Why I Write what I write

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Tena kotu, tena kotu, tena kotu katoa.

Why I Write, What I Write. Why do I write? What do I write? Why do I write what I do write? I think before I even attempt to answer these questions I should give you a warning. Do not expect to be enlightened, illuminated or genetically enhanced in any way by the content of my presentation. From the other authors, certainly, but not mine. Do not expect to leave here knowing any more than you knew when you arrived. Expect to sit quietly for ten minutes or so and politely applaud at the end.

But let’s pause there for a moment. Why would anyone start their presentation with such a warning? Well you see, if my presentation turns out to be halfway entertaining, interesting or witty, you’ll think to yourself at the end, ah-hah, he was only joking. But if it turns out to be dull, ill-informed, and about as much fun as watching CNN’s 24 hour coverage of the Presidential Debates, then you’ll think to yourself, well, at least he warned us.

Actually, there is a point to this rambling preamble. And it starts with an inflexion. New Zealanders are famous for ending their sentences on an upward inflexion. We can turn any statement into a question. Like this:

I’m from New Zealand. It’s a small country near Australia. It’s the country where they filmed Lord of the Rings. (By the way, if you’re reading this from the presentation notes, instead of listening to me talk, you’ll have no idea of what I’m on about here.)

Why do we talk this way? New Zealand is a small country in the middle of the Pacific nowhere. We’re most famous for having lots of sheep, and we’re good at a sport that nobody’s ever heard of. It’s as if in every sentence we are seeking your approval.

I’m from New Zealand. (Hey that’s okay, I hear it’s really nice there.)

It’s a small country near Australia. (No really, that’s great, that’s really er…)

It’s the country where they filmed Lord of the Rings. (Enough already!)

So forget all the stuff you’ve heard about hardy pioneering stock who hacked a life out of the wilderness with their bare hands and were fearless warriors in two world wars. We really just want to be liked. If that’s okay with you?

There’s another group of people who are also notoriously insecure, and that is writers. Writers bare their souls and hang them out in the open for you to mock or abuse or just to kick around, all the time secretly hoping that you will respect, admire, and caress them. So if New Zealanders are notoriously insecure and writers are worse…what chance have you got when you’re a writer from New Zealand? And yet, there’s
something about being able to call yourself a writer. There’s something about that line of children queuing for your autograph at a book festival or the delight on a child’s face as you sign their very own copy of one of your books that sweeps all those insecurities away as if they were never really important. Which they weren’t.

That’s why I write. I write because it validates my existence. It gives me a reason to be on this planet. A bit sad and pathetic when you say it out loud.

So why do I write what I do write? I write children’s books. Chapter books. I write books with a touch of the fantastical about them. Something that couldn’t possibly be true, and yet, in my world it seems entirely natural. I hide the pearl of fantasy within a thick oyster shell of realism to make the impossible seem possible. A kind of plausibility by association.

But the question comes around again. Why? The answer in the simple logic of a child: Because!

Buddha said:  *Things are not what they seem. Nor are they otherwise.*  The great French philosopher, Pierre Abelard said:  *The beginning of wisdom is found in doubting; by doubting we come to the question, and by seeking we may come upon the truth.*  Groucho Marx said:  *A child of five would understand this. Send someone to fetch a child of five.*  When we learn to crawl, our world expands. When we first walk, it grows a little more. When we get our first bicycle, we realize that there are lands waiting to be explored in the uncharted territories of the neighborhood around our home.

What we know suddenly seems small. The number of questions we don’t know the answers to seems vast but is still just a raindrop compared to the ocean of questions we have not yet thought to ask. But then far too quickly, the world starts to close in around us.

In a wonderfully tragic story by Helen Buckley a young boy who loves to paint flowers of all sizes and shapes and colours, starts at a big school, where he quickly learns that flowers are small and red, with green stems. There is a narrowing of our horizons that we cannot avoid, year after year, as first parents, then teachers, then professors explain to us the way things really are.

I am going to tell you something now, and I am sorry to have to be the one to break this to you, but you were bound to find out sooner or later. Human telepathy, the ability for human beings to read each other’s minds and communicate simply by thought, is more than just possible, it is commonplace. In fact there are very few people in the world who cannot communicate by thought transfer. It just so happens that you are one of the few. The rest of us in this room are all able to read each other’s minds. And able to read yours. Yes we know what you are thinking right now. But as soon as I tell you this, you are comparing this information with your own experience and worldview, and you know that I am lying to you. You know the way things really are.

See, I told you I knew what you were thinking!

