

Beautiful Words are Subversive

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Many years ago, while still in my home country, Zimbabwe, I had a brief confrontation with the minister for information whose name I will not mention since he succumbed to illness. People, including writers, should not insult the dead. The subject of discussion was freedom of expression. He warned me that I could write whatever I wanted, but I should know that after writing what I wanted, I have to face the consequences. That is when it dawned on me that that freedom of expression is important and crucial, but freedom after expression is better.

One African writer, years ago, made a little speech which I still find inspirational today. We were talking about the situation of a writer in Africa and what were the dangers of our existence as writers, especially if we have alternative views to the ones which the wielders of political power have.

The writer, from Benin, said his main problems were anchored in ministers of his government ... the minister for information who thinks that a writer is an unpaid information officer of the government, the minister for culture who wants to dictate his definition of culture to the writer, the minister for justice who makes laws which make writers seem a criminal and the minister of police who owns the handcuffs of the nation.

As a writer, this observation set me thinking. And in most African countries, books are not even under the ministry for culture. They are under the ministry in charge of the police. The national archives are under the ministry for home affairs, not the ministry for culture or even information. I can never stop worrying about the culture of the minister for culture. When will the minister for culture ever quote a writer of his country in any one of his many speeches in which he lectures artists on what culture is all about?

So, we are talking of books and national records under arrest, the master keys of the national archives are with the police ministry. But then we still have to insist on finding out the logic of this misplacement of knowledge in the ministry for police affairs. In Zimbabwe and most African countries that I have visited, stored knowledge is under the ministry for the interior; as if all knowledge must be arrested in order to ensure that it does not escape to the people.

When Zimbabwe tried to ban Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verses*, I was chairperson of the Zimbabwe Writers Union, fresh and rather naïve about power and control over national knowledge and records. The Zimbabwean Muslims were fighting to have the novel banned. The writers sent me to meet the chairman of the censorship board and the minister for state security about the matter.

It so happened that the minister for state security had only a few photocopied pages of the novel delivered to him by the Muslim community of Zimbabwe. I had the whole novel. My task was to explain to the minister that it was futile to ban a book since citizens who want to read it will smuggle it into the country anyway. And the book, being a hard cover and massively expensive, there was no way this single novel could be a state security issue. But the minister picked up the phone and called the chairman of the censorship board, an ex-policeman in the colonial government of Mr Ian Smith.

As I entered the chief censor's office, he recognised me and we sat down to do literary business. I questioned his knowledge of literary aesthetics as a police officer sitting in judgement over literary matters. It did not make any sense that a police officer should preside over matters literary. And his argument was that it was like that also in South Africa, that the banning of books was under the police. And in Australia too, and Canada and many other former British colonies, including Jamaica. I was amazed at his whole colonial map of the control of writers and literature, the sheer brutality of thinking that if literary brutality was shared among many countries, it must be right and justifiable.

Politicians and writers never seem to come to an agreement about basic national issues. Writers, especially poets and novelists like me, accept that we cannot promise anyone to build a bridge where there is not even a river. During election time, politicians can promise you anything. But writers have no election time. Writers have no business lying to anyone about building schools or hospitals where there is not even anyone who is ill.

But then why the quarrel? Politician and writer, power and powerlessness, the strong and the weak? Guns and prisons versus words. Did someone drunkenly say the word is mightier than the sword? That sounds like a good philosophical and Biblical teaching, but we know that guns kill and writers get killed for using words against swords.

To write is to rebel, to revolt, to challenge the established system of values even if those values are in politics, culture, history and even geography. Writing has to do with the affirmation of memory in order to create some sense of permanence of time and space. The writer, and I am one of them, wants to restore the respectability of human memory in order to establish some semblance of permanence in human affairs.

