

The Ambiguous Language of Human Rights as Reflected in William Faulkner's *Dry September*

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Abstract

William Faulkner's short story entitled Dry September tells about how black people live under suspicions from white people. Black people has their own rights since it is embraced as natural statuses. White people also has the rights by living cultural sides of the society. The question then, how is the posture of human right be reflected in Faulkner's story? By using qualitative method, the analysis of this paper underlines the realities of both restrictions and limitations shown in the foundation of human rights. Those rights are never unlimited but situated through both people and society. Its languages are ambiguous since it contains various and abundant possibilities to be understood furthermore. Matters of justice and freedom are both directly and indirectly attached to wide aspects of human rights as seen in Syracuse Principles. While human rights are considered universal, its main conditions will never escape realities of particularities in real world. In conclusion, Faulkner's story is one great example of ambiguous language of human rights. The rights of the people are not static at all, but may involve relativity dynamicity of how individuals interpret society and in reverse as well.

Keywords: *Dry September; human rights; Syracuse Principles; Universal Declaration of Human Rights; William Faulkner*

A. Introduction

Since stated in Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), situation of human right is colored with perspectives of how rights are attached to human beings (UN, 2021). One main idea of human right is stated in Syracuse Principle that talks about how human right is not unlimited. One's right is both restricted by others and limited by own self. Problems of human right could be cultural and primary (Marmor, 2011). It is cultural as

embraced tightly by people every day.

It is also primary as ascribed status since being born. That situation is also reflected in William Faulkner's story *Dry September*. White people have rights to defend themselves by accusing black people in doing crimes (Faulkner, 1995). Meanwhile, black people also must not be killed since they are subjects before the law. Those two sides bear such rights to defend and to attack.

Then, how is the posture of human right be reflected in

Faulkner's story? The analysis of this paper underlines restrictions and limitations in foundation of human rights. Those rights are never unlimited but situated through both people and society. Its languages are so ambiguous that contains possibilities and probabilities. Matters of justice and freedom are directly and indirectly attached to human rights. While human rights are considered universal, its main conditions reflect particularities in real world. Law might see things as black and white, but realities could be gray, or colorful, or even without any color at all.

B. Research Method

Through qualitative method, certain concepts and written data are analyzed to answer the question in this paper. Online and offline scripts are derived to follow ideas of William Faulkner's *Dry September*. Restrictions and limitations of human rights in its ambiguous ideas are well drawn either. Online and offline scripts are derived from books, journals, and online resources to understand shown matters. The data

analysis include attaining sources, reading them carefully, comparing with other issues, quoting into paper, and writing down in reference lists.

C. Results and Discussions

Duality and Dualism in *Dry September*

Published in 1931, *Dry September* is a short story by William Faulkner. Stated in five parts, it focuses on lynch mob in the town of Jefferson, Mississippi, where a rumor says that Minnie Cooper, a white woman, has been raped by a black man Will Mayes (Faulkner, 1995). In the first part, the men working at the local barbershop discuss the latest piece of gossip coursing through the town: Will has done something terrible to Minnie. Henry Hawkshaw, a barber at the shop, speaks that he knows Will and says that no way the rumor was true (Amende, 2010). Hawk's opinion triggers heated arguments amongst those in the barbershop. One outraged man says that a white woman's word against a black man must always be taken as a fact. Then, someone named McLendon enters

the barbershop and exaggerates the rumor (Faulkner, 1995). This stokes anger within men at the shop. McLendon denies Hawk's argument by saying that he does not care whether the rape allegation is true. He and the other patrons of the barbershop leave to go find Will. Hawk watches as they depart, telling the other barbers that someone needs to stop them (Amende, 2010).

The second part tells about Minnie who lives with her mother and aunt. She is approaching forty years old, unmarried, and no man has interest in her. She started a relationship with a widower, but he left Minnie heartbroken (Faulkner, 1995). Since then, she disconnects from normal life accompanied with her drinking habit. The third part draws the mob of men in cars searching for Will and Hawk jumps into the vehicle either. The men arrive at the ice plant where Will works as a watchman. McLendon summons Will, who faces the mob and tells them he is innocent. The men ignore him, handcuff him, and throw him into one of the cars (Faulkner, 1995). As the vehicles

start off again, Hawk feels sick and jumps out then he goes back to town on foot.

