

# Fracturing the Insularity of the Global State: War and Conflict in Moira Buffini's *Welcome to Thebes*

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## **Introduction**

Conflicts have always played a role in human society, but the recent global and local economic conditions have led to an increase in their intensity, and complexity. States are under siege from marauding powers whose intentions are sometimes either politically or economically ambiguous though with clear outcomes of imposition of political will for economic benefit. The economic gains are usually tilted towards the invading, or liberating, power. These invading powers often metamorphose as mercurial peacekeepers, impatient to humanise their plunder and present a passionate view of justice, even as they supplant the legitimate authority of the 'colonised' state on several bases.

Moira Buffini's *Welcome to Thebes* is a contemporary re-presentation of Thebes as an African country emerging from a ruinous internal conflict into a chaotic and disordered peace. Weaving the classical Theban past with contemporary African historical perspectives, Buffini explores the dislocation of power and the disjunction between reconciliation and revenge on the one hand, and the deflation of imperial ego through feminine guile on the other. Her drama examines the positions of both the coloniser and the colonised, and the accommodations each have to make to ensure the continual well-being of the colonised state. Drawing her antecedents from Greek antiquity,

Buffini investigates how war and conflict resolution fracture the global state, in the way they demythologise and infiltrate the complacency of the ruling powers, and expose their supposed insularity. Tangentially, she also scrutinises the failure of such powers from hinging their actions on history, in particular the absurdity of repeating the same mistakes from historical past.

*Welcome to Thebes*, inspired by ancient Greek myths, is set in the present day and dramatizes an encounter between the world's richest and most politically complacent country and one of the poorest countries in the aftermath of a fierce internecine war. Though set in the twentieth century, the actions still take place in "a city named Thebes" (p. 2<sup>1</sup>), a city emerging from a ten-year war with a feminist agenda to re-engineer the society through a truth and reconciliation commission. However, this cannot be done without the financial and political support of the stronger Athenian state, the seat of democracy, whose first citizen is Theseus.

### **Dramatising Myths**

The dramatic plot is eclectically derived from classical Greek plays, in particular *Hippolytus* and *Antigone* by Euripides and Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, but, in general, from a whole corpus of classical myths. There are also references to the recent wars in sub-Saharan African countries of Sudan, Liberia and Sierra Leone, and the emergence of Ellen Sirleaf-Johnson as the president of Liberia in 2005, following the Second Liberian Civil War. The war lasted from 1999 to 2003; and followed the First Liberian Civil War of 1989 to 1996, which ended with the election of Charles Taylor, an erstwhile warlord who defeated Sirleaf-Johnson at the polls. All these subtexts lend an intertextual theme to *Welcome to Thebes*.

After ten years of war, Thebes has just elected Eurydice, the wife of the dead Creon, as the first democratic president of the state. With a shattered infrastructure and a penurious population, she promises peace to her nation. But it is a promise she cannot redeem without the

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes are from Moira Buffini, *Welcome to Thebes*, London: Faber and Faber, 2010.

aid of the arrogant, emotionally unstable and patronising Theseus, the leader of the wealthy state of Athens whose sole motivation is material gain. In that, Eurydice must learn to adapt to new system of politicking by diplomatically playing a powerful nation, Athens, against the Spartans.

The legendary Theseus has every reason to be arrogant and insufferable; as a young hero, he kills a maddened bull that is terrorizing Athens, seduces the Minos princess Ariadne and, with her assistance, defeats the Minotaur; and is feted and admired by his countrymen as a strong leader. But his haughtiness makes him abandon the pregnant Ariadne on an island. By the time he comes back to the island, Ariadne has killed herself, leaving her sister Phaedra whom Theseus marries and brings back Athens, a city-state which he has united and made prosperous by his good leadership.

Thebes' origin however is mysterious and filled with incidents such as the birth of god Dionysus, the patron god of the city, and how Cadmus defeated the legendary snake whose teeth formed the first warriors of Thebes. The royal family is also cursed through Oedipus because of a disavowal of Tiresias' prophecy concerning an impending doom. After Oedipus' exile, his mother/wife Jocasta's brother, Creon, who is married to the quiet, unassuming Eurydice, becomes King. However, in *Welcome to Thebes*, Buffini makes Eurydice the ruling power instead of her husband, thereby giving women the voice, as in *Lysistrata*. Although, unlike in *Lysistrata*, Eurydice is elected in a democratic setting and not self-nominated as leader. She found the conviction to contest the election after Creon's death during a war campaign. He was ambushed at a barricade of human innards and his body dismembered.

