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A friend of mine who lives here in Frankfurt asked me to start my talk by saying that I like Frankfurt. Because she said that people in Frankfurt like to be liked. So I like Frankfurt.

I was raised Roman Catholic. As a child, I loved going to church. My family went every Sunday to St Peter’s Chapel, which was a tall white building on the campus of the University of Nigeria, where I grew up.

The parish priest was a University lecturer. And as far as a Roman Catholic Church could go, it was an open, progressive, welcoming place. The Sunday sermons were benignly boring.

Years later, I heard that the church had changed hands and that the new parish priest was a man who was singularly focused on women’s bodies. He appointed a religious police, a brigade of boys, whose job it was to stand at the door of the church, and examine each woman and decide who could enter and who could not. Grandmothers were turned away because their dresses were ostensibly low-cut.

After I’d been away for years, I went home to visit my parents. And I went to church. I wore a long skirt and a short sleeved blouse in traditional print—an ordinary, commonly-worn outfit. At the entrance of the church, a young man stood in my way. His expression was a contrived mask of righteousness which I would have found, in different circumstances, very funny.

He asked me to turn back. My sleeves were too short, he said. I was showing too much arm. I could not go into the church unless I wrapped a shawl around my shoulders.

I was enraged. This church was part of my happy childhood, part of my memories of a time filled with joy. And now it had become a place that treated women not as human beings but as bodies that had to be controlled and harassed. And for what? To protect men from themselves.

So I decided to write an article about this incident in a widely-read Nigerian newspaper. I thought that the article would trigger action, that the university community would finally rise up and say “enough” and petition the Bishop or the
Pope or whoever made these decisions, and get this priest thrown out and restore the church to a welcoming place, free of misogyny.

But that did not happen. Instead, I was astonished by the hostile reception the article received. The summary of which was: SHUT UP. How dare you, a young woman, challenge a man of God?

I found it interesting that both the response to my article and the priest’s attitude toward women came from a similar impulse – the need to control of women. And this impulse to deny women full autonomy over their own bodies, this inability to see women as full human beings, exists everywhere in the world – the woman in the Middle East who does not want to but is forced to cover herself, the woman in the West who is slut-shamed for being a sexual being, the woman in Asia who is secretly videotaped in a public bathroom.

And this impulse also exists in the liberal literary world, where women writers are expected to make their female characters ‘likeable’, as though the full humanity of a female person must, in the end, fit the careful limitations of LIKEABILITY. And to end the story of what happened in church that day. Obviously my reaction was based on principle – just as men could decide what to wear in church, women too should be able to. But more practically, it was a hot day and the fans in the church were not working and the last thing I wanted to do was to wrap an itchy shawl around my shoulders.

And so I brushed aside the religious police and I walked in and sat down. The priest was informed of a stubborn person who had forced her way into the church, and was guilty of showing too much arm. The priest scolded me from the altar, and after mass, words were exchanged and to say that the words were unpleasant would be putting it very mildly indeed.

That experience made me let go of my own foolish romanticized idea that “speaking out” comes with the certainty of widespread support. But it clarified for me the importance of speaking out about what matters – one must speak out not because you are sure you will get support but because you cannot afford silence. I knew what the church once was, and I saw what it had become, and I could not keep silent.

I am sometimes called an activist. And I often feel a tug of reluctance, a resistance in my spirit – because it is not a word I would ever use to describe myself. Perhaps because I grew up in Nigeria and I saw what I consider to be REAL activists, people
who give their lives for causes, people who showed the kind of uncommon dedication that I can only aspire to.

I see myself as a writer, a storyteller, an artist. Writing is what gives my life meaning. It's what makes me happiest when it is going well. It's what makes me saddest when it is not.

But I am also a citizen. My responsibility as an artist is to my art. My responsibility as a citizen is to the truth and to justice.

This distinction between the artist and the citizen was recently made clear to me by an acquaintance who – in response to Nigerian hostility about something I had said about feminism – told me “Nigerians don’t have a problem with your books; they have a problem with your politics. They just want you to shut up and write.”

A few years ago, the Nigerian government passed a law that makes homosexuality a crime, a law I find not only deeply immoral but also politically cynical. It was this same acquaintance who told me that he didn’t understand why I would choose to speak out about my opposition to this law that many Nigerians actually happened to support.

“You have nothing to gain,” he told me. “And potentially a lot to lose.” He meant well. He was trying in his own way to protect me. But he was wrong about my not having anything to gain. Because to live in a society that treats every citizen in a just and equal manner IS an advantage. If I can change ONE mind, if I can get ONE person to THINK critically and oppose the law, then I have gained plenty because I have contributed to one small step in the long journey towards progress.

Art can illuminate politics. Art can humanize politics. But sometimes, that is not enough. Sometimes politics must be engaged with as politics. And this could not be more urgent today.

The world is shifting; it’s changing; it’s darkening. We can no longer play by the old rules of complacency. We must invent new ways of doing, new ways of thinking. The most powerful country in the world today feels like a feudal court full of intrigues, feeding on mendacity, drowning in its own hubris. We must know what is true. We must say what is true. And we must call a lie a lie.

This is a time for courage, and my understanding of courage is not the absence of fear. It is the resolve to act while also being afraid.
This is a time for more complex stories: it is not enough to know about how refugees suffer or how they do not fit into a new society; we must also know about what hurts their pride, what they aspire to, and who arms the wars that made them refugees in the first place, who bears responsibility.

This is a time to proclaim that economic superiority does not mean moral superiority.

This is a time to parse the subject of immigration, to be honest about it. To ask whether the question is about immigration or whether it is about immigration of SPECIFIC kinds of people – Muslims, black people, brown people.