But my readers are still young. The world is not yet quite so set in stone and the possibility still exists that there are more things beyond the limits of their knowledge that they have not yet discovered. By starting with what they know to be true and pushing it just slightly beyond those limits, I try to appeal to that sense of
wonderment, that exploration of a possible new world. In this world where anything can happen if you can only believe it to be true, the most wonderful adventures can take place with the most extraordinary people and the most powerful emotions, limited only by my own inadequacies in taking the stories from this world and translating them to the page. By my own stuttering empathy with the heart and mind of a ten-year-old child, a badly tuned in radio station to the way kids think and feel.

It may be distant and filled with static, but the signal is there. And I will continue to write, what I do write, as long as I can hear the music.

If that’s all right with you.
The Naked Muse: Echoes from a Writer’s Soul
John Nkemngong Nkengasong

*Glory is he who perceives the Truth*

*and speaks it plain;*

*or he becomes the snake that refused fewer legs*

*because it claimed it was bigger than the millipede*

*and died having none. (Black Caps and Red Feathers 7-8).*

Many times I have asked myself the questions: why waste the candles of the night and the beams of the day poring upon the universe and wondering whether the world was strutting forward in beatitude or slouching backward in despair? Is it of any worth spending a lifetime dreaming of unknown worlds and tediously scribbling WORDS at a writing desk in a little corner of the world? Perhaps the great contradiction is that I don’t understand myself not to talk of the world in which I live. Maybe I am just a Sisyphean hero assigned to some awesome task by some unknown fate and I have turned to writing as a way of reconciling the soul with the self and the universe.

What I write is a different matter all together. I know that anyone who communicates with the verbal image or what Harold Bloom calls the “splendour of figurative language” is a poet be it verse, prose, drama or any other form. For, the poet is not just a singer of mellifluous verse but a legislator, an instrument of justice and the pathfinder for meaningful existence. As for me, I am uncertain about what I write. Let the critic judge. It is the critic who is the real author, who writes and unwrites a work, who determines its tone, pulse, and spirit. It is the critic who illuminates the meaning or blurs it; it is the critic who builds monuments of praises and brings them down again with a destructive phrase. Let the critic get to task according to his/her valued judgements. I am only an agent of creativity, and I write in order to start an argument and not to conclude it.

The twenty-first century is a dynamic and an enchanting one enriched by unprecedented strides in science and technology, not necessarily to make life better for all things living, but most evidently to prove human ability to survive without cosmic intervention. But is there happiness? Is there happiness for the one who stands at the center
and talks boastfully about his or her achievements? Or the other who cringes at the periphery in resignation and oblivion? We can hardly answer in the affirmative because we have shunned, in Friedrich Nietzsche’s words, the “holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned.” In the 19th Century Nietzsche declared: “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him” (95-96). In the 20th century, we dug and built His grave with concrete, and in the 21st Century we are burying Him. Our ancestral shrines have been desecrated, our stone gods crushed to build mansions, our totems slaughtered and eaten for supper and the towering temples and churches deserted or have become curious sights for distressed tourists all because of the mad rush for modernity. And since religion can no longer serve the purpose for which God was born, poetry must of necessity take its place.

If I have mentioned modernity it is because the concept seems to be grossly misconstrued. In practical terms it refers to improved and more comprehensive ways of life. In other words, modernity should be a polished form of culture and not a rejection of it. The very root of culture does not change; in fact, it should not change. It is culture that gives one a sense of being, that takes one into the heart of the universe and links one to the very roots and essence of existence. It is culture that stops the world from breaking into pieces. And of course, it is culture that provides the pulse and rhythm of poetry as well as its content. On the contrary, modernity has killed culture. Instead of improving ways of life in such a way that there is the greatest happiness for the greatest number, modernity has become a vast body of misconceptions interpreted by many to mean vulgarity and misdemeanour; the reason why we walk naked in winter and wrap ourselves in wool in summer.

The world is moving towards the dynamics of a world culture, what has been famously described as “globalisation.” We are indeed moving towards a cultural globalisation, an important way to make the world and life more accessible and to bring the cultures of the world together so that humanity can partake in the pleasure of each other’s cultural experience. But who is dominating the global culture? Who is losing in the global culture? Where is Africa’s place in this global culture? What happened to Africa, a continent that was and is still bustling with life, energy and cultural diversity?