Buffini's *Thebes* is introduced by a militia sergeant named Miletus, and two child soldiers under his command, Scud and Megeara. They discover the body of Polynices, brother of Antigone and Ismene, and a warlord in the recently concluded civil war, as Eurydice and her all-female cabinet prepares for the arrival of Theseus, first citizen of the powerful democratic state of Athens. Theseus' visit is presented as a benevolent presence regarding aid to rebuild Thebes and support the new female president. Theseus is especially important to bolster the

new government whose opposition leader, Tydeus, is a former champion athlete, a devotee of Dionysus and a war criminal; after losing the election to Eurydice, he unceasingly plots with Pargeia, Polynices' widow, to seize political power in Thebes.

When the new president is informed of the discovery of Polynices' body, she immediately takes a Creonic decision to leave the body unburied as a punishment and a reminder of the warlord's horrible actions during the war he caused. Faced with a growing discontent from her people, Theseus arrives to offer equality and support, which he in the same breath betrays by his skepticism about Eurydice's ability to be an effective ruler by virtue of her gender; he reveals his mythical interest in the Dionysian antecedent of Thebes and asks the president to dance for him (p. 62) like a common entertainer. After all, she is practically a "beggar" and a new democrat before the might of the democratic Athenian leader who prefers to be identified by the populist term of "First Citizen."

Theseus' contempt for the Thebans is displayed in his opinion of them as "people who eat each other's brains... people who leave corpses right outside their gates" (pp. 63 – 64). Buffini introduces Euripides' *Hippolytus* through Theseus' continual attempt by telephone for information about his wife. The lack of credible news and the unstable situation in Athens betrays the vaunted peace and prosperity of the democratic state and puts Theseus' claims into perspective. Later, incidents disclose the suicide of Phaedra and the death of Hippolytus, events which, with the failure of Theseus' mission, quicken the demystification of the powerful Athenian state. To further hasten Theseus' "fall," his aide shoots and kills Scud the boy soldier. Tydeus exposes the duplicitous nature of the global power as he courts the first citizen of Athens and projects himself as a credible ruler of Thebes who should be supported, and not the feminine Eurydice who is weak, leaves dead bodies on the streets and is unreliable in her tardiness.

The Athenian army who had morphed into peacekeepers keeps guard in Thebes. Sensing the failure of his mission, especially after the news of his wife's suicide, whose circumstances he blames on his son Hippolytus, Theseus threatens to pull out the soldiers, leaving

Eurydice without military support to protect her mandate. This of course is a last ditch attempt to cow the Thebans into signing a trade treaty with Athens instead of with Spartans. His “international responsibility” (p. 83) however inhibits withdrawing his soldiers, as Athens support for Thebes is integral to its advocacy for democracy.

The political ambivalence of Athens as a global power is further bared by Pargeia as she encourages Tydeus not to use the Spartans arms he had ordered but to seek Theseus’ backing for his insurrection:

**Pargeia** Shape up to it, come on, shape up  
Shine up that skilful tongue of yours  
We could have Theseus without the violence  
If Athens backs up Thebes is ours – elections all be fucked  
You know it’s Athens chooses leaders, props them up.  
All this blah-blah-blah about democracy –  
If they don’t like the people’s choice, they topple it (p. 91)

This statement undermines the public schema of the global power and uncovers the seditious views of the colonised as well as poor independent states that seek to trade with powerful nations such as the modern United States of America. Tydeus further questions the Athenian’s commitment to “international responsibility” by uncovering the conflict in Theseus’ nature about whether to offer assistance or indulge in myths and fantasies about the origin of Thebes. But to assert its significance and independence, Eurydice calls the bluff of the dithering Athens and announces the invitation of Spartans to the aid of Thebes, in opposition to Theseus’ power: “if you cannot help, may you devour yourselves” (p. 104). This angers Theseus who responds:

**Theseus** I can’t believe you’d speak to me like this.  
I came here so compassionate  
So full of energy, of admiration;  
I was going to pledge myself to your improvement.  
You make me feel like I’m a wicked man  
And I don’t like that, not one bit.  
I AM THE HOPE OF ATHENS AND THE WORLD (p. 104)

In the end, Thebes rejects the notion of being “colonised” by the global, domineering, male state and opts “to be a nation that

regenerates itself” (p. 109) outside the influence of the superpower that is humanised in the confused Theseus.

### **Mythologising Contemporary History**

The parallel with Liberia is remarkable: a war-torn, war-weary, poverty stricken African nation which has just elected a female president. After two incapacitating civil wars, the country embraces democracy and chooses to rebuild an enduring nation, with the help of more powerful states – United States of America, United Kingdom, France and other major powers. Less than a year after the election of Ellen Sirleaf-Johnson, in 2006, she instituted a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to promote national peace, security, unity and reconciliation by investigating the events and personalities surrounding the civil conflict in the country since the 1980s. The idea was modelled after South Africa’s post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission instituted by the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act 34 of 1995 to “provide for the investigation and the establishment of as complete a picture as possible of the nature, causes and extent of gross violations of human rights committed during the period from 1 March 1960” in the country. Essentially, the Commission was set up by the South African government to deal with the violence and human rights abuses under apartheid. The Commission found that many prominent South Africans, black and white, were involved in the abuses lasting more than thirty years.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as a public process, retrieves personal testimonies and assimilates them into a national narrative of grief, often subordinating individual needs to collective healing, as Thalia, the minister of justice, demonstrates in her exposure of Tydeus as a war criminal who had impaled a child who saw a saviour in his arrival at his father’s workshop during the conflict.

