



The Life and Mind of Ali Zaidi

By A. K. Kaiza



The last time I heard from Ali Zaidi was May 22nd this year in a message that blipped out from a long stretch of silence.

I sent an email in reply, I texted, I called. There was no response.

I had spent nearly a week in northern Kenya, and the poor connections prevented me from checking my mail. The events of 21st May had passed me by. A source I was due to interview in Turkana had abruptly travelled to Uganda and so in a hurry, I had caught a plane from Lodwar and flown to Eldoret to cut the 6 to 7 hour journey down to 30 minutes so that I could arrive overland in Soroti in Uganda, where he was, before nightfall. Right on the tarmac of Eldoret airport, with reliable connection back on, the news jolted me.

I went numb. I tried calling several people. The messages kept rushing in. The drive from the airport to Eldoret town itself seemed surreal.

An email sent the day before popped up. It read:

“David, sorry to have missed you. Listen, we want to put together a tribute next week. Care to do something?”

He was so much fun.”

The emailer was Ali Zaidi. And that email was the first communication we had had in ages. It was also the last time I heard from him. His “sorry to have missed you” was from the fact that the week before, I had passed by the Nation Centre, where Ali worked, and been told that he had stepped out briefly. The “tribute” that Ali was referring to was what he was putting together for *The EastAfrican* following the untimely death of Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina, with whom he had a long and close connection.

Circumstances play a sadistic hand. The next email I got from Nairobi was nearly four months later. It was a request to write about my memories of Ali Zaidi, who had passed away a few days earlier. Two obituaries in a year of people I knew left me crushed.

I had written for *The EastAfrican* newspaper since 1999 but I only got to know Ali Zaidi in 2008. I had spent that decade in Kampala, so the occasional walk-ins into the Nation Centre were hurried, impersonal, encounters. But in 2008, my life had changed. Constant conflict with the Ugandan government over my writing made my career at the paper untenable. So I became a full-time writer, something I had always wanted. And in 2008, Nairobi was where actual writing was taking place. After I met Binyavanga and Billy Kahora in Kampala in March of that year, I moved to Nairobi in August.

Quite incredibly, having quit *The EastAfrican* where he was editor, here I was, landing in a circle at the centre of which Ali Zaidi played a critical role. There was no escaping the man - not that you really wanted to. This time, the formality of him being my boss was gone, and we could talk openly.

The 18th birthday of his son Hassan provided the occasion at which I formally met Ali Zaidi's circle. It was a Saturday, a day that also coincided with the opening of the *KwaniLitfest* of that year. New and a guest of Kwani, I spent that weekend driving around Nairobi in cabs with Binyavanga Wainaina, the founder of the literary journal.

Kwani had organised a discussion on writing for magazines, which was being held at the Karen Blixen Museum in Karen, with Binyavanga and Yvonne Owuor sharing the stage. It was an interesting, writerly talk, but Ali had personally called and invited me to his house and I was getting anxious to leave.

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We arrived at Ali's well after 2 o'clock that afternoon. New in Nairobi, I could not believe how cold it was at that hour, right on the equator! But that had been my experience during my early days in Nairobi; cold all the time, and because of cold, also constantly hungry. My hosts did not seem too keen on food themselves, and I wondered about their lives, and just what it was I had stepped into.

Ali's house in Loresho was not what I had expected it to be. It was also unsurprising that it was what it was. Informal, comfortably disarrayed, welcoming, unintimidating. Loresho was a gated estate far from the centre of the city, nestled in a thickly wooded “leafy” suburb.

It seemed that everybody was there. I recognised Lynn Muthoni Wanyeki from her mugshot in *The EastAfrican*. A young, energetically bouncing writer (he wore his credentials too well) introduced himself as Parselelo Ole Kantai. Ali emerged from his house, and amidst the crowd (for it was a packed compound, very wide, with wood and stone sculptures all over), he spotted me and Binyavanga coming in. He stood waiting for us to approach. “David,” he said, smiling, warmly. He

took my hand and led me indoors. "Let me feed you." At last. Someone in Nairobi understood that people needed to eat.

But it was the sheer number of people in Ali Zaidi's house that occupied my mind. From the sound of them (all eloquent), and the look of them (the tasteful but crumpled look of arty sorts) you could tell who the writer was, the filmmaker, the musician, the activist. Had he taken each one of them by the hand and said "let me feed you"?

