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On Writing and Politics

Obari Gomba

Panel: Writing and Politics (IC Book Festival panel)

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On Writing and Politics

(Text of a panel presentation by Dr. Obari Gomba on 7 October 2016 at the Robert A. Lee Recreation Center during the Iowa City Book Festival)

I want to make seven quick points on this subject. I have chosen seven deliberately, because seven is my family's preferred symbol.

1. Literature cannot ignore politics because politics has never ignored literature. Throughout history, politics has either suspected or nurtured/supported or starved/persecuted literature. It would be wrong for anyone to argue that literature should not pay attention to its political space. Place and time impact literature; literature impacts place and time.
2. Politics is not a bad subject for literature. A writer should be free to write on any subject with a sense of craft, with a capacity to create art out of experience. Gravitas, purpose, aesthetics, and context can be coeval elements (and they ought to be so) in the hands of a good writer. I say this because I know that one of the issues raised against African literature, by the West and Western-oriented scholars, is the density of politics in our literature. They think that political content is a debasement of art. No, sirs. We have no apology for what we write. And I must also add that the totality of our writing speaks to every aspect of life.
3. Yes, we write about everything. I write about everything that comes to me strongly and provokes creativity. That includes global politics, not just the politics of Nigeria and Africa.
4. I write about the environment and against the industrial nihilism of national and transnational corporations. There are societies in which people can afford to theorise about the environment. I do not have that luxury. The environment is immediate to me and my people. Environmental pollution happens to us every second. There is a conjunction between abusive firms and abusive government. I know there are persons around the world that share my experience.
5. I am interested in the competing identities in the world. I believe we can work across boundaries and cultures. I believe we can stop the programmes of hegemony in the world. I believe we can create development for all if we stamp out megalomania and greed. I believe we can reform institutions of power for good.
6. I speak against the oppression of women. There are open and covert programmes designed to keep women down across the world. We have to respect the place of women in humanity. From a male point of view, I know that every man has a woman in his life: as a lover or a wife or a daughter or a sister or a mother. There is also communal motherhood and the motherhood of the earth. In this age and time, why do we still allow systems and cultures that brutalise, subjugate and objectify women? The equality of humankind is a task for this age; this includes the enforcement of the equality of men and women. Each of us must begin on a personal plane to treat our women better. As writers, I think we have to constantly tune ourselves to be increasingly sensitive to the sensitivities of women. It has to show more and more in our depiction of womanhood. We may not get it right with one stroke or every stroke of the pen, but we have to endeavour to do better than we have done in the past.
7. I believe the world we live in today is the world we have made. We have done great things. We have also done stupid things. We have more work to do to cancel the cost of our stupid actions. We have lied against history. My people say, when a person wants to seize/steal his neighbour's land, he first begins by re-writing history. If you know anywhere where history is deliberately subverted, dig a little deeper; there is big injustice there that power is trying to cover up.

If we need to make a better world (and we seem to agree we do), we have to remake the world on humane terms. It is time to end the predatory opportunism of might. Literature must play a part in the

making of a better world. Literature must speak the truth to the world, a great deal of which must be uncomfortable truth.