The Liberian Commission found in 2009 that Sirleaf-Johnson, like Eurydice in the Theban conflict, remained implicated in the conflict because she provided financial support for former President Charles Taylor during the initial part of the First Liberian Civil War. Sirleaf-

Johnson's apology to the Liberians is akin to Eurydice's acceptance of her culpability in propagating discord and ill-feeling among her people, and her responsibility for the murder of the boy soldier, Scud:

**Eurydice** By insulting Polynices  
I've insulted all the dead.  
I have been wrong  
I'm trying to turn back time one hour  
And it keeps buckling against me, flying on  
The death of Junior Lieutenant Scud  
Is my responsibility  
I won't insult him with my sorrow and my shame  
But I must give his death some value  
Since his life was held so cheap (pp. 89 – 90)

This culpability however goes short of what the Thebans required, in particular what Tydeus the leader of the opposition and Pargeia his consort would accept as Eurydice's admission of guilt for her role in the war and her incompetence in resolving the confusion afterwards.

Shortly after her election, Sirleaf-Johnson courted and renewed close relations with the United States of America to seek debt relief for Liberia, in the same manner Eurydice seeks the Athenian aid; nevertheless, she strengthened relations with the People's Republic of China, a tactic similar also to that of Eurydice in inviting the Spartans to deflate the Athenian hubris. To achieve this, she has to breach the arrogance of Theseus and seek a difficult equality from the Athenian leader. Theseus wants a domineering, personally negotiated relationship in the "equality" he offers whereas Eurydice wants an equality that is defined by the liaison between the two states.

Eurydice fractures the complacency of Athens and its singular leader through a series of simple actions that, taken together, proves the strength of her feminine intuition. By calling the bluff of Theseus and demeaning his arrogance, she presents a front that seems ignorant of political intrigue, a ploy that uses guile to achieve a determined action against Theseus' crass imposition of authorial power. She further reminds Theseus of an alternative to the seemingly undisputed influence of Athens in the waiting Spartans with their commercial success. The Spartans may not be as militaristically or politically

powerful as Athens, but they serve as foil to the Athenian apparent impenetrability. Nevertheless, her plan is not to accept aid from either powers but to see Thebes achieve sufficiency and psychical healing without help from any nation. She says, “I wish that Thebes could mend itself without the rich world’s help. I wish that we could find the unity, the strength” (p. 93), in a wish to actualise the newfound democracy of the emerging nation.

### **Power and Politics**

Buffini uses classical characters to create a contemporary political allegory. Thebes is presented as an African country emerging from civil war into democracy under the leadership of a Eurydice, with a feminist agenda. Using this agenda, Eurydice devalues the status of the powerful Athenian state and its arrogant, patronising first citizen, Theseus, who offers equality on the condition that the definition is slanted towards an understanding that could also be defined as that between a master and his servant. The key question for the two leaders is whether trust can be established between a complacent leader who wants to expand his area of influence, and a desperate leader who needs to rebuild her country and her people’s confidence in her. Basically, the Thebans are interested in an egalitarian state based on good governance, to repair their political economy.

Generally, political systems have proved to be the main source of social and economic anguish in Africa. The demand for good governance has resulted in different forms of internal strife in African countries. This push is for what Uzodike has identified as decentralisation of power, accountability by the ruling class, transparency and the rule of law (Uzodike 1999: 81), in short, for enduring governance that considers the interests of the people against the backdrop of peace, democracy, human rights and sustainable development. But these objectives cannot be achieved without a strong leadership.

Buffini’s ingenuity is in the intertextual interpretation of Liberia’s post-war situation alongside a rendition of the Oedipus myth, Antigone’s determination to bury her dead brother, Polynices, and Theseus’ domestic issues, in particular the incestuous feelings of Phaedra for Hippolytus. In line with the Greek antecedent, Buffini



expands that revenge is the hallmark of Greek gods, heroes and culture though she projects this to a universal human attribute, expressing it as a dilemma faced by Eurydice who seeks truth and reconciliation for her nation but who is also driven by the ecstasy of revenge.

