist, lashes out at Sam, the black servant he loves, not because he is a racist but because his alcoholic father is about to return from the hospital. He is, therefore, anticipating "the end of the peace and quiet we've been having." Halley's father treats him like a servant, asking him to empty his "stinking chamberpots full of phlegm and piss" (48). Furthermore, his father steals both his money and his mother's in order to have "money for booze." In addition, when alcohol allows his parents' tempers to flare up, Hally is caught in between the two of them, which "makes life hell" for him (48–49). He tells his mother: "I'm not going to be the peacemaker anymore. I'm warning you now: when the two of you start fighting again, I'm leaving home" (49).

As a child, Hally sought refuge in the room of the two black servants Sam and Willie. As Hally tells them: "No joking, if it wasn't

for your room, I would have been the first certified ten-year-old in medical history" (25). Hally's visits to the servants' room were not socially acceptable. Repeatedly, he got a "rowing for hanging around the 'servants' quarters'" (25). Yet, he was much happier there than with his alcoholic father and his mother who functioned as an enabler. Sam, the black servant in "*Master Harold,*" was a substitute father. When Sam made a kite out of "tomato-box wood, brown paper and two of [Hally's] mother's old stockings" and they were actually able to fly it, Hally felt proud of himself and Sam: "I was so proud of us! it was the most splendid thing I had ever seen" (30).

Hally wants his mother to protect his peace of mind by insisting that his father stay in the hospital a bit longer. Hally's mother fails her child by letting the father come home early and by forcing Hally to get some brandy for his father (49). When Sam tries to comfort Hally, out of his pain and anger Hally turns on him. Hally forgets how much he loves Sam and decides to put him back into his place as a black servant. By lording it over Sam and forcing Sam to begin addressing him henceforth as "Master Harold," Hally tries to compensate for the powerless and impossible situation in which he finds himself.

Hally feels torn apart emotionally. He loves his father and defends him at the same time that he wants his father to stay away. He tells Sam: "You see, you mustn't get the wrong idea about me and my Dad, Sam. We also have our good times together. Some bloody good laughs. He's got a marvelous sense of humor" (55). Unfortunately, Hally asserts his white dominance over Sam by repeating a racist joke of his father's and proclaiming to Sam that he, too, found it "a bloody good joke" (55). Hally's behavior is self-destructive, for he risks the loss of Sam's love. Sam tells him: "You've just hurt yourself bad. And you're a coward, Master Harold. The face you should be spitting in is your father's . . . but you used mine, because you think you're safe inside your fair skin . . . and this time I don't mean just or decent" (56).

Because of the alcoholism, Hally's father fails to behave as a responsible adult and father. Sam reminds Hally of the time they went to fetch Hally's father—the night he "was dead drunk on the floor of the Central Hotel Bar" (57). As if that were not humiliating enough, Hally and Sam had to wash his father because "he'd messed

in his trousers" (58). Sam describes the dilemma faced not just by Hally but by many children of alcoholics: he loves his father and yet he is intensely ashamed of him. Seeing how ashamed Hally has been, Sam comments, "That's not the way a boy grows up to be a man! . . . But the one person who should have been teaching you what that means was the cause of your shame" (58). Worse yet, Hally also felt ashamed of himself. Sam tells Hally how he behaved after they had to fetch his father that night: "You hadn't done anything wrong, but you went around as if you owed the world an apology for being alive" (58).

Additionally, the alcoholism of his father makes Hally despair. Like another victim of alcohol abuse, Martha in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf,* Hally is an atheist. He claims that the "fundamental law of the Universe" is the "principle of perpetual disappointment." Hally believes that "if there is a God who created this world, he should scrap it and try again" (35).

In *Clear Light of Day* Anita Desai, a novelist from India, depicts the pain of children in the home of dysfunctional parents. However, unlike Fugard, she is silent about the reasons for this situation. Ostensibly the novel is about a family reunion and a sense of time and space as "perceived by the five senses" (Srivastava, 224). Critics celebrate Desai's imagery and narrative structure, but none mention that the power of the novel radiates from what is, out of pain, left unsaid.

In Desai's autobiographical novel published in 1980, the four children—Raja, Bim, Tara, and Baba—are like orphans. Their parents are never home. As adults, they recall that they were "always waiting" for their parents to come home, and even after they came home, "they were still unfulfilled, still waiting" (122). Raja describes his father as dealing with "both family and business by following a policy of neglect" (52). The night their mother dies, she had not felt well, and, "for the first time in twenty years" she had "missed an evening at the club" (53). When the father dies, the children do not miss him because he had never been there anyway: "It was but a small transition from the temporary to the permanent" (64). His absence seems normal; only the presence of his car in the garage seems abnormal (64). When their family doctor says about himself, "It is a great responsibility being an only child of a loving

mother," Bim's response is: "I wouldn't know . . . didn't have one" (84). In addition to the parents' "total disinterest in their children," there was "the secret, hopeless suffering of their mother" who had diabetes (130). The neglect and the mother's suffering created a "silent desperation that pervaded the house" (130). Anita Desai does not mention alcoholism as the reason for this neglect or as one of the causes of her mother's agony; nor does she indicate whether the father and perhaps even the diabetic mother drank alcohol every evening at the club. But in her next novel, *The Village by the Sea* (1982), the mother is again ill and the father is unemployed. This time the nonworking father is described as a dipsomaniac.