Therefore, I write in search of Truth, a search invoked by a naked Muse in a world that is getting steadily uglier, especially with the drama of hypocrisy, vanity and untruth which has left humanity in the first decade of the 21st Century sweating with the terror, fear...
and uncertainty never experienced in human history. We are living in a world in which conscience is dead and humanity has sunk to the lowest depths of evil. As a result, the world continues to roll on, on the rails of an enchanting paradox towards an uncertain fate or some intractable destiny because it is thirsty of Truth. In these pervasive circumstances, therefore, the writer must not go to sleep if she/he must stop the world from going to sleep. Our world is a happy world if we embrace only the Truth. Thus the writer has the task of exploring the universe in search of Truth and to bring humanity to those realms where harmony, peace and happiness are attainable.

Let me conclude with a veneration of four poets, (aside the incomparable Shakespeare) who are accomplished Apostles of Truth. There is my late friend and compatriot, Bate Besong, whose laughter woke African tyrants from their sleep; there is the living, Wole Soyinka, whom excess of ritual has transformed into a myth; there is the most sincere of poets, William Butler Yeats, who climbed the imagination rung by rung until he reached God’s home; and there is T.S. Eliot whom philosophy turned into a pack of “broken images.” I am not worth a particle of dust around their graves. However, they remain the ingredients of my creative energy. And if my feeble effort as a writer won’t lure anyone towards my convictions, or reanimate the cold dead world and bring it back to God’s crafted beatitude, I will, when I shall wake from sleep one morning to find that I am dead, be happy all the same, that I lived to create monuments of WORDS.

References


Sometimes, when critics pigeonhole me as a social or feminist writer, I ask myself: whom are they talking about? When my press articles and TV programs are attacked and accused of advocating women's liberty, I wonder if they are talking about me. When I discovered my name in the 2005 "Arab Human Development Report" on women Arab writer’s who have made a difference and left some social impact, I wondered if we really deserved it.

For me, writing has always been an attempt to answer troubling, violent and urgent questions that are alleviated only on paper. It is difficult to be selected "a writer" by your destiny in a society constantly changing, intellectually, socially, politically, and economically in line with requirements of the world game. A life composed of a set of conflicting items and concepts; identity, Islam, the nation, orientalism, globalization, foreign occupation, alienation, fundamentalism, the crusades, colonialism, women's freedom, bridging gaps, dialogue, and all other paradoxes.

In the Arab mind, the "Other" was the West as an occupation civilized force, whereas in the 'invaders' eyes the East was the land of barbarian savages. This image was enhanced by the Orientalist representations that drew a portrait of the east based largely on Arabian Nights and the Turkish harem. This stereotype of the imagined East has aggravated the feeling of injustice felt by the Arabs and threatened their identity in a changing world in which they had no role in the sweeping political and economic transformations. This feeling was reflected in both culture and society by going back in history in search of identity and definition of self. The West became an enemy of the cultural, religious and national identity. Arab liberal thought, which had made gains from the 1950s to late 1980s, faced suspicion and even rejection and was accused of Westernization. The collapse of the Soviet Union also played a role in retreat to fundamentalist thought among socialist intellectuals.

Narrative fiction is a complex composite of feeling, language, reality, hopes and sufferings in which the imagined literary text is merged into the socio- historical.

The Arab human development report for 2005 on the "Rise of Arab women" and in the section on women's creative writing, argues that "Arab societies suffer a series of contradictions that combine both inferior values and liberation values in the men-women relationship".

Do I write about these or about women within these transformations? I have chosen the latter, but with some reservations. I do not write a novel with a predetermined methodology. Articles,
TV programs, and lectures are usually the vessels of ideas, theories and figures. Novels and fiction in general are different zones, built in a world that is parallel to reality, which highlights all these contradictions through characters.

When I read something by other women writers, or review my articles, or start a new novel, I am amazed by the margin of freedom of expression and boldness in handling the taboos in terms of religion, politics and sex. The image of women has indeed changed drastically since the Arab renaissance at the beginning of the last century.

At other times, I tend to dilute my optimism when I view young girls wearing their veils, or refusing to shake hands with men, while believing in men's responsibility for their upkeep and superiority over them. Ironically, most of these young women are educated, and some are physicians, lawyers and engineers.

It's true that our societies are governed by certain religious and social characteristics. Social change is resisted and often obstructed by those who have monopolized religious authority and become its custodians against us. In their mind-set they believe that women's freedom threatens their identity, especially at a time when the West is trying to impose its understanding of democracy and women's liberation on our political regimes. This kind of thinking identifies freedom as a conspiracy against the Arab Islamic identity. The growing Salafi and fundamentalist backlash in our societies has made great advantage of the bias in foreign western policies and the misunderstanding between East and West.

But the question remains… for whom, why? and what do I write? Writers cannot claim that they write for the sake of spiritual satisfaction or for the ecstasy of creation. They follow up on the impact of their writing on others. They enjoy the recipients' interest in what they write but are disappointed when readers and critics neglect their output.

