



By Rasna Warah



“What would you have done?” This is the question that the main character Hanna Schmitz (convincingly played by the British actress Kate Winslet) in the film *The Reader* asks the judge who is presiding over a case where she is charged with Nazi war crimes. It is a critical moment in the film as it explains the blind faith that Adolf Hitler and his Nazi brigade commanded, and the conscious or subconscious naiveté displayed by those who convinced themselves that they were merely following orders when carrying out the mass murder of Jews.

What this film, an adaptation of Bernhard Schlink’s eponymous 1995 novel, subtly underscores is the moral vacuum that existed in this dark period in Germany’s history, when misguided notions of nationalism turned ordinary women like Hanna into heartless beasts devoid of emotion or rational thought. This moral vacuum, this inability to see things ethically or rationally, has resurfaced around the globe, from Donald Trump’s xenophobic America to Narendra Modi’s Hindu nationalist India, and even to Kenya, where tribalism has made people blind to crimes being committed by those in power.

The Indian writer Pankaj Mishra describes this global trend as “the age of anger” because anger, rather than compassion or empathy, has become the dominant emotion determining how people vote and how policies are formulated. Working class white people in the United States are lashing out against immigrants and those they perceive to be taking their jobs. Upper caste Hindus, who have been steadily losing their clout in secularist India, are lashing out against Muslims and Dalits (low caste Hindus), who they view as a threat to their authority. The Kikuyu, the largest ethnic group in Kenya, which was deprived of political leadership under the 24-year reign of Daniel arap Moi, are

lashing out against anyone who threatens their political dominance, which is currently embodied by their “anointed” leader Uhuru Kenyatta.

The “deep state” and corporate power

The difference between 1930s and 1940s Germany and today’s world is that there was no threat of Islamic terrorism then and neoliberalism, or what Mishra refers to as “a kind of amoral individualism”, had not yet become the dominant religion. These new threats have been accompanied by the corporatisation of political power, which has led to the growth of what is known as the “deep state” where big corporations, not governments, determine public policy for their own benefit rather than the benefit of the majority of citizens. (Although it is worth noting that former colonies in Africa and Asia experienced something similar in the late 19th century when commercial interests coincided with political interests, as when the British East India Company was coopted into Britain’s empire-building project.)

The truth is that political leaders no longer represent the people - they represent corporate interests.

In this corporatised world, governments are told to get out of the way of free markets. Deregulation and privatisation are viewed as the key to efficiency - even if they leave out large sections of society who cannot afford private health care and education and other services, and even when deregulation threatens the economy, as happened during the financial crisis of 2008, when unregulated financial institutions almost brought the US economy to its knees. Those left on the margins are deemed lazy or noisy troublemakers, and therefore, unworthy of public attention or public services.

The truth is that political leaders no longer represent the people - they represent corporate interests. This is why the CEOs of successful companies get front row seats at policymaking forums, while small-scale traders and hawkers are delegitimised through punitive laws. Corporate interests, in turn, fuel the political machinery, through the funding of political campaigns and sometimes by nominating their own representatives to leadership positions. Once they attain political power, they begin dismantling all those institutions they consider to be standing in the way of their profits. This has led to the death of trade unions, democratic institutions and civil society engagement in public affairs.

In this cut-throat world of wheeler-dealers, wealth and power are concentrated in a few, who re-write society’s rules to their own advantage. Issues such as environmental protection and social justice have become peripheral. Democratic institutions are being weakened and the media and intellectuals are being vilified. Fascism - the feverish exaltation of ethnicity, race, nation or religion above the rights of the individual - has become the new normal.

Chris Hedges, a pastor and one of America’s leading intellectuals, says that this tiny cabal of powerful people “embody the moral rot unleashed by unfettered capitalism”. In this “twilight phase of capitalism”, as he puts it, wealth is no longer created the old-fashioned way by producing goods or providing services; it is created by manipulating the prices of stocks and imposing a crippling debt on the public.

This “casino capitalism” has now merged with the gambling industry in places like Kenya, which has seen the rapid growth of mobile phone-based gambling in recent years. A considerable amount of prime time television in Kenya today is devoted to announcing the results of lotteries, and rags-to-riches gamblers are often given front-page treatment in the newspapers.

In this cut-throat world of wheeler-dealers, wealth and power are concentrated in a few, who re-write society's rules to their own advantage. Issues such as environmental protection and social justice have become peripheral. Democratic institutions are being weakened and the media and intellectuals are being vilified. Fascism - the feverish exaltation of ethnicity, race, nation or religion above the rights of the individual - has become the new normal.