Ali's warmth spoke volumes about who he was. Firstly, his was a house full of children. And then books, and artwork enough to qualify as a museum. We went past the living room, and inside the kitchen, he introduced his children. There, where I was to often find him, was Hassan, marinating piles of meat. We went past him to more introductions - Franco, Emma, Tara (Ali's children) to the backyard so I could see his wife Irene's big marble sculpture, a work in progress.

Back to the front garden, which was enormous and punctuated with Irene's sculptures, there were more introductions, hands to grip, names to exchange: Betty Muragori (soon to be Sitawa Namwalie who invited me to the opening of her poetry show, *CutoffMyTongue*), Wanyeki, Rasna Warah, Shalini Gidoomal. I forget the rest. The talk was a high, theory-studded tenor. You turned here and caught a whiff of postmodernist extrapolations that side someone in deconstructionist pique, and over there, postcolonial postulation. People held court, drew a circle, talked, then dispersed, sat by the fire, re-congregated around another forth-holder, filled glasses, opened another bottle.

As I was quickly learning, in that circle, you did not simply say things. There had to be an intellectual filter, an optic, a politics via which you saw the world. It was like living inside the pages of *The New Yorker*, or the *Times Literary Supplement*, or the *London Review of Books*. Books, titles, verses, quotes and much else flew about to emphasise a point, a name invoked to shore up a position, wedge in a definition.

And there was Ali Zaidi, walking in, resting on an elbow, listening, gathering a line, looking over shoulders, recharging an empty glass, then pulling over someone who might inject a new idea, an anecdote, drawing the embers out of an overcharged guest, keeping the fires burning. I thought of Anna Scherer in the opening scenes of *War and Peace*. Had the Tolstoyan character been less pushy and read Marx (a century before her time, admittedly but it might have saved the characters in that book!), her name would have been Ali Zaidi.

What he might have meant when he took my hand, might as well have been "let me seed you".

As I was to learn over the next few years, this was Ali's element. It was what he lived for. It was how, five years before that day, *Kwani?*, the literary magazine, had been born in that very garden. From Ali's garden, the writers who created *Kwani?* went out with valuable tools to examine the society they wrote about and did it without asking permission from established hegemonies.

I don't remember at what point Binyavanga left the party (he forgot his jacket there that evening, I recollect), so I caught a ride back to where I was staying with Parselelo well after 1 on Sunday morning.

To start life in Nairobi, I had to get pragmatic. I had shut down my workshop in Kampala, so I was not making anything to sell to pay the rent. During the week, I rung Ali up. He suggested lunch at Riviera Bar and Restaurant, a short walk from the Nation Centre. As I was to find out, Ali's haunts were a circle of restaurants minutes from the Nation Centre, which allowed him to nip out briefly and then return to his desk.

I needed to write more regularly, I told him. Nairobi is expensive, I said. That year, I had also

strayed into literary infamy and needed to explain myself.

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He chuckled. He may have intuited that already. It was lunch but all he had was a Spanish omelette. I told him I had some ideas about art and literary criticism. "Send in some stuff and let's see," he said, instantly looking worried. Perennial bet-hedgers, editors, I always found, reacted to writing proposals with alarm where writers expect gushing enthusiasm.

The closing months of 2008 were fascinating. What started as a weekly comment on this and that literary tradition and heritage turned into a ping-pong exchange of comments and counter-arguments with other literary commentators in Nairobi. We had a lovely debate about literature and history in the pages of *The East African*. It was the most engrossing bout of newspapering I can recollect.

Over the next few years, I was to see Ali in a way that had not been possible from a distance.

There was his personal/intellectual background and also the context in which it fit. For decades, to be an editor in Nairobi was to have occupied a serious position via which power and public life were mediated. From descriptions, one could hazard that the template may have been set as far back as 1902 when A.M. Jeevanjee hired the British editor W.H Tiller to man the *African Standard* (later bought by British interest and renamed *East African Standard*) as founding editor.

By many accounts a grasping man, W.H. Tiller was said to have run the place in the pugnacious mould that was to characterise the job thereafter. Post-independence Kenya was enlivened by a procession of print media editors whose reputations remain in the same ring as generals, CEOs and politicians: John Bierman, Hillary Ng'weno, Boaz Omari, George Githii, John McHaffie, Philip Ochieng, Joe Rodriguez, Gerry Loughran, Joseph Odindo, Peter Mwaura, George Mbugguss, Joe Kadhi. Dramas and epochs attach to each with the swing of Kenyan and East African politics.

