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SIGNATURE TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome from Alex Tetteh-Lartey. And a book that's just been published sets us talking in today's "Arts and Africa".

SIGNATURE TUNE

TETTEH-LARTEY

Perhaps the best way of explaining the subject of today's programme is to leave Africa altogether and listen to the opening lines of a poem by the Chinese writer Fu Hsuan.

TETTEH-LARTEY

QUOTATION FROM 'WOMAN! BY FU HSUAN

The title of the poem is simply - 'Woman' and it introduces a newly published anthology called "Women of the Third World". It can't be a coincidence that 1975 is International Women's Year but the dedication: To the Women of Vietnam, does remind us that the idea of equality is being put into practice, especially in revolutionary situations - and not only in Vietnam but right inside Africa; in Mozambique for example.

The 'Third World' of the title means that the twenty or so stories are set not only in Africa, but in Asia and in South America as well. The editors, two Americans, Naomi Katz and Nancy Milton, claim that their book is intended to reveal the lives of women in these parts to readers in the West - and reveal it through literature. Just how well they have done this is what I invited our studio guests to discuss. Aina Lewis from Nigeria has been studying traditional Nigerian drama and Ndumbu Abel is a broadcaster and poet from Kenya. Well, with contributions from writers like Alex La Guma, Okot p'Bitek and Abioseh Nicol, is "Women of the Third World" a realistic introduction to the problems of women in Africa? Knowing that Aina Lewis would inevitably have the last word, it was Ndumbu Abel who began the discussion.

NDUMBU ABEL

I don't think one can seriously talk of problems of the Third World as presented in this book. All the stories and the few poems that are in there are talking about women, but the theme that runs through and connects all the material in the book is the fact they are talking about a traditional rural society that is increasingly becoming urban - I think that is the only theme that runs through the book.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Aina, it's about African women and their problems, obviously it will be of interest to women in the Western world; do you think it will also be of interest to women in Africa or even to the menfolk in Africa?

AINA LEWIS

Actually, I am surprised that the editors have limited the interest to the Western world, because the kind of material that is in the book will interest anybody. There are stories from Latin America, Asia, Africa and somehow the stories are all almost the same. I felt kind of monotony in the theme. It's mostly about matrimonial problems and things like that and I feel that most of the stories have not been treated in depth enough to convey the intrinsic qualities of the different materials which they are supposed to.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes, but I suppose most of these stories were written by women so they must surely know what problems

LEWIS Not mostly by women, some are written by men as well.

ABEL No. in actual fact, the majority of the stories were written by men. This is the other fault, if we can talk about faults, in the book - it talks about women of the Third World. Now, there are 19 authors in this collection of material - poems and short stories; now, 12 of them are men, 6 are women, one is unidentified, so I find it very curious that that proportion of the writers should be men. This is where I think we could talk about choices - I think the choice is also faulty. I don't know how you could talk about the literature of the Third World and the women who have been involved in it, without somewhere, some place bringing in people like Elvania Zirimu, Nadine Gordimer in South Africa, I don't see how you could bring in Third World women and literature without bringing these people in.

LEWIS In a sense I agree with Abel. He said women's feelings and lives cannot be projected enough if men are the writers, because naturally they

TETTEH-LARTEY

They probably wouldn't understand the women's feelings very well.

LEWIS They would probably understand some, but they won't know everything - they won't have the facts. But I think this is a good thing, because sometimes when one is talking about oneself, one gets too personal and there isn't any kind of objectivity at all. So maybe it is a good thing that most of the work is written by men.

But there is one particular story written by a woman which I find very illustrative of what Abel was trying to say - it's the story from India 'Who Cares?'. It is a woman relating her experiences in connection with another woman. She has a friend - a boyfriend, but nothing serious, it wasn't anything emotional at all, and there is a girl from a village who has been brought into the boy's family as the bride-to-be. The boy resents it because he has been trained in America and all that and the girl understands his feelings. But the beautiful thing about it is to see this girl from the village use both of them to achieve her own goal. The story is written by a woman and the quality of expression - well I don't know if that says anything, but you can see that the feelings are very well projected and one knows what she is talking about - and as a woman myself, I felt it. Where she refers to "all the Janakis of the world", I knew just what she was talking about.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, Abel. Following from what Aina was saying, would you say that the stories written by the women are better than those written by the men, in view of the fact that the men haven't got quite the genuine feeling for the emotions of women?