So to whom do I write? And do I write to change my world and the world of women around me?! When my schoolteachers discovered that I could write, I thought I could change the world through my work, that my reputation as a writer would open up all opportunities and remove all obstacles and barriers before me. I thought that I would be an instrument for change like all the great writers who had influenced me after reading their translated works. The scene for such daydreaming was a small field that my family owned near the frontiers of Bethlehem. The mountains provided barriers for my town hiding everything beyond. Their heights motivated me to discover and to explore the world beyond; a different world I did not know. I started flying over their peaks. But never imagined that crossing the barriers could break my neck. Yet, when I practiced writing, I realized that my dreams of jumping over fortified barriers and prohibited fences were much easier than facing the reality.
Since childhood, I mastered the game of escape to the paper whenever pressing questions overwhelmed me. When I was seven or eight, I asked my religion teacher, "How could God be just with all this misery and large numbers of refugees around us"? She slapped me on the face for my blasphemy, my question unanswered. When I was ten, my father hit me because I joined a demonstration out of sheer curiosity. He feared that my actions would affect his job. However, after he closed up the windows to protect his job with the government, he would listen to anti-government political commentary on the radio. My mother would forbid any talk on sex in front of the girls, while my religion teacher emphasized daily that Eve was the original sin that tempted Adam into vice. Censorship would cover pictures of bare breasts and legs completely with black ink, and cut off political pages from newspapers and magazines. I REALISED THE TABOOS.

Do I write about taboos or women? Perhaps I have been haunted by the image of my mother whose father deprived her and her sisters from inheritance and passed it on to his son...the male! When she claimed her rights, she was outcast for years. Or was I troubled by the images of violence against women in our neighborhood?

With the crises of the occupation of Iraq and the recent developments in Palestine, the habit of reading is unfortunately fading out in the Arab world. The Arab readers' taste is now geared increasingly toward religious, direct political, horoscope, and cookbooks. The year 2008 was ushered in on Arab satellite channels with new media stars, a new year with reading and prediction from famous Arab zodiac readers and fortune-tellers to audience feeling insecure. The books of those new stars are best sellers, unfortunately more popular than those of distinguished novelists.

In spite of the great achievements of Arab women writers, after a long struggle, they are being threatened by the fanatic fundamentalist trends. On the other hand, while novel writing has scored many points beyond the taboos through publishing outside the native country or in foreign languages, it has moved quite a few steps backwards in terms of readership.

With poverty among Arab women being one of the highest in the world, owners and supporters of the Salafi thought are having their way with their resources, organizational skill, and funding and ability to provide social assistance to the needy.

Do I write for women? Or about them?!

Women characters in a novel cannot be separated from their circumstances, which are governed by traditions and conventions of a religious and social culture that defines roles for both sexes. In all my fiction works, I have defied and challenged the traditional taboos in modern Arab life: sex, religion and politics. This is what I have done so far in my five novels: "The Sun Rises From the West", "A Woman for Five Seasons", "Two Nights and a Woman's Shadow", "Neighing of Distances", "Illusive Anchors", and my short-story collection "A Day Like Any Other". Most of these novels are used as text books in Arab- and Jordanian universities. I was very happy when a
PhD student who is preparing her thesis on my works told me that the leading character in my latest novel looked very much like her, and she learned from her how to defend her rights. I was delighted when a woman artist expressed her admiration for one of my novels by drawing a painting inspired by it. And I nearly cried when housewives in Ramallah studied it as part of some NGOs' requirements and they said they learned some of their rights through the characters.

Such feedback makes me feel that I am not a voice in the wilderness. I am happy when fundamentalist writers condemn my articles. I'm also happy when they ask for my writings to be stopped. I was delighted when I was attacked in a mosque sermon after one of my TV programs. This is at least an indication that there are still those who read, listen and react. For me, still I have many explosive and burning questions. I believe the answers are always….

More writing.
Tarek Eltayeb

The Migrant as a Poet
The Poet as a Migrant

Every creator is a poet.
Every creator is a migrant.

The difficulty exists when the poet is a migrant.
More difficult yet is when the migrant is a poet.

When both are in one person, it can be a catastrophe, or it can produce a unique creation from the suffering he has witnessed.

The poet is a person who leaves his time

The poet is a person who leaves his time because there are many things he does not accept. So he rebels against language and uses language against the rigidity of habit and the stupidity of intelligent policy. The poet looks for another time with which to harmonize. He hates running with the herd. He hates the argument “everybody is doing it.” He leaves his time metaphorically, to rise to another place, to bring back innovations, not only for change but to motivate the independence of others, to free thought, to create a better way, and he does this in peace. He does this tenderly.