Ali Zaidi brought his intellect and social gift to the role. He ran a newspaper whose reputation was without equal in East Africa and beyond. By convening and hosting a circle of writers who would have an impact on the arts and culture on the continent, Ali Zaidi was also outdoing his predecessors. As with all editors of note, you wrote primarily for Ali Zaidi, and only secondarily for the paper.

Ali Zaidi was born Aligarh in India and came to Kenya in the early years of President Daniel arap Moi's rule. He did some teaching before finding his calling as an editor. He told me he could no longer live in India after witnessing the massacre of Sikhs following the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. He had read economics at Master's degree level at Delhi University.

I first heard the name Ali Zaidi when I joined *The EastAfrican* newspaper in 1999, still only 23 and not yet graduated from university. Ali likes this. Ali does not like that. He was not the managing editor. That was Joseph Odindo. But he was that *éminence grise* that all newspapers must have - that one in-house intellectual and grammarian commanding a battery of section editors. I saw him

once in those early years, when I visited Nairobi in 2002, and not again till 2008.

Given its structure, and as a weekly, *TheEastAfrican's* reporters were required to do hard news. What I really paid attention to was art and literature. It was how I came to the attention of Ali Zaidi.

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He was not too enthusiastic about what I had to say about art and books. He must have thought me a novice all over the place with ideas. Whatever reviews I wrote were whittled down to reporterial bare bones. He also thought I wrote with too much flourish. "Just go down to town," was his way of saying write simply. I was not too enamoured by him either. I had called him a philistine - not directly, but in words that amounted to the same. It took me a while to understand that the arts section mattered a lot to Ali.

Once settled in Nairobi, the bulk of my meetings with Ali consisted of the lunches at restaurants within walking distance of the Nation Centre. These provided a chance to talk. 2008 was the year of financial collapse. Capitalism, as we had come to know it, had ended. People were starting to talk about Marx again.

"You have not read Marx," he stated.

I protested.

"You have read of Marx," he modulated the charge.

I detailed to him what I had read of Marx. When I mentioned that I planned to tackle the Grundrisse, he scowled.

"Stop telling lies. Read Marx."

His vehemence gave me pause to reflect. It was not like Ali to insist so harshly. But it was then that I began to sense where his intellectual locus sat. I understood that when he said "you have not read Marx," he meant I was not hewing to the Marxist school he was beholden to, the very typically Marxist internecine conflict to have. But what might that be? The answer was not a difficult one. He was a Walter Benjamin Marxist. (To boot, he was even a spitting image of the great German philosopher-martyr.)

I was hence starting from the beginning, fleshing out what it was that propelled the man. To begin with, the thorough-going, intellectual coherence of historical materialism always provided penetrative insight. It provided a structure of not only thought but also action that could have tremendous impact. Because it was critical, being as it were, on the offensive against an exploitative class, Marxism did not have to play hide-and-seek with history. Coming up with dodgy arguments to support personal wealth was the territory of liberal and neoliberal apologists, such as Maynard Keynes and his successors, Milton Friedman and Friedrich von Hayek.

I got it that Ali understood the world in certain ways. Marxism provided him not only with a view into politics and economics, but also a view of society that was basically humane. For him, people were not for sale. The wealthy in Kenya, he insisted to their face, had profited from a fundamentally unjust system.

But what was it about Walter Benjamin that appealed to Ali and how might it have shaped how he saw the world?

The Jewish philosopher, whose death on the Spanish border when he was fleeing Nazis in 1939 remains a mystery and continues to divide Spain, had gone longer distances than most Marxists of his times in postulating a critical theory. Walter Benjamin's idea of history, his "angel of history" (after buying the painting by Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*) is his most powerful idea. The eponymous angel in the painting, Walter Benjamin wrote, "would like to say, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed".

This insight into history was, to say the least, ultra-revolutionary. What it said, and how it has variously been interpreted, is that the past (lost causes) is not dead (defeated) as long as there are people still willing to fight for it. It is the closest one can come to resurrecting the dead, this idea of picking up the cause they died for and then refighting it. The catchy formulation being that the fate of the past lies in the hands of the present. In other words, the past is not dead as long as the living continue to believe in its ideas.