Despite Desai's silence about the parents addiction in *Clear Light of Day,* there is certainly alcohol and alcoholism in the home. Even before Tara gets married, Aunt Mira, a poor, widowed cousin who has been brought in to take care of the children, is already sneaking drinks "from a familiar looking bottle on her cupboard shelf" (64). The prospect of young Tara's oncoming marriage makes Mira drink "agitatedly, as if to hide from the intolerable prospect" (64). Later in the book Aunt Mira's body is "bony and angular, wrinkled and desiccated" (111), and she is subject to terrifying hallucinations. On one occasion she runs outside naked, crying "'Oh God—the rats, the rats! Rats, lizards, snakes—they are eating me—oh, they are eating me—' and her frantic hands tore the creatures from her throat, dragged them out of her hair. Then she doubled up and rolled and howled" (96). On another occasion, she imagines that she is being engulfed by flames (78; Cf. Gilmore, 20). At this point, Aunt Mira has a "bird-boned wrist" (87) and delirium tremens to such an extent that she cannot drink from her glass, "only spilt it all" (98). Obviously, Aunt Mira has been drinking for years. Because of alcohol, as a parent substitute she too fails to meet the children's needs.

Children of alcoholics adjust to their pain by developing certain types of personalities. The four children in Desai's novel match several of the patterns usually found in alcoholic homes. As the eldest daughter, very early on Bim becomes a hypermature child who manages the house and family (Cf. Ackerman 50). At one point the adult Bim boasts bitterly: "I could have been a nurse—or a matron—in a

plague hospital. I can handle it all" (85). Yet when her doctor asserts that she is sacrificing her life for others, she angrily denies it. In contrast, her younger sister, Tara, is the kind of child who is not noticed. She cowers in a corner or under her Aunt Mira's skirts. She does not misbehave, but she performs poorly in school. School is for her a terrifying experience. In contrast, Raja and Bim excel in school in order to gain approval through their own achievements. Also, as a way to survive, both Raja and Tara choose substitute families and spend as much time as possible in these neighbors' homes. The fourth child, Baba, is mentally handicapped. His congenital problems may or may not have been caused by either his mother's diabetes or fetal alcohol syndrome. No explanation is given.

The oldest son, Raja, feels there is "no house as dismal as his own, as dusty and grimy and uncharming. Surely no other family could have as much illness contained in it as his, or so much oddity, so many things that could not be mentioned and had to be camouflaged or ignored" (49). As Raja says, "The restraints placed on him by such demands made him chafe" (49). Eventually, Raja escapes the atmosphere at home by running away. Consciously, Tara escapes by getting married.

Meanwhile, filled with bitterness and anger, Bim stays on in the old house to care for her alcoholic aunt and her mentally handicapped brother. The plight of these four adult children is most poignantly represented by what Bim sees one day on the veranda:

> She nearly stepped on a smashed pigeon's egg and the unsightly corpse of a baby bird that had plunged to its death at birth from its disastrously inadequate nest. The scattered bits of shell, the shapeless smudge of yellow-tipped feathers and bluish-red flesh and outsize beak made Bim draw back for a moment, then plunge on with a gasp of anger, as if the pigeon had made its nest so crudely, so insecurely, simply to lose its egg and anger her and give her the trouble of clearing it. It was a piece of filth—Bim nearly sobbed—not sad, not pathetic, just filthy. (163)

Raja, Bim, Tara, and, perhaps most of all, Baba were the victims of an insecure nest.

Anita Desai's silence about what made the family nest so insecure weighs over the book. Although she is frank about her alcoholic aunt, she has censored the reasons for her parents' behavior. What is absolutely clear, however, is that she is familiar with alcoholism. Desai's *Clear Light of Day* includes moving descriptions of her Aunt Mira's hallucinations and vivid glimpses of the behavior of the drunken brothers who live next door. Yet the inexplicable behavior of the parents suggests that she may still be guarding family secrets. Critics admire her work without commenting on her lack of explanation for the parents' behavior and without noting that the children would have been affected by the central role alcohol played in the life of Aunt Mira.

To fail to notice and analyze the impact of alcoholism on the characters in literature by third world writers is to fail to understand fully the exact nature of the pain they are describing. If we ignore the alcoholism, or speak of it casually, we fail to understand what the writers wish to communicate. Third-world writers describe many problems. However, their condemnation of economic, political, and social injustices should not blind us to how clearly many of them also reveal through their characters the destructive impact of alcoholism on human lives.

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