This is a time for boldness in storytelling, a time for new storytellers. It is important to have a wide diversity of voices—not because we want to be politically correct, but because we want to be accurate. We cannot understand the world if we continue to pretend that a small fraction of the world is representative of the whole world.

This is a time to revisit HOW we think about stories. The question of human rights is not just about the big stories of government repression. It is also about the intimate stories. Domestic violence is as much a question of human rights as refugee asylum [rights]. Eleanor Roosevelt said of human rights: "Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we will look in vain for progress in the larger world."

All over the world today, women are speaking up, but their stories are still not really heard.

It is time for us to pay more than lip service to the fact that women’s stories are for everyone, not just women. We know from studies that women read books by men and women, but men read books by men. It is time for men to read women. It is time to bring an end to that question "what do women want", because it is time for all of us to know that women simply want to be full members of the human family.

There is a big gap in the imaginative space of so many people in the world today. There is an inability to feel empathy for women because the stories of women are not truly familiar; the stories of women are not yet seen as universal. This to me is why we seem to live in a world where many people believe that large numbers of women can simply wake up one day and make up stories about having been assaulted. I know many women who want to be famous. I don’t know one single woman who wants to be famous for having been assaulted. To believe this is to think very lowly of women.
The American Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg has spoken of how she was once asked “how many justices of the Supreme Court would need to be women for it to seem fair to you?”

And her response was “all nine of them.”

And she said people were often shocked, and people would say “oh but that’s not fair”. Bu of course, for many years all nine justices were men, and it seemed normal. Just as it seems normal today that most of the positions of REAL power in the world are occupied by men.

Women are still invisible. Women’s experiences are still invisible. It is time for all of us to be unabashed in recognizing that, in the words of Pablo Neruda, “we belong to this great humanity, not to the few but to the many.”

I’m sometimes known as a feminist icon. I have a hat that says “feminist icon”, but I didn’t bring it with me today.

But being a feminist icon means that people often turn to me to talk about feminism. I am bilingual; I speak both Igbo and English. And with my family and friends, we often speak two languages at the same time. And so a close friend of mine had told me that she had gone to see a consultant. And she said this in English. Igbo, I should say, does not have gender-specific pronouns, so the same word is the pronoun used for men and woman.

And so my friend said “I went to see a consultant”, and I switched to English and said “what did HE say”?

And my friend started laughing. She said “you lecture us all the time about not assuming things, but you just assumed the consultant was a man. In fact, the consultant was a woman.”

And so I hung my head in great shame. But it also made me realize how deeply embedded patriarchy is in our social DNA.

Literature is my religion. I have learned from literature that we are all flawed, all of us humans are flawed. But I have also learned that we are capable of goodness, that we do not need first to be perfect before we can do what is right and just.
I have two homes, in Nigeria and in the US. I used to roll my eyes at people who, when they were asked where they lived, would name TWO places. But I have become one of those people (and sometimes I roll my eyes at myself).

But when I first came to the US to attend college more than twenty years ago, I discovered that I had a new identity. In Nigeria I had thought of myself in terms of ethnicity and religion – I was Igbo and I was a Christian – but in America I became a new thing: I became black.

I don’t often transplant scenes from my life into my fiction but I once did with a particular scene in which I first started to understand what it meant to be black. An editor told me that the scene was completely unbelievable. It had been staged so that I could say something about race. She said: It would never happen like that in real life.

I wanted to tell her – actually, it did happen like that!

But I didn’t tell her that. Because when I teach creative writing, I tell my students “you cannot use real life to justify your fiction”. If your fiction is unbelievable to the reader, then you, the writer, have failed at your art, which is to use language to achieve the suspension of disbelief.

I tell my students this because I used to believe this. But increasingly I find myself questioning it. Because what we believe or what we don’t believe, what we find believable or what we find unbelievable, is itself a framework of our own experiences.

How many black people did that editor know? How many HONEST experiences of black people had she heard? On what basis did she decide what to believe and what not to believe?

It is time to expand our boundaries, widen the framework, know that what already exists can sometimes be too narrow to fit the complex multiplicity of human experiences.

I think that we need more stories that are overtly political–more stories that look the world in the face. But I also think that we need stories that are NOT overtly political. I teach a writing workshop in Lagos every year. And I make a conscious effort, when selecting the final participants, to have a diversity of voices – diversity of class, of region, of religion.
Two years ago, a young man called Kelechi came to the workshop. He was working class, intelligent, a journalist. During the workshop, one of the participants wrote a story—a story without a plot, a celebration of language, a meditation on growing up.

I found the story beautiful. Kelechi was perplexed by it.

"But nothing happens in this story. And it doesn’t teach us anything," he said.

Now that I think back on it, I am ashamed of my response to him.

"Well", I said, "I am sorry the story does not teach you how to how to build a house and how to get a job."

My response, in its shameful snobbery, was shaped by a fashionable idea among those who make literature, who teach it, and who promote it—that to question the usefulness of literature is philistinism in its purest form.

Later, in thinking about it, what Kelechi was asking that day was a much bigger and much more important question.

Does literature matter? Is literature useful?

We can continue to talk about literature as a cult that cannot be questioned, or we could soften the edges of our definitions. What does it mean to be useful? Does usefulness end in the concrete?

We humans are not a collection of logical bones and flesh. We are emotional beings as much as we are physical beings. Usefulness should relate to all the parts that make us human.

I wish I had told Kelechi that day what I now think—which is that our definition of useful is too narrow.

Literature does teach us. Literature does matter. I read to be consoled, I read to be moved, I read to be reminded of grace and beauty and love but also of pain and sorrow. And all of these matter. All of these are useful lessons.