ABEL No, I wouldn't say so, not by one iota. We cannot even talk about objectivity in literature; literature is expressions of people's feelings and inspirations, if you like, and I think you could find some men who write about women in a more penetrating way than some women could. In the same manner, you could find some ladies writing about men - it depends on the level of inspiration and how 'insightful' the story is.

LEWIS There must be some kind of objectivity that doesn't understand the emotions or the feelings of the characters in the book.

LEWIS The kind of objectivity I am thinking about is when an outsider looks at something it is always with a fresh approach, you are not so involved in yourself that your views become distorted - that's the kind of objectivity I have in mind. You know, as a woman when you are putting down your feelings, if you are not intelligent enough to sort out genuine feelings from prejudices you can get everything mixed up and you don't give a proper picture.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Abel, can you quote any particular story to substantiate this claim you are making that the men sometimes write better than the women on topics affecting women's emotions?

ABEL Yes, for instance, take Mphahlele's 'Mrs Plum' in the book as well as Alex La Guma's 'Coffee for the Road' - I think these two stories are very insightful in the way they express the life of a woman who is a servant in South Africa. If you take those two stories and compare them to Mbilinyi's 'A Woman's Life', I find the first two are more solid literature than the more sociological story by Mbilinyi. I mean with all due respect to Mrs. Mbilinyi, she has this story which she calls 'A Woman's Life' that I find to be more the anthropological trend.

LEWIS It's 'The Benediction', the very first story in the book that interests me - you know the position of the servant, who happens also to be a woman. I don't know whether the writer is a man or a woman, the name is Lu Hsun or something

ABEL That's a man.

LEWIS Is it a man?

ABEL It is a man.

LEWIS Right. I don't think the problem is really the woman's problem as presented in the story. It is the problem of the poor against the rich. Mind you, maybe I'm wrong. All the time I had thought that it is the rich/poor that is very much in focus here - but now that I am talking about it, it has suddenly occurred to me that it is really the woman's problem that's the thing. The servant there, her problem arises from the fact that she is a widow - a widow the first time, a widow the second time; an aura of ill-luck is supposed to surround her - coupled with the fact that her only child was eaten by a leopard or a lion in the story I think. And you can see how she becomes ostracised, she becomes an outcast and the objection against her always arises from the men, the heads of the family, the heads of the compound and you know people like that, who naturally influence the mistresses of the homes there.

ABEL That's rather unfair, isn't it?

LEWIS It is. But the other story that really tickles me is 'The Truly Married Woman' by Abioseh Nicol. And this happens to have been written by a man and I really enjoyed it.

TETTEH-LARTEY

I see you are smiling.

LEWIS Yes, it is a really good story. I know this sometimes happens in Nigeria - two people might have been living together for a long time and then suddenly they decide, or something prompts them to get married: anyway, while Ayo was a mistress she was very subservient to the man, she was everything he wanted her to be. And then they got married and she becomes a truly married woman. So, the first day of their marriage the man woke up in the morning and every morning when he wakes up he finds his cup of tea beside his bed. When he didn't find the cup of tea, he said, "Ayo, Ayo, are you ill?" - this is quoting from the book, you know he is so shocked that the tea isn't there; the wife said, "No, I'm not ill." The reply he gets from her is, "Ajayi, my husband" she said, "For twelve years I've got up every morning at five to make tea for you and breakfast. Now I am a truly married woman you must treat me with a little more respect; you are now a husband and not a lover, get up and make yourself a cup of tea."

TETTEH-LARTEY

'The Truly Married Woman'! One of the more light-hearted stories from a collection with a serious intent - "Women of the Third World". The editors are Naomi Katz and Nancy Milton, the publisher is Victor Gollancz and the price, £3.80. And discussing it with me were Aina Lewis and Mdumbu Abel.

MUSIC - 'Brand New Day' by Miriam Makeba.

The title is 'Brand New Day' and the singer - that liberated African woman, Miriam Makeba. And if you listen to the words you'll realise why we've chosen it to end the programme. Of course, there'll be more this time next week, so this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye from "Arts and Africa".

MUSIC - 'BRAND NEW DAY' BY MIRIAM MAKEBA

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