

Shadreck CHIKOTI

Speaking Freely

I recently posted this on my Facebook wall: “As a writer, sometimes my characters will say things that I personally cannot say, they will go to places I am not allowed to go. Sometimes they do things that I would never do in my whole life. Therefore, when my character is swearing, it is not I who swears because I’m just a messenger.”

That post generated all sorts of comments. Here is a highlight on a few of those:

Person A said, “In short, characters have their own legal personalities? Like they can sue and be sued?” (One thinking-face emoji and three I-can’t-stop-laughing emojis).

Person B said, “I always have this fear about the readers here, whether they'd understand that it's the character saying and doing things and not necessarily the writer.”

Person C said, “You are one with your characters. Otherwise, how can a mango tree bear bananas?”

Person D said, “As a writer, you are a parent to your characters. It is your responsibility to punish them as a father. Simply put, you can’t run away from responsibility when your characters misbehave.” (A red angry face emoji).

I come from a country that is very restrictive when it comes to freedom of speech. Not necessarily because of politics or laws, as is the case with many African countries, but because of social norms.

For thirty years, we were under the totalitarian rule of Dr. Kamuzu Banda, an infamous leader who was notoriously quick in silencing people of dissenting views. During his reign, many writers were arrested: Jack Mapanje for his poetry book, *Of Chameleons and Gods*; Sam Mpasu for his novel, *Nobody’s Friend*; Chinoko, for his poem, “Come Come And Mend.” And many others.

But in 1992 we rose up as a nation, took to the streets and ousted Dr. Banda, ushering in a period of democracy, freedom of speech, respect for the rule of law, human rights, and unfortunately, a period of corruption.

Politically, once we embraced democracy, anybody could write anything in whatever manner they wanted. We had all the freedom to truly speak. In our society, and to most writers, this freedom was mostly exercised in the political arena, since you could now criticize the government without fear of facing a jail sentence.

That said, not long ago, a friend of mine wrote a story that depicted two boys who were madly in love—the internet in my country was set ablaze with people accusing him of being an “irresponsible writer” who had no respect for the cultural norms of our society.

ICPL and the International Writing Program Panel Series, October 4, 2019

Efe Duyan (Turkey), Shadreck Chikoti (Malawi), Nick Yu (China), Tade Ipadeola (Nigeria)

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I wrote a story almost two decades ago about a Christian boy, well-behaved, very principled, who was enticed to watch porn with a girl, ended up sleeping with her, enjoying the sex, and asking himself, “Why did I come this late to the party?” Again, my Christian friends accused me—and told me to my face—that my story was demonic and from the pit of hell. I was betraying the Cross, they said.

My daughter is an avid reader and writer. She is already writing poetry and amazing stories. Recently she asked me, “Dad, have you started writing your virtual reality story yet?”

“Yeah,” I answered.

“Please, read me a little,” she said.

“I can’t. It’s still in Chichewa. I will read it to you after translation,” I said.

I lied. My story starts in a bar, with a character who is preoccupied with his attempts to impress a prostitute and his desire to get some, quick. I did not want my daughter to hear that.

As a writer and an individual, I am a free soul with the freedom to write whatever I want in whatever manner. But sometimes I do catch myself asking the question, “What if my daughter reads this? What are my friends going to think about this and me? How about my religion?” and in many cases, my answer has been to middle-finger all these restrictions so that I can be true to my stories and my characters. But sometimes my answer has been to abandon some of this freedom, willingly, in order to be a responsible father, or citizen, or member of my church. Sometimes freedom feels at odds with my affiliations.

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