In part four, the story flashes back to how Minnie nervously gets ready for a night out with friends. Her friends ask her if she is in well condition, but Minnie wants to go. In the town square, Minnie knows the other residents are discussing her and the rumor of her rape (Faulkner, 1995 and Kim, 2017). At the movies, the presence of couples at the theater compels Minnie to laugh uncontrollably. Her behavior alarms her friends, and they take her home. When they get her into bed, she is screaming maniacally, leading her friends to wonder about the truth of the rape allegation (Amende, 2010). In the fifth part, McLendon arrives home, gets angry with his wife, then goes out to sleeping porch to sleep. He removes his gun from his pocket, sets it aside, and sheds his clothes (Faulkner, 1995). He wipes some of the sweat and presses his body against the porch to cool off. McLendon looks up at the dark sky, surrounded by the quiet and seeming peace of the night.

The story is interesting since it makes reader to think what is really going on. Many will presume that McLendon is the one who rapes Minnie instead of Will (Amende, 2010 and Kim, 2017)). McLendon accuses Will to distract any allegation towards himself. Besides, let us put aside that assumption and focus on what happens in the barbershop. In there, white men are said to be dominant in that area. They could say anything and accuse anyone with no evidence at all. They say how Will could be the actor of Minnie's suffering (Faulkner, 1995 and Kim, 2017). It seems that they already have presumptions about black people. The black people are always wrong, they must be doing something bad every time and should always be considered as citizen number two (Kim, 2017). That position is so common in any racial theme story. However, the white may be true since they protect their own rights, even they accuse him without any proof (Amende, 2010). They just want to act to cover their own, but they do it negatively by destroying others. On the other side, the black

also have their own rights positively. They could not be disturbed by others' simple accusations (Kim, 2017). They are also living people with identities who are parts of society. They live as subjects of their own, not to become objects of others (Amende, 2010).

In that case, the story speaks about dualism and duality. How white men move is about dualism; saying that they are above any other races. They could define law by prosecuting others. Their own domination is so hierarchical that could easily stomp others below them (Marmor, 2011 and Kim, 2017). Others are stated not only different, but they must be controlled so that they do not disturb majority. The black men indicates duality; they are only different in skin color from the white men. The black and white live equally as human beings and subjects of the society. No side could accuse the other without any proof (Amende, 2010). Both have human rights as they embrace living in society. Moreover, through human rights, those are limited by own and restricted by others. Those are

limited by only to their own identities inside and could not be applied to others. Those are also restricted by others since any human rights must always appreciate others' as well (UN, 2021). Human rights are not unlimited and unrestricted. Those are such consciousness that intertwines with own internal and other external aspects. Human rights are always in consideration (Berardinelli, 2020 and Amende, 2010). It is a process that is going on every time.

Ambiguous Languages of Human Rights

Human rights, as fully attached to individuals through UDHR (UN, 2021), still need to be limited due to limitations in them. The ambiguity of the UDHR itself was unavoidable because its relative presuppositions were regarded as objective. What is inherent to individuals does not mean that it is easy to be actualized (UN, 2021). Human subjects are not similar to human rights. In short, the distance between individuals and human rights has triggered limitation of the concept. On the one hand, human

rights have potential for humans to develop without stopping at all. On the other hand, facing the reality of a pluralistic world, individuals will never be able to totally fulfill their rights. Presumably, human right is a construction in which limitations are absolute. Human rights could not escape vulnerable existence as an intrinsic contradiction in universal concept.

Preamble of the UDHR indicates human dignity, justice, and freedom as essentially attached to individuals (UN, 2021). These show existence of peace to be achieved passively and actively. Human rights in UDHR respect humans that supports what is good while avoids what is bad for all. This assumption arises because individuals as micro part of the world have become victims of macro power who fought in World War II (UN, 2021). Major problem with presupposition of UDHR lies in universality which indicates ambiguity. On one hand, the universality is exist in individuals as a characteristic that cannot be contested. This side shows shared concept from 'many things in each

person' to 'many things in many people' (Marmor, 2011). Equality of rights that everyone has makes it universal; the logical presupposition is from 'every individual' to 'all individuals' in bottom-up context. On the other hand, universality is a big umbrella that covers every individual under it as 'all for each individual'. This is intended to protect the individual universally from above as top-down values. This side actually does not refer to individuals directly but to indirect potential realization of human rights (UNODC, 2021).