Eurydice also shows her leadership sense by taking decisions that negate a masculine notion of power; by reversing her decision to make Polynices' body an exhibition for everybody to view as a sort of catharsis. Instead, she orders him buried in the same grave as Scud, in a symbolic gesture that makes Polynices a 'footnote' to the boy soldier murdered by Theseus' peacekeepers. This reduces Polynices' importance and relevance in the new dispensation, and furthers the aim of the truth and reconciliation commission. While this action brings to the fore the conflicted nature of a leader emerging from a destructive civil war, it portrays her as a visionary leader who wants the best for her country and seeks to build bridges between the different warring factions. It also shows her as an astute learner in the school of political intrigue. This conviction elevates Theseus to the insignificant role as a leader, and instead regards him as a man unsure of his public role, whether as a peacekeeper, a trading partner or a conqueror.

### **Demythologising Power**

By reinventing the mourning rites after ten years of war as Eurydice buries Scud and Polynices, an act she conflates with the task of hero making in a state lacking credible heroes whose reputation has not become soiled by the effects of the war, she displays her political canniness. And, as Sam Durrant offers, "the temporality of [her] personal grief is outrun by the temporality of political anger" (1995: 73) or expediency.

In the end, the global power is revealed as a creation of greedy, power-drunk men whose ambition is to dominate and bestow equality and respect (p. 66) while asking vulnerable women to "dance for" (p. 62) them. To drive home this point, Buffini asks: what would have happened if, instead of King Creon, his wife Eurydice had been in charge? From this feminine thesis about power, *Welcome to Thebes*

examines the relationship between the West and emerging nations, and the nature of philanthropic gestures offered to poor nations as part of the liberating efforts of the powerful nations. In doing this, she demythologises the powerful Athenian state. Eurydice fractures Theseus' insularity through her indifference to power, her compassion, firmness and integrity. She is not also anxious about changing her decisions, thus violating one of the political lessons Theseus teaches her in never apologising for her utterances or actions. To foster trust and encourage Thebans to accept collective responsibility for the war, she does not deny her role in the conflict and extols her people to learn the lessons of the past even as they forgo the hurt and loss.

Meanwhile, as Eurydice's power and influence grows, those of Theseus diminishes as he loses his communicative ability, both physically and technologically; his mobile phone which he uses to call Hippolytus fails to link up with network, and his self-assuredness descends into incoherence. With the breakdown of communication around him, Theseus' seemingly inviolable sense of competence and aura of power, which he uses as a shield, becomes disrupted. He starts using bravado and insults to conceal his insecurity and his emotional loss in the suicide of Phaedra. Gradually, he is revealed as an individual whose arrogance is built on a myth, and whose Athenian state is another wasteland in the guise of modernity, where poverty jostles with plenty in sectarian enclaves, and where crime and insurrection rule the streets.

## **Conclusion**

The descent of Theseus from his colossal height is more significant given his interest in myths and history. He absurdly exhibits his captivation with Theban myths. This fosters his attentiveness for Tydeus, who is acknowledged as having been possessed by the god Dionysus. However, Theseus' interest is not a pervasive one that absorbs instructions; his interest is in the myths, the stories, and not in the lessons of history. He fails to learn from history because of conceit that has an origin in the supposed invulnerability of Athens. He has an overriding confidence in the hegemony of the Athenian political institution over that of Thebes, disregarding the fact that political

hegemonies have the same root in tyranny, and that myths are employed to inscribe this tyranny into history as a reminder. Theseus, like most great leaders, forget that all leaders and the empires they build shall inevitably decline, as Percy Bysshe Shelley reminds us in his poem, *Ozymandias*; biographies that ultimately inspire or underwrite general concerns for freedom. Theseus' decline is swifter, wildly unmasking his human frailty and inability to maintain domestic cohesion while leading the influential Athenian state. As the cracks become wider in the overbearing shield of Theseus, Eurydice's dignity and growing acceptance by her people become more convincing. In that, the Theban's imposed liberation by the Athenian peacekeepers gradually metamorphose into real freedom; and they re-plant or re-authorise legitimacy to their state.

It is instructive to note that Buffini proffers an alternative future for Thebes based on the choice of leadership. Eurydice as a woman, with a feminine agenda, displays more compassion and therefore more effectiveness than Creon with his autocratic decree that led to the death of his son Haemon and his niece Antigone. Eurydice's demonstration of feminine guile creates a hiatus in the way political disruptions have continually re-invented a country's history, development and governance. These interruptions have always generated active resistance on the one hand, and on the other, a sort of defeat, treachery and fraudulence. The culmination of these is an unending cycle of resistance and defeat and acquiescence, or to render it simply, a dialectical carnival in which history repeats its conflicts, sometimes as a metaphor.

To fracture the insularity of an invading, authorial power, Buffini shows that the Creonic zeal is antiquated. What is required, she offers, is compassion and an understanding of self-importance, and equality between states that is negotiated rather than dictated.

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