This get-rich-quick mentality has also permeated the public sector where so-called "tenderpreneurs" are known to have made/stolen millions of shillings in procurement deals with the government. Procurement officers in government ministries and the individuals (many with fake companies) who are awarded fraudulent or irregularly acquired government contracts are the new emerging billionaire class in Kenya. There was a time when stories of millions of shillings being stolen by government officials shocked the Kenyan public; today, evidence of billions of shillings being lost to corruption barely elicits a yawn. What we are witnessing in Kenya is the capture of public institutions by corrupt ethnic-based cartels who enjoy state protection. And rather than reprimanding those who steal, Kenyans vote them into power, as happened in the August election, when a former cabinet secretary from whose ministry millions of shillings were stolen was elected as governor.

Like the Nazi prison guard Hanna Schmitz, Kenyans have become blind to wrongdoing, and follow their tribal leaders without asking too many uncomfortable questions. The sins of the individual have merged with the sins of the tribe - and neither the individual nor the tribe wants to take responsibility for crimes committed. This is why, when asked why he had failed to stem corruption in the country, President Uhuru Kenyatta, echoing Hanna's words, said, "*What do you expect me to do?*" By not taking responsibility for the rot around him, and by absolving himself of culpability, what the president was suggesting to Kenyans was that he is not really in charge.

Dissent as treason

In order to mask their real intentions, political leaders and their corporate masters need to create bogeymen or convenient scapegoats who can be blamed for all of society's ills; this allows them to literally get away with murder. Under Trump, Mexicans, African-Americans, Muslims and other minorities have been reduced to "barbarians at the gate" who threaten to topple all that is good and great about America. America's "war on terror" does not just target terrorist groups in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan or Somalia, but anyone who holds views that are contrary to those of the president and his administration.

Yet, as Hedges points out, those seeking to destroy democracy and to curtail people's freedom are not the array of "dehumanised enemies" cooked up by the government's war machine but the "financiers, bankers, politicians, public intellectuals and pundits, lawyers, journalists and businesspeople cultivated in the elite universities and business schools who sold us the utopian dream of neoliberalism".

In India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has turned a blind eye to the recent lynching of Muslims by Hindu mobs; his "Hindutva" philosophy that casts India as a purely Hindu nation has emboldened Hindu bigots and subdued secularist voices. Beef is now officially banned in several Indian states, not because cows are sacred to Hindus, but because the banning of beef marks beef-eating Muslims as "outsiders".

In Kenya, the "tyranny of numbers" - a phrase popularised by the Uhuru apologist Mutahi Ngunyi to

explain why the Kikuyus will always dominate leadership in the country - is used to instil fear and command obedience among minority ethnic groups. Dissent is often portrayed as an act of treason and civil society activists have been dubbed "the evil society". This tyranny - the use of numerical strength to oppress the majority - is now being deployed to silence and intimidate the judiciary.

There was a time when stories of millions of shillings being stolen by government officials shocked the Kenyan public; today, evidence of billions of shillings being lost to corruption barely elicits a yawn. What we are witnessing in Kenya is the capture of public institutions by corrupt ethnic-based cartels who enjoy state protection.

Yet, as Hedges points out, those seeking to destroy democracy and to curtail people's freedom are not the array of "dehumanised enemies" cooked up by the government's war machine but the "financiers, bankers, politicians, public intellectuals and pundits, lawyers, journalists and businesspeople cultivated in the elite universities and business schools who sold us the utopian dream of neoliberalism".

Forced amnesia

After the horrors of the Second World War, Germany made a conscious effort to not forget the Holocaust, and to ensure that this dark period in its history would not be erased from the memory of future generations. School curricula were revised to help children understand the genesis of Nazism and the rise of Hitler and memorials were built to physically mark the sites of the most monstrous atrocities.

The very opposite is happening in other parts of the world. In order to carry out their agenda, the corporates and the politicians that sing their tune - the "deep state" - are trying to erase people's memories so that the status quo appears normal or legitimate. So, in their efforts to "make America great (white) again", white supremacists make non-white people in the United States feel like parasitic invaders or criminals, obscuring the fact that had it not been for the abominable transatlantic slave trade and the free labour provided by African slaves, America would not have become a wealthy nation and there would be fewer blacks living there today. By failing to accept this reality, white supremacists absolve themselves and their ancestors of all responsibility for slavery and for the near-extirpation of the indigenous Native American population.