The ambiguity of UDHR also reflects as 'a whole' and 'a part'. Overall, each individual is universal before UDHR, while the protection only partly recognizes the individual (UN, 2021). As a result, the ambiguity sparks conflict between 'what the individual has' and 'what the individual ought to have'. The contradiction between concept and reality is related to universal and relative considerations. Bottom-up aspect seems more peaceful than top-down idea since it comes from grassroots, but that lacks sustainable power. Meanwhile, top-down aspect

embraces continuous power but prone to realize coercions to the people. What is happening is contradiction between universality and particularity (Constantinides, 2000). Universality of human rights cannot be fully realized and requires full limitations so that no absolutes occur from bottom-up and top-down aspects. Presumably, ambiguity will always greet limitations due to wider possibilities of compromises.

Furthermore, not many people are aware of themselves being conceptual subjects of human rights (UNODC, 2021). That condition makes people not as autonomous and fully self-enabled subjects. Human rights are not silent potentials but interpreted as a continuous process. Besides, implementing human rights is maximizing it, but that will obviously be limited by others' individual rights. In other words, the fulfillment at the same time is to protect, from individuals, entities outside the individual, and human rights themselves. Relativity is becoming more and more unavoidable and human rights restrictions can be

important in the midst of the tensions (Constantinides, 2000).

The Syracuse Principle is discussed through democratic human rights (ICJ, 1984). When entering the public sphere, human rights must be limited so that individuals do not absolute each other (Marmor, 2011 and UNODC, 2021). The relationship is reciprocal subtracting and adding to each other. This tension will never end, and it can even trigger various problems. There are three problems that should be asserted according to his principles (ICJ, 1984). The first problem is public order, public health, and public moral in Syracuse Principles. Of course, all three are in the public sphere and as a consequence it is the state that holds power as a form of social contract from the people. These three clearly cannot be built by individuals. What exists is a group of individuals encapsulated in the bureaucracy. It is this bureaucracy that exercises power over the fundamental principles of society. Humans live and develop in society, but that does not mean that development is a fundamental principle of society (ICJ, 1984). It is

not easy to apply the principle of non-discrimination in the fundamental principles of the state into individual matters because the power tends to be owned by certain majority.

The second thing is restrictions and limitations. Restrictions come from external while limitations are from internal (ICJ, 1984). Interestingly, both are associated with such ethical self-control. In fact, both of them are pressures from the other side so that tension is inevitable. Both limit and transcend the good and the bad. In practice, these two things are always associated with good and bad things that tend to be authoritarian so that conflict becomes its result. The third thing is public emergency and the actors behind it (ICJ, 1984). The actor who can determine whether an emergency is or not is the state and not the individual or group. Democracy does not only respect individuals and groups but also gives power to them, including the state (UNODC, 2021). More power can lead to authoritarian actions that erode value of human rights. What is called a threat to the power could be the right to legalize violence in the

public sphere. The prohibition of violence in public spaces has indeed also been regulated in the Syracuse Principles (ICJ, 1984), but the full jurisdictions within the territory of the power owner actually legalize that action.

Contradictions of the Universal and the Particular in Human Rights

The human rights are related to right, legal, and cultural sides. On the rights side, universality in equality and freedom is main assumption that exists at once one but also different. When freedom is for all, everyone may not be equal since its density could be different from one to another. In reverse, equality will erode someone's freedom but may enhance others' with the logic of the whole for the whole (Woodward, 2015). On the legal side, presuppositions of certain and just can only be realized if the subject is autonomous. In fact, what is fair for all is only true within legal science but not in law. Positive side of the law shows an absolute which can be oppressive rather than liberating. In

addition, philosophical presuppositions in law form a distance from the applications so that potential deviations are very prone to occur (ICJ, 1984).

Right and law tend to show totality. Far from those, cultural side underlines existence of discourse about life conditions. Ambiguity on cultural side is not avoided but understood as open possibilities (Woodward, 2015). The existence of the 'same' cannot be an absolute benchmark for the 'other'. UDHR is considered not a permanent product, but full of contradictions in application. Not only exist in individual potential, human rights are to be lived by human beings (UN, 2021). When it is lived, there is no longer distance between human rights and the subject itself. By living it, criticism of human rights both is constructed and constructs matters of human right applications.

The conflicting boundaries of human rights does not want to answer the question "why do human rights need to be limited?" because that has already been answered by itself. Human rights do not need to be

limited because they are indeed limited. Human rights could be individual instincts or product of individual ratios. If human rights are individual instincts, then nurturing concept of human rights actually reduces that natural breadth (Woodward, 2015). When the subject thinks about human rights rationally, the limitations are aimed at the a priori aspect so that it becomes an absolute understanding (UN, 2021). Thus, it can also be asked whether human rights are human sides or merely construction of issues. The tendencies of what is good and bad is still main presupposition in human rights which is further preserved by utilitarian. Likewise, the concepts of essence and existence can be very contradictory between the two. If human rights are universal, consideration asserts 'humans as humans' and not 'labels of humans as humans' (Woodward, 2015). It also reflects contradiction in universality: the more something is considered universal, then in fact it is not 'universal' but 'forced to be universal'.