The task of the writer is to see, record and warn. When society is decaying, the writer records the decay. But if that society decides to over-celebrate the political slogans of the day, the writer's task is to warn society that no nation should celebrate false and empty slogans. In the writing of the history of periods and spaces, one gets more from the dynamics of literary works of the period than one would get from political speeches or even historians' versions of events, especially if that history is simply a record of the deeds and misdeeds of the powerful, the heroes. In literature, the heroes are the small ants, not the big elephants. Remember how a small mosquito can cause you sleepless nights by simply mewling into your ear like a neglected cat!

It is futile to think that the powerless did not have power of some kind. The creative eye and ear and nose always searches for the hidden truths which the politicians work hard to obliterate. The erasure of memory is the stock in trade of the politician. The revival of memory is the stock in trade of the writer, the story-teller, the poet who tells history in sequences of images, metaphors and symbols.

For, to write is to remember. To write is to think. To write is to re-invent a world which could be easily erased from human memory for the convenience of those in power. To write is to expand the constituency of the imagination, the constituency of possibilities, the space of human beings' capacity for unlimited human doubt.

Literature says: what is a human being if that human being is deprived of the capacity to doubt? And that is why the scientists who made a huge impact on society were usually readers of literary works which assisted in expanding their literary imagination first before enriching their scientific capacity to doubt and to search for answers. The space ventures and travels to the moon and to Mars were first invented in the literary imagination.

But then writers, intellectuals and other artists are fighting in Africa all the time. What is the nature of this fight, and how will it end? One can only speculate that it will never end, and the nature of it is a matter of borders and constituencies. The politician or businessman believes in the constituency of the physical borders and numbers. The more the voters, the happier the politician. The more people the politician can address in a rally, the more powerful he feels. It is the physical and numerical space that the politician cherishes.

But artists, writers included, live in a different world which is not justified by quantitative things, the numbers of voters and the physical boundaries which the writer's has crossed. When a million copies of a writer's work are bought in one year, I have never heard a writer talking as if he were a millionaire. A book is a constituency, a living one which enkindles the imagination of the individual who sits down and allows himself or herself to be subverted by words, images, metaphors

and symbols. For a writer, life is made of images and symbols, just as it was in the beginning, and the word became flesh.

Did I talk about subversion? All engaged art is subversive, but not in the way politicians use the word *subversion*. Subversive art is that art which makes the viewer, the reader, feel newly persuaded to question the way they have always thought the world is organised, the world of values. To write is to create new values, to move from old spaces into the realm of new spaces of the imagination. A book, and any effective piece of art, searches for new spaces in order to enrich them while at the same time enriching the old spaces by removing the rust of the imaginative spaces of the old.

A book, oh, what a universe ... It informs, forms and transforms human conscience, the paraphrased words of the late novelist/philosopher, Jean Marie Adiafi echo in my mind. A good book is not like a banana whose skin you throw away after eating the flesh. A good book is one that refuses to be forgotten since it enriches the reader's present and nourishes the reader's past and gives flowers to the future of the meaning of human existence.

A book ensures that the world you thought was round might actually be flat, depending on where you are standing. A book subverts thought and emotion, human experience and the search for new forms of possibilities of experience in different and similar spaces. When a bird sings and the writer records its music, both are transformed - the bird and the writer. The world changes. The bird becomes the voice of my mother who died many years ago, and I become a bird which flies and meets my mother's voice somewhere at the centre of the human soul; and there are many centres of the human soul which art attempts to give us a safe voyage to, a journey with a complicated map so that human experience becomes one permanent piece of continuous motion and transformation. Art hates stagnation! The vibrancy of the word is witness to the dynamic nature of human experience in all its complexity.

Anybody who creates is in trouble. People were thrown into the den of lions for venturing to tell the emperor that the world was round. The emperors were not about to accept the flatness of their imagination. Every ruler hates innovation in which they are not a major participant. But an artist stands up and says to the ruler, we should know that change can happen without us being in the centre. We can also be on the periphery, and what is wrong with being on the margins, especially if being on the margins can be so loud. In an orchestra? The musician with the smallest flute might get the most attention because the orchestra is not complete without that particular instrument, the small voice. Writing searches for the small and hidden spaces of human existence.