In India, Modi's Bharataya Janata Party has embarked on propagating a revisionist history of India that fails to recognise that the subcontinent has never been a purely Hindu entity; it has been an amalgam of different religions for centuries, and Hinduism itself has undergone various transformations since its birth some four thousand years ago.

Kenyans have been forced into amnesia through various policies, including the removal of history as a mandatory subject at the primary school level, and the propagation of the narrative that it was the Kikuyu-dominated Mau Mau movement that liberated the country from British colonialism. Yet, despite the Mau Mau being recognised for its role in the struggle for independence, few people are aware of the fact that upon becoming president, Jomo Kenyatta did not lift the ban on this movement, which remained a proscribed organisation until 2003, when President Mwai Kibaki finally lifted the ban. Nor are Kenyan school children told about the various other movements and organised groups, such as the Nandi Resistance and the Kenyan Indian Congress, that actively resisted British rule.

In order to carry out their agenda, the corporates and the politicians that sing their tune

- the “deep state” - are trying to erase people’s memories so that the status quo appears normal or legitimate. So, in their efforts to “make America great (white) again”, white supremacists make non-white people in the United States feel like unwanted invaders or parasitic criminals, obscuring the fact that had it not been for the abominable transatlantic slave trade and the free labour provided by African slaves, America would not have become a wealthy nation and there would be fewer blacks living there today.

To make matters worse, these big lies are being disseminated by an omnipresent, repetitive and corporatised media. As the Australian journalist John Pilger stated in an essay titled “The Rise of Fascism”, these lies then become a justification for inflicting atrocities on people and even for invading countries. For instance, when the mainstream Western media was reporting that US, British and French planes, under the auspices of NATO, had bombed Libya to protect the human rights of Libyan rebels, it failed to report that under Muammar Gaddafi Libyans enjoyed among the highest standards of living in Africa. Similarly, when the United States and Britain decided to invade Iraq in 2003, they did so on the pretext that Saddam Hussein possessed “weapons of mass destruction” and had links to Al Qaeda, yet both allegations turned out to be false.

Ironically, after the fall of Gaddafi, Libya became a major conduit for human traffickers sending illegal migrants to the very European countries that viewed him as a threat to democracy. And the mainstream Western media, instead of linking his ouster and the mayhem that followed to the migrant crisis facing Europe today, has painted the crisis as an African or Middle Eastern problem that has nothing to do with European and American interventionist policies that have fostered lawlessness in places like Libya, Iraq and other countries whose leaders the West did not like.

Resist and revolt

Hedges believes that revolt is necessary to reverse this descent into dystopia. Revolt is not just a political necessity, but also a moral imperative. In a recent talk he gave at the “Inaugurate Resistance” rally in Washington DC, Hedges urged his fellow resisters to develop a critical mass that will force the centres of power to respond because, “the moment we defy power, we are victorious”.

“I do not know if we can build a better society,” he added. “I don’t even know if we will survive as a species. But I do know that these corporate forces have us by the throat.”

Why did we not see this coming? Perhaps because we erroneously believed that the democracy that was unleashed around the world after the Berlin Wall fell was about people power, not about corporate interests. Yet, two decades ago, David C. Korten, in his book *When Corporations Rule the World*, warned us about a future where big corporations would undermine democracy and take over the running of countries. But we did not listen because it seemed too improbable then.

Revolt is not just a political necessity, but also a moral imperative. In a recent talk he gave at the “Inaugurate Resistance” rally in Washington DC, Hedges urged his fellow resisters to develop a critical mass that will force the centres of power to respond because, “the moment we defy power, we are victorious”.

What can be done to halt the rise of fascist and corporatised states in places like the United States, India and Kenya? First, we must forge alliances with like-minded people and organisations. Many citizen groups are already uniting to resist corporate hegemony, the Occupy Wall Street movement being one such example. Such social movements must be nurtured and strengthened if we are to prevent our descent into a morass of moral and spiritual bankruptcy. We must build what

economists refer to as “social capital” - networks of people and institutions along the lines of the Greenpeace brigades that can provide moral support and guidance in the face of corporatised tyranny. We could also boycott the products manufactured by big corporations and “go local”. For instance, we could buy fruits and vegetables at our local farmers’ markets or cooperatives and establish local associations that are linked to the larger global resistance movement.

If we do not resist this tyranny individually and through sustained mass action, the wolves will soon be at our doors, threatening to tear down our houses and rendering us permanently homeless.

Published by the good folks at [The Elephant](#).

The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.

Follow us on [Twitter](#).

