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The Tyranny of the Acceptable Lived Experience

I have always found the term “lived experience” a strange expression. Since “experience” is only accrued through living, it would therefore be safe to assume that “living” is already implied in the word “experience” warranting the qualifier “lived” redundant. But since, by today’s shapeshifting standards, to which we are constantly playing catch up, it would be crude of me to educate you on the mechanics of what to me is a borrowed language. So I will—grudgingly—use the term as is, since it is, for now, in the zeitgeist, much like other strange expressions—take *adulging* or *bazinga*.

Now we have got that out of the way, allow me to beguile you with another reluctant capitulation in my short literary journey.

For the longest time, I have avoided identifying as any kind of writer partly because I fundamentally detest, abhor, and abominate labels and, more so, the sanctimonious busybodies who assume the monumental responsibility (without invitation) of determining who or what I am. It is only recently I have, grudgingly, accepted the moniker of a speculative fiction writer, because, for the most part, it is superficial, a temporary coat I accept to wear only to silence a world that is obsessed with labels and affiliations. I am at liberty, even now, to be unfaithful to this adopted moniker and write whatever the hell I want, be it non-fiction, mysteries, or (godforbid) romance and, most importantly, from any perspective of my choosing.

However, it appears such literary elasticity is slowly becoming a privilege of a bygone time, and I am now expected to confine my imagination to a limited spectrum of archetypes.

You see, I too am a victim of what I’d like to call “the tyranny of the *acceptable* lived experience.” Now while I am not constrained to only telling stories related to my own identity (for now anyway), this iteration of literary tyranny imposes a deceptively innocuous proposition—as I came to discover a few years ago. Whilst I can evade the obligations of my adopted moniker “speculative fiction writer” without consequence, it would appear I will not be accorded the same leniency with this challenge to the literary form which is, as far as I can tell, a well-meaning crusade to ensure that previously unseen and unheard lived experiences are captured and celebrated in print.

My first flesh wound from this ideology of sorts came from what could only be described as a pompous faultfinder who created nothing and yet felt qualified to pass judgment on the works of those who bear the emotional cost of actually creating something. A species known in the wild as *criticus literarius*, the literary critic.

One critic’s surgical disembowelment of my work in speculative fiction ran for five pages of a literary review with the wonderfully complimentary title *Tongue-Tied*. While a painful slog to get through, some of the criticism was, to be fair, justified, for instance my “homages to Eurocentric traditions” or “references to Greek mythology” being proof of my non-Malawian inspiration. But what really ruffled the feather of my quill was a snipe at my short story “One Wit’ This Place,” describing it as “a feminist nightmare,” with a female protagonist who “seems to have no agency to make things happen.” It is a

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wonder the critic did not follow through with this line of thinking and christen my female protagonist a male chauvinist's wet dream... but I digress.

Reading between the lines, it would appear the critic expected my female protagonist to conform to a certain archetype – an acceptable lived experience of sorts – emblematic of feminine empowerment; in this case “the strong female character.”

I have nothing against strong women. I married one. But must we satisfy our literary palate solely with a calorie-free diet of strong female characters, even if our reasons are noble? Who says every female character must be a feminist icon? Can't we have female characters who are “weak,” even to a fault, and yet are still enthralling?

Now while challenging tropes is understandable in some contexts, my unease with this literary ideology rests not in its intention, which may be good, but in its implication. For if we begin to set boundaries on our imagination so only certain stories of certain lived experiences are told or are worth telling, does that not also mean, to borrow a current American cliché, that certain stories matter more than others?

We are all stories waiting to be told, and each story matters—even if one of them happens to be a feminist's nightmare.

If, however you still feel inclined that I should agree with this critic and conform to this emerging tyranny on the literary form, then allow me to finally get African on your ass and leave you with the immortal words of the late great Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe: “If you do not like my story, write your own.”

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