I am talking about the small voice in a democracy, in a world which is running the risk of thinking in quantitative and not qualitative ways. The validity of a democracy is measured, in my own personal view, according to how small voices are protected. The strong have to have their strength measured against how much they can protect the weak, those who have no access to the numbers which are used to bolster the power and influence of the powerful.

The majority, the ones with the big numbers, are already protected by their “majority” status. It is the weak and minority who should be the centre of protection mechanisms in any democracy. That is where the writer, the artist, as an individual voice, enters the arena as a minority, to say a singular voice is also part of the orchestra, part of the multifaceted dialogue which makes society and societies tick. The foolishness of the monolithic democracy is no longer viable since there can never be a majority without a minority to respect the weight of the majority. An elephant is not big if there is no ant to announce and acknowledge the elephant’s bigness.

Writers and all other artists depict people in small spaces, with their small visions which have sustained them for so long, which is their history, and the artists of the world have a place in the world in order that the world’s spaces are not only for those who have money and political power, but those who know how to distribute the

power of the imagination so that the small spaces of our lives can also have meaning. The creation of new meanings is the task which the arts have taken upon themselves. That is why art is magic because magic without new creative spaces is nothing.

And writing is magic because it makes people believe what they had never imagined could be possible. When we talk about freedom of expression, we are talking about how we can expand the imaginative spaces so that our scientists can read a novel and expand their imagination in order to dig deeper into the recesses of human existence in their own way. There is no society which has cancelled the arts and bloomed in the fields of architecture, science and philosophy. The city of Rome is a big piece of art inspired by the writers of the time.

As a writer, I did not realise that I was banned from entering all government schools of my country until a high school teacher was dismissed for having invited me to his school. High school students nationwide were studying my novel, *Bones*. My novel was allowed into schools, but the author (me) was banned. The reason: "You will poison the minds of the students," an official told me when I protested.

But then, if a writer poisons the minds of the students, what would the novel do since it is allowed into schools? Of course, the authorities feared that my interpretation of the novel would be "poisonous" to the malleable imagination the youth. But if I were a frightened bureaucrat or minister for culture or education, I would fear more the book without any authorial interpretation, a free book in the hands of the students, than a book with some interpretation from the author.

Experience has taught me that the root of the conflict between writers and politicians is a space called constituency. Those who said the pen is mightier than the sword might have been materially mistaken, but in the end there are certain fundamental truths in this saying. Maybe the truth is that the pen, words, shoot at the heart, soul and imagination of the reader while the sword, an object of physical harm, only

destroys the flesh. A writer's words soothe the reader to change; a gun shoots the reader to death.

Since time immemorial new ideas about perceptions of the world have always been a danger to those whose comfort is viewed as permanent. Books, and all arts, contain "new" ideas, and new ideas and visions are a danger to those whose constituencies are always measured in quantitative ways. Books change lives through ideas. Politics changes physical and human spaces quantitatively.

Artists never promise their audiences anything except the meaning of a full life. Politicians and others of the power trade promise heaven on earth. The former dwells in the constituency of mind and meaning, while the latter dwells in the constituency of figures and numbers. But when the politician seeks the constituency of mind, he/she finds that the artist has already settled permanently in that constituency.

The two constituencies have their different kinds of power. I cherish to have my words, my language, help shape the dreams and aspirations of those who read my work. My dream is to change the way they perceive the world, the way they feel towards objects and people, the way they feel towards the land they walk on, the way they experience 'the other' who comes from 'other' lands. I want my words to share the beauty and ugliness the hopes which I still see in human beings.

If my endeavours offend anyone, it is because he/she hates sincerity and the human capacity to doubt, which is also the human capacity to transform. The moment we lose our capacity to doubt everything about our existence, we, as human beings, soon become extinct.

Artists seek the freedom to create, to see and record the joys, sorrows and smiles of their societies in order to celebrate and warn humanity about its flowers and human decay. I hate silence, society hates silence laws because human beings are not silent imbeciles.

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