

Bearing Inner Witness:

The Writer's Journey in Toni Morrison's *Burn This Book*

Toni Morrison's *Burn This Book* is a collection of essays exploring the tension between a writer's private self and their engagement with the external world. Nadine Gordimer, one of the contributors, frames this tension as a conflict between the writer's inner journey and the outer events they must confront. Each writer in the collection portrays their own journey—how life events shaped them into becoming writers. What emerges from these essays is a common theme: for writers to reflect the outer world without being consumed by it, they must undergo a personal transformation, marked by contradictions and self-discovery. This process is evident in the works of Gordimer, Rushdie, Pamuk, Iyer, and Grossman.

In "Witness: The Inward Testimony," Gordimer explores how a writer's sense of agency evolves through reflection, even on tragic external events. She describes her own development, recalling how, as a young girl, she transformed everyday incidents into stories, searching for meaning in what others took for granted.¹ Writers are often seen as detached observers, but Gordimer argues they must undergo a journey of self-discovery to bear witness without becoming burdened by the tragedies they encounter. This ability to look beyond the surface of ordinary life helped her reflect on larger world tragedies without being overwhelmed by them. Gordimer's

¹ Gordimer, 105

evolution as a writer allowed her to engage with both sides of a story, transcending her initial biases and self-pity. The essay highlights how writers can capture the external world more reflectively by tracing the evolution of their inner voice. This is crucial because many writers assume it is enough to write from a fixed identity. However, Gordimer suggests that a writer's journey is shaped by constant self-reflection, which deepens their understanding of their own voice and the "I" from which they speak.

Salman Rushdie's "Notes on Writing and the Nation" adds another layer to this exploration of the writer's identity. He discusses the tension between the writer as an individual and their relationship to the nation-state. Rushdie references the Welsh poet R. S. Thomas, who struggled with national self-hatred, illustrating the dangers of trying to transform personal identity into a national one.² Thomas's inward focus gave him a unique awareness of the pitfalls of nationalism, which ultimately led to his dissonance. Rushdie suggests that the more personal the writing, the more it reflects overlooked realities about national identity. However, this often leads to misunderstandings, as writers like Thomas resist conforming to the public or national narrative, which in turn places them in opposition to the very idea of the nation-state.

Orhan Pamuk's essay "Freedom to Write" delves into the dangers of national coercion and its effects on a writer's sense of self. Pamuk's

² Rushdie, 78

conflicting emotions prevent him from fully embracing his identity as a writer, leaving him trapped between pride and shame.³ Pamuk reflects on his feelings of shame and guilt in response to state censorship in Turkey, revealing the tension between the writer's desire to rise above political turmoil and the emotional toll such pressures exact. Unlike Gordimer and Rushdie, who achieve inner clarity through their journeys, Pamuk's emotional struggle clouds his ability to gain the reflective distance needed to become an effective witness to outer events. His journey, incomplete, prevents him from attaining the maturity that defines the other writers in the collection.

Pico Iyer's essay "The Man, the Men, at the Station" stands in stark contrast to Pamuk's inner conflict, showing how a writer's maturity can allow them to engage with the outer world without being overwhelmed by it. His ability to bear witness to the story of a Burmese man, without being burdened by guilt or shame for not acting as an agent of change, illustrates this maturity.⁴ Iyer emphasizes the importance of detachment, or indifference, in allowing a writer to recount stories truthfully. Iyer's reflections highlight how, through personal growth, a writer can become a vessel for telling the stories of others while maintaining the emotional distance necessary to observe without interference. This detachment, far

³ Pamuk, 74

⁴ Iyer, 50

from being a flaw, is essential to the writer's ability to truthfully engage with the world.

David Grossman's essay "Writing in the Dark" emphasizes the necessity of balancing the pressures of the external world with a deep understanding of the writer's internal experience. Grossman reflects on the loss of his son in war, revealing the profound inner journey that followed.⁵ For him, writing became a means of escaping the "suffocating dichotomy" between inner life and outer tragedy. His essay shows that turning inward does not lead to isolation but instead broadens a writer's world. Grossman's personal tragedy elevates his writing, marking the completion of his journey as a writer who can bear witness to the world's pain without surrendering to it. His ability to reflect on his own suffering, and to remain whole in the process, shows how deeply the writer's journey is intertwined with their capacity to bear witness.

Morrison's collection reveals that writers, to truly reflect the outer world, must first undergo a personal transformation. The journey of self-discovery, fraught with contradictions and challenges, allows them to observe the world from a more mature and nuanced perspective. By bringing together these essays, Morrison underscores the importance of this journey, showing how it enables writers to bear witness to outer events without being overwhelmed by them. At the heart of *Burn This Book* is the

⁵ Grossman, 9

idea that after each storm comes light—and that the stillness in which the writer stands after the storm is what allows them to see, and to reveal, the truths that matter most.

Works Cited

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