

**The role of literature in human rights:
Studying the art of the novel through the texts of Milan Kundera,
J.M.Coetzee and Ernesto Sabato**

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Are the human rights an arrival to the acceptance of equality and freedom of all people or a departure, the beginning of a process. Human rights can be interpreted as principles of moral propriety, a set of objectives toward achieving a better world. They advance mostly legal, sociological, psychological, philosophical and political discourses. The focus of this paper however is how human rights connect to literature, mainly to a particular form of literary text, the novel.

I examine Milan Kundera's *Art of the Novel*, J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* and Ernesto Sabato's *El Escritor y sus fantasmas*¹ with a focus on their elaborations on the role and purpose of the novel. These writings raise fundamental issues about the state of the novel, which are particularly interesting when examined in the context of the postcoloniality and human rights.

If the human rights are a dimension of the recognition and acceptance of the equality and diversity of people than the human rights discourse had already started. It started with texts written *against* the formerly established hierarchy/ies, with postcolonial, feminist etc. writing and studies.

Nonetheless the discourse of human rights is a spiral process, which - by definition - requires the understanding of human nature. Although human nature has been studied for centuries, the question is what it means for/in the various - including previously ignored or misinterpreted – cultures in the changing times.

Human nature and thus human rights cannot be understood merely by logic. Human rights (based on civil law, which draws on the enlightenment) maintain that we are endowed with “reason and conscience” (1st article of the UDHR). Yet values are not based on reason (Sabato 27). A great deal of what is integral part of human nature and existence is unconscious, emotional, based on desires none of which have internal logic, yet this irremovable heterogeneity governs much of our lives. Literature can illuminate on human nature and existence in its fullness - with its logic and illogic – therefore it has a crucial role in understanding humanity and consequently the principles of moral propriety defined in human rights. The novel brings us closer to human rights.

¹ In Czech translation. Ernesto Sabato. *Spisovatel a jeho přízraky*. Prague: Mladá Fronta, 2002. trans. Vít Urban and Anežka Charvátová.