Human rights are very ambiguous that opens up so many

possibilities rather than conforming to values of good or bad, or more generally 'this one' rather than 'that one' (Constantinides, 2000). It will only propose sameness than otherness. They as 'the other' must be subject to the homogeneity of the established structure. It is impossible to accept heterogeneity because it is considered a form of anarchy and not as a system. In reality, the 'other' is also a system in itself. Objectivity in human rights is also the target of criticism. The 'many' will always have more priority than the 'little'. Particularity in everyday life is considered as less important than the universality of human rights. Furthermore, modernity also rejects the local because it is considered as primitive and uncivilized (Constantinides, 2000). It is ironic when human rights as consensus in modernity actually contain dis-census in it. Relativity could not be incorporated into objective modernity. What individuals believe is also often not in line with state policies. The state exists to fulfill and protect human rights, but what often happens is violence as tool to enforce

justification of human rights (Constantinides, 2000).

If we look deeper, the UDHR itself shows diversity in it. Individuals are highly valued in their freedom of religion, the right to opinion, and their right to a decent life (Constantinides, 2000). Unfortunately, UDHR is built on a grand rationality that is actually irrational. This is seen as a limitation of human rights itself. It may be true that human rights need to be limited so that individuals do not arbitrarily use their rights to disturb others. It is also true that power of the state must be limited so that it bases policies on human rights. The common sense of UDHR is only able to facilitate individuals to move and be protected, but not as absolute universality (Constantinides, 2000). The legitimacy of human rights as a universal value is eroded because it is normative by rigid institutions rather than dynamic by cultural people.

From the various explanations above, the universality of human rights clearly meets its limits when it is applied (Berardinelli, 2020). As seen in Faulkner's story, it seems that the cause of these limits is not only

from the actions of individuals who absolute their rights, but also the intrinsic limitations of human rights themselves (Faulkner, 1995). Human rights are indeed a product of modernity, but destroying them will also destroy human civilization. When rights are always seen as basic then they will never change and will only be improved in practice but not in assumptions (Berardinelli, 2020). How McLendon accuses Will could be considered as human rights but that action eradicates Will's as well. Will's right should not be abandoned especially since both parties embrace the same rights either. When humans are considered as humans, the process of humanizing humans will continue to occur.

On the cultural side, the limitations of rights that are seen as humane can be more accepted in various possibilities. Of course, it cannot only be seen on the a priori good side and then applied well to all. The cultural side also emphasizes what is seen as the 'other' which also needs to be accepted with various compromises in it (Berardinelli, 2020). Precisely when the human

being is increasingly interpreted culturally, then humans are increasingly showing their humanity. In Faulkner's story, interpretation of human rights should be done from two sides by making fact and regulations as the intermediaries. Will as 'Other' does not mean weird, he could just be 'different' from McLendon (Faulkner, 1995 and Amende, 2010). He could not be dictated by merely assumptions of dominance of the white people. Even superiority should not dominate, but protect the inferiors. Human rights are ambiguous in its language but it does not mean to be confused. It actually could define others better than being seen in the eye of the sameness (Berardinelli, 2020). The limitations of human rights can be overcome by shifting the view from the 'same' to the 'other' or in other words widening the horizon of view from 'definite' towards the 'infinite'. The 'other' cannot be reduced to the 'same' in totality as stated in contemporary ethics (Woodward, 2015). The 'other' is that which is limitless and at the same time has the potential of possibility. When human rights

expands its views, it may be difficult to remove its ambiguity, but it will find its purpose again, namely for humans.

D. Conclusion

The language of human rights is so ambiguous but not to be confused. Its ambiguity relates to matters of universal vs particular, static vs relative, and even definite vs infinite. As peace should be achieved actively and passively, human rights then should be regulated either. It is related to Syracuse Principles that mostly speaks about limitations of own identities and restrictions of other men and women of human rights. That aspect is also reflected in Faulkner's *Dry September* in which human rights are shown as reflection of dominance. What should happen is actually matter of otherness rather than sameness. Human rights should cover duality rather than protect dualism. Those should speak of proofs as presupposition of ascribed rights. As rights are about equality owned by everyone, any application of right should be limited to internal

identities and restricted by others' existences as well.

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