



Fictions of Dignity: Embodying Human Rights in World Literature

By Elizabeth S. Anker

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Over the past fifty years, debates about human rights have assumed an increasingly prominent place in postcolonial literature and theory. Writers from Salman Rushdie to Nawal El Saadawi have used the novel to explore both the possibilities and challenges of enacting and protecting human rights, particularly in the Global South. In *Fictions of Dignity*, Elizabeth S. Anker shows how the dual enabling fictions of human dignity and bodily integrity contribute to an anxiety about the body that helps to explain many of the contemporary and historical failures of human rights, revealing why and how lives are excluded from human rights protections along the lines of race, gender, class, disability, and species membership. In the process, Anker examines the vital work performed by a particular kind of narrative imagination in fostering respect for human rights. Drawing on phenomenology, Anker suggests how an embodied politics of reading might restore a vital fleshiness to the overly abstract, decorporealized subject of liberal rights.

Each of the novels Anker examines approaches human rights in terms of limits and paradoxes. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* addresses the obstacles to incorporating rights into a formerly colonized nation's legal culture. El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* takes up controversies over women's freedoms in Islamic society. In *Disgrace*, J. M. Coetzee considers the disappointments of post-apartheid reconciliation in South Africa. And in *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy confronts an array of human rights abuses widespread in contemporary India. Each of these literary case studies further demonstrates the relevance of embodiment to both comprehending and redressing the failures of human rights, even while those narratives refuse simplistic ideals or solutions.

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Editorial Review

Review

"In her analysis of 'the vocabulary of human rights,' Anker . . . interrogates the liberal/Enlightenment tradition that values the intellect over the body. She regards this preference, one that stretches from Plato to Descartes, as dismissive of corporeal and indigenous factors. Hence, imperialism emphasizes the 'barbarism' of the global south, patriarchy stresses the weakness of women's bodies to justify their suppression, society categorizes animals as unconscious 'carnal being[s],' and large political bodies ignore smaller interests in implementing justice. Anker discusses four works that engage these stances. . . . [Readers] will be intrigued and challenged by Anker's critique. Summing Up: Highly recommended."?Choice (June 2013)

"*Fictions of Dignity* is a distinctive contribution to the growing body of scholarship concerned with the relationship between human rights and novels."?Emily Hogg, *New Formations* (November 2014)

"With deft skill, Elizabeth S. Anker explores some of the most important issues of human rights by moving restlessly between literature and law. The originality of her reading lies in going beyond textual and linguistic codifications and confronting the dignity of the human person in its most urgent, embodied form. I have greatly enjoyed Anker's phenomenology of the fictions of dignity."?Homi K. Bhabha, Anne F. Rothenberg Professor of the Humanities, Harvard University

"*Fictions of Dignity* mounts a defense of literature and the literary for thinking about human rights thickly?over and against what Elizabeth S. Anker considers the thinness of legal language and interpretation. It offers a compelling account of why culture matters."?Joseph Slaughter, Columbia University, author of *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*

About the Author

Elizabeth S. Anker is Associate Professor of English at Cornell University.

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