Now I need to explain the word “poet” in my mother tongue, Arabic. It comes from the verb “to feel.” In this case the poet becomes the “feeler”. I don’t know where the word comes from in English, but the first time I heard the word “poet”, I wondered a little. The sound of this word, po-et, means “small house” in my language. “Small” because in Arabic, the short syllable of e makes the diminutive. As we say “Hassan”, we make it smaller with “Hussain”. In German, my second language, “poetry” is “Dichtung”, which means “create, arrange, erdenken”. Perhaps this meaning strays from feeling and moves towards intellect.

Most people doubt the word “poet”. They don’t consider it a profession. The poet produces nothing visible for them. Poets produce words, and perhaps books later on, but for the majority of people, poetry books may as well be invisible.

Twenty-five years in Cairo during the first part of my life, I never met anyone who called himself a poet. I never met a single person who claimed it as a profession. I met poets, but first they would say, “I am a journalist,” or teacher or translator or another job. The title “poet” was refused. Only after the society had recognized one’s work through publication and notoriety, could one say,
“I am a poet.” However, 1500 years ago in the same society, a poet was present at each great occasion to express its significance. The poems of this past era have been respected across the generations and continue to be respected today. However, in this current era, in which the ear is inferior to the eye, and everything is translated through images, poetry is valued as a quality, not as a thing in itself. It is valued as an adjective, not a profession.

The migrant is a person who leaves his place

The migrant is a person who leaves his place because he cannot accept many things. He rebels against the political environment. He rebels against the claim that the powerful simply deserve their power more than others. He rebels against the stupidity of intelligent policy. The migrant looks for another place with which to harmonize. He hates the argument “everybody is doing it”. He wants to leave a place physically, to flee from violence, to save himself in this life, to change his path and preserve his dignity.

After time has passed, some migrants become aggressive to other migrants. As migration is a relative issue, depending on place and time, he who has migrated long ago may no longer feel like a migrant. The generation that follows rejects their migrant history. Often, the hardest pressure on the new migrant comes from the old migrant, like someone who recently quit smoking and now preaches as if he were the head of the World Health Organization, or a recent vegetarian who holds himself as the great defender of animal rights.

From the other side, the new migrant is a person who rarely speaks of himself as a migrant – especially in his earliest years. To many of those who label the migrant as such, the migrant is an incomplete person, having lost something, above all the home. Few people consider that a migrant could achieve greater things without the need for a motherland, which has been is my experience. But for most, the migrant appears as a person who lacks a home, lacks money and lacks language. The word “migrant” becomes a title and not a quality or adjective.

The poet and migrant first meet as they depart the norm.

The poet brings a new language from the original language. And the migrant brings a new place from their origin.

Both the migrant and poet are similar in their reasoning and goals.

A migrant is a person who leaves a place looking for a better time and place. A poet is a person who leaves his time looking for a better place and time.
Why I Write What I Write? June 10, 2020 | 8 Comments. I received this email from a reader recently—

"Boss, I’d prefer to read actionable articles on what stocks you like, and what trends you are seeing in the markets, etc. and not these crappy ‘how to think and invest better’ articles. ~ AJ. And then this slightly more respectable one: ‘You see, as lazy and selfish as I am, I would like to see my writing endure well over time. I would be happy to see what I write being just as effective thirty years from now as it may be today, just as helpful to someone starting investing in 2040 as to someone investing in 2020. You may find nothing actionable in my writing, but hopefully it leaves you with something to think about. Good investing, after all, is 99% good thinking and just 1% good acting. Why. I always stood out of the crowd, even as a little girl. I thought I was supposed to be a boy, because I gladly stayed home to watch football games with dad instead of paying attention to Winx, Bratz or other girly cartoons that were popular at the time, but I soon understood that I am building a character for myself. First time I wrote anything was when I had a school task to describe my summer vacation. My teacher said it was so good that she had to call my parents and tell them about my gift. Our second task was to describe our role model and I wrote a paper about my grandmother, comparing her to many, many other powerful influencers from books I have been reading. Which brings me to an interesting question: why I write in the first place. Sure, I write because I enjoy the process. I have always loved writing, and I finally reached a level where I can write comfortably in English even though it’s not my native language, which feels nice. Plus, writing feels essential to my mental gym routine. And yes, I write to build a business. Content is one of the most powerful ways to build an audience at scale while keeping things human. But, the more I write, the more I realise that writing is much more than all of that to me. Writing is a way to create meaning. Writing allows us to craft our own world, to untangle our thoughts, to design our own mental models, to make sense of our lives."