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There was also his critical art theory: Walter Benjamin's was a fundamental questioning of the concept of art, stripping it down to a matter of aesthetic, from which point open-ended questions become possible: as "Art", it is an absolute in itself; but as "aesthetic", it is the territory of the subjective, a thing you can negotiate with. An immensely liberating direction to take, for then, totalities, or what Ali liked to term "absolutes", rapidly came unstuck. For the work of art, as Walter Benjamin argued, is tied to the question of tradition, what a people think of the object. What had been pure creativity in one epoch had in another age been an object of veneration, of spiritual significance; what had for one people been just a utilitarian, functional object becomes for another a work of art. Created objects are armed and disarmed as art, depending on the politics of a time. For instance, graffiti would in the 1990s be a nuisance scarring cityscapes. In a period of insurrection against the "one percent", Banksy would be viewed as a great artist.

The work of art becomes tied to other larger aspects external to the object of art, making the metamorphosis from the spiritual stage to the political and the economic. Art in the industrial age hence takes on a new, urgent significance. It becomes the keeper of the forces of a spiritualism exiled from human relationships by the forces of production.

The work of art becomes the only safe place in which freedom, equality, community, and kindness will not jeopardise the profit motive of capitalism. For if these ideas are left within human society, they will inspire resistance against the exploiting class. The work of art begins to command vast sums of money because they are indeed storing the very lifeblood of human society. It might seem as though the capitalist patrons of art are missing the warmth of community they have destroyed. It is telling that global corporations give so much money to museums, not so much as a back-handed apology as ensuring that what is imprisoned in art stays there, to be viewed rather than lived.

According to this line of argument, the work of art is then slightly off-centre to the *objet d'art*. A sculpted stone is a stone with a shape. It will only become art when we will it to be art. That "will" comes from our political positioning, for it is the belief of our society, as well as the class we belong

to, that tells us how to feel. Hence, art is not an intrinsic property of the object. All value is external to the object.

Ali Zaidi spoke often of Walter Benjamin's examination of the work of art at the dawn of the modern era, the "mechanical reproduction of the work of art", stating that a photograph of a famous work of art was no less valuable than the original itself. This was Walter Benjamin's argument. An argument dangerous to a rising age of fascist nativism for which value must be intrinsic and inseparably innate to the *volk*. (Ali, who moved to Africa and married an African, an act that was anathema within the migrant Asian community, did not see race or tribe or class. His Marxism was a lived idea.) If all interpretations art, history, culture are political, then is it not hogwash to claim any one culture as supreme?

Ali would say things like "the destruction of the material cultures of African societies was central to the colonial enterprise", a typically Marxist statement to make. But it swept away rhetorical verbiage and overheated, superficialities about identity. It went to the gist of history itself, that the struggle was not of "civilization" but of baser intent, for control of material resources, to put it crudely.

As I saw it, that was the point at which Ali operated his politics, as it were. It also made him a stranger to an age in which identity politics characterised everything. As far as I can remember, he had little to say about post-war philosophical politics and I tried unsuccessfully to get him to discuss Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.

The irony was that the intellectual set that gathered around Ali was deeply steeped in the postmodern identity politics spawned by their ideas. Most spouted it second-hand without knowledge of where it emanated from, the free-for-all, anything-goes "deconstruction" tool of reading that Derrida inflicted upon intellect.

I never came to know Ali's views on postmodernism. Perhaps others did. But it was not a topic he encouraged whenever I brought it up. At any rate, extend the ideas of Walter Benjamin two or three decades into the 21st century and they likely end up there.

He did not set out to influence anyone. That would have been not only crude but disingenuous. They would all have dropped him for that. It is not that he was too clever for that. Rather, Ali was genuine.

He was addicted to people. I could see that. He could not get through an evening without the company of at least half a dozen people. People were his element. He was happiest in large groups.

I'd like to think he found a home in East Africa. He believed in things, and he went out of his way to make it possible for creative, earnest and driven intellectuals to have a say. We appreciated that deeply.

He seemed happy. He often said: "In Africa, people accept you as long as they sense that you are genuine. Elsewhere, they see your face, your religion, and shoo you away."

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