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TROUBLES

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

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A Writer's Eyes on the World

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

OBARI GOMBA



MASOBE

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34 Gbajumo Close, off Adeniran Ogunsanya,
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For everyone who can take a risk
with the gravity of truth.

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PROLOGUE

...

He asked
“What do you do for a living?”
“Free Speech,” I said.

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A Parable

In a dream, the Spirit of the Age said to me: “Write down the words I say.”

“Why?” I asked.

Then he told me the parable of Aluebo.¹ When the Almighty One called the people of Aluebo to a meeting, He set before them the power to make wealth and the power to make griots, and He asked them to choose one. The leader of Aluebo stood up, cleared his throat, and said: “Head of All Wisdom, bless us with griots.” The Almighty One queried them: “Why do you prefer griots to wealth? If you have wealth, you can hire the best griots to tell your tales.”

The leader of Aluebo replied: “It is improper to own griots in that manner. If a fly comes to those griots with more money, they will fly away with the fly. We want to raise griots from our own groins and wombs. We want griots that will share our blood; we want griots that will sing about our triumphs and our failures. We want griots that will reprove us in our seasons of darkness.”

¹ A mythical place.

The Almighty One was pleased with Aluebo. And He blessed them beyond their request. He gave them both the power to make griots and the power to make wealth. You can guess why the Almighty One was so impressed. A people who are humane enough to listen to uncomfortable truths from their griots will be able to manage their existence.

If a people have good fortune without good judgment, they will come to ruin sooner or later. No society can progress beyond the intellect at work within its borders. No society can grow beyond its own power of imagination and creativity. No society can progress beyond the measure of its creative spirit. A society has to harness and grow its creative force.

• • •

That parable sat at the corner of my head when I arrived in Oxford on 17th October 2021 as the TORCH² Global South Visiting Professor and Visiting Fellow at All Souls College. I had set out from Nigeria to present essays and poetry to the university community.

In the process of writing “To Stop Human Maternity for at Least Fifty Years: A Modest Proposal,” which forms the first chapter of this book, it occurred to me that I could write more topical essays in the same satirical mode.

Satire is an old and effective trope of art. It is safe to say that satire is as old as humanity. It has found expression across cultures and eras. In Nigeria, the

² The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities, University of Oxford, UK.

Eleme ethnic nationality has the Eson Okea-ebie and the Urhobo people have the Udje. Both are old forms of oral poetry that deploy satire amongst other features. Some persons love to speak about Menippus of Gadara (ancient Greece), Horace (Rome), and Juvenal (Rome) as the “inventors” of the earliest forms of satire. That is a narrow viewpoint.

Menippus, Horace, Juvenal, Aristophanes, and Menander are great contributors to the development of the form. But the origin of satire is diverse and so are its forms. There are three well-known forms: Menippean, Horatian, and Juvenalian. There are other forms and sub-forms. Too many for our time here. There will be more fusions and mutations in the years to come. There are mixed forms. In actual practice, there are no boundaries or borders to stop creative people from mixing or combining forms that deploy any or all of situational and verbal irony, understatement or exaggeration, incongruity, parody, sarcasm, humour, etc. to create a blend of aesthetics and social commentary.

Social criticism has its limitations: backlash, the unpredictability of public taste, barriers of existing biases, self-censorship that forces writers to look over their shoulders or their minds' shoulders, legal censorship, concerns about libel, the dictatorship of the state or the dictatorship of the public. Yet, writers and content creators have continued to navigate society and to make social commentary in literature, journalism, film and television, cartoon, music, theatre, commercials, and political campaigns. It has also been a feature in private conversations.

I know a few golden principles, and I love to make them guide my writing. They apply to satirical writing as they apply to other modes of writing. My daredevil muse says to me: “If you must write a book, write a loveable or hateable book, write a loveable-hateable book that is not afraid to fail.” A text should aim to please or to annoy: never to leave the public indifferent. Whether the public laughs or rages, a text should dare to make people think and talk and act. A text should never ignore imagination and wit. It is a great feat for a text to heal with morals as it hurts with wit (Alexander Pope’s style).

This book project has taught me to prepare for a backlash. Free speech is easily free troubles. You can be sure of freedom of speech but never sure of freedom after speech. It has also alerted me to escape the jaws and claws of self-censorship. I have heard that if you speak like a clown when offering commentary or criticism, your listeners will allow you till you run into someone that has a head of stone.

Social commentary is the dominant mode in this book of disturbance. There are faction and straight talk, but satire springs up in diverse tones. I trust that the reader is discerning enough to distinguish between satire and faction and straight talk.

• • •

Not all the essays were first written in Oxford. Some of the earliest drafts date back to 2013. I have dusted off and reworked earlier pieces of writing. After digging carefully, I am amazed that I had allowed so many essays to be lost and many essays to be scattered in files, folders,

and envelopes. I am grateful for the extant and recovered ones that have acquired newness as they stand beside the new ones. I am grateful that time has forced me to undertake this book project in Oxford. In this book, I have exceeded the work plan I had before my arrival in Oxford. I have no doubt that I have made my visiting professorship and fellowship count in a significant way.

This work will task the reader to consider its units either as stand-alone essays or as a whole single story held together by “a stream” of consciousness. It can also present as the mental peregrination of a contemporary Underground Man who has dared the eternal ghost of his Dostoevsky to look at a wider, disjointed milieu shaped as the globe. This work can be many things, and it can be anything.

To anyone who will read this book from a preset position on style or form, this book is too glad to be inside and outside your expectation. Any text that fails to alter or extend or disturb a tradition is not worth its place in that tradition.

To anyone who will read this book, you will not find answers to all the questions that agitate the world, but you may find the candour and audacity to ask new questions. To anyone who will read this book, I hope that it requires more than your purchasing power; I hope that it requires your courage to know and unknow the world; I hope that you see not just polemics but beauty.

*Beechwood House,
Iffley Turns,
Oxford.*

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