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Literature in the Time of Conflict

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Panel: Writing in a Culture in Conflict

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Samuel KOLAWOLE

Literature in the Time of Conflict

About six months ago, I had the good fortune to witness two men fighting on the streets of Lagos close to a dual carriageway. The men, both tall and gaunt, must have been in their thirties. The unusual thing about this spectacle was not that they were fighting. Lagos being a sprawling megacity of about twenty-one million people on Nigeria's coast, a city that struggles with deprivation, traffic congestion and chaotic infrastructure, it's only normal for skirmishes to erupt. But then this fight was of a unique kind.

The men were stark naked.

For a few moments, I watched as they fought with their bare knuckles like savages amidst a crowd of cheering people (I'll spare you the crude details), and when everything was over, after the policemen had invaded the place and dispersed the crowd, and the din of the streets had returned, the image of those two men stuck in my head. I played the scene over and over again in my mind. I found myself wondering what could have incited such a shameless confrontation, if they had removed their garments at the scene of the fight or come prepared.

I became gripped by the desire to know who these men were, if they had children, why they would fight in full view of everybody, their origins, the spaces they occupied. It further occurred to me that my imagination could easily provide the things I wasn't privy to. I wanted to tell their story, or rather I wanted to tell a story with two naked men fighting. My imaginations percolated, and then the time came when I could no longer hold the idea within me, so I began processing it into fiction.

In the end, a short story emerged from my experience, and now I am in the process of writing a second draft.

It is said that in Nigeria you can never be in want of a good story idea. My first book, *The Book of M*, is a collection of short stories, most of which were inspired by real events, the things I heard and witnessed growing up under the Nigerian Military regime in the 90's. Even now my works continue to draw heavily on the stories and events of my country.

From the moment you step out of your house, you are exposed to a world of paradoxes, a country where there is warmth, love, humour and kindness, but also hostility, fear and strife, a country where abundant wealth and abject poverty stand side by side.

In so many ways, we are a nation at war with itself. Why that is so is a question that cannot be answered in a simple way, and yet it must be confronted over and over again.

When more than one belief, orientation, or opinion exists, conflict can occur. With about 350 languages spoken across the country, Nigeria is divided into over 250 ethnic groups. The two major religious persuasions are Christianity and Islam, while others hold traditional beliefs. So it is not surprising that some of our cities remain largely divided along ethno-religious lines with cases of ethnic clashes, Jihads and reprisal riots from the crises in Jos, Plateau State, to the larger, more complicated Boko Haram insurgency in the North East.

There is also the issue of the stark dichotomy of wealth and poverty. I am of the firm belief that any society structured so that people are treated unequally and unjustly is likely to erupt into conflict. Nigeria has one of the world's largest proven oil reserves in the world. Oil wealth accounts for 95 percent of Nigeria's foreign earnings and 65 percent of government revenues. Nigeria is the largest economy in Africa, and yet almost 100 million people live on less than \$1 (£0.63) a day, about 60 percent of the population.

On a simplistic level, we understand that literatures rely on conflict to thrive as the most effective stories are the ones fraught with challenges.

The broader scope, however, is to see literature as a tool for enabling us to understand the nature of conflicts amongst individuals, families, communities, tribes, and cultures.

Writers in many cultures and ages have interpreted the realities of conflict through their works.

In the book *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane, a teenager enlists with the Union Army in the hopes of fulfilling his dreams of glory but experiences the harsh realities of war.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, illuminates a seminal moment in modern African history: the Biafran War, a conflict that took lives numbering more than one million people.

Dambudzo Marachera's semi-autographic book, *House of Hunger*, is about a man in conflict with himself.

Literature calls into question on a fundamental level why inequality exists in our society and argues—and in some cases demands—for fairness. It serves as a method of transcending the barrier of time, geography and culture. Literature keeps connecting us across worlds.

It offers us hope in the midst of despair. Most importantly, it makes us realise that we are human—all too human.

Our art is shaped by where we come from. Nigeria, troubled as it may be, remains my country. The people of my country are resilient and industrious. Some of the most talented and hardworking people I know are Nigerians, and for every citizen involved in drug trafficking or internet scams, there are more than a thousand striving to change the world.

Nigeria is the country of my birth, the country that made me the man, the writer that I am.