

Arts and Africa

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ANNC AND SIG TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to Arts and Africa. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and today I talk with a Nigerian lady about her poetry.

SIG TUNE

EXTRACT FROM "THE MAD WOMAN AND HER SON"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

An excerpt from a poem entitled "The Mad Woman and Her son" by Grace Osifo. Now, Grace lectures in English language and Literature at the Auchi Polytechnic in Benin City, Nigeria, and was in London this summer to attend the English Radio Summer School. I first asked her how she came to write poetry.

GRACE OSIFO

Well, to start with, I studied literature in the University and I've always liked poems. They fascinate me, not only because of the message they have, but also because the way the poets are able to play with words. So I started by wanting to try my hand at this type of thing.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Do you do other things as writing poetry?

GRACE OSIFO

I have written a number of plays, short plays, which have been produced over the television. I've also written short stories, which have been published in one of the Nigerian newspapers, "Sunday Observer", I've written a couple of essays, also which have been published in the local newspaper.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And do you find these creations of yours useful when you are lecturing?

GRACE OSIFO

Oh yes, particularly if I'm teaching some aspect of language, I think drama is very useful. We pick on a short play and act it out. It helps in conversation and it gives the pupils some sense of pleasure too.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Would I be right if I said that poetry however is your main activity, creative activity, the one you're intested in?

GRACE OSIFO

I'm not so sure that would be true, because as yet I think I'm still experimenting. The first things I wrote were plays and I felt very happy when I saw some of my plays on stage. If you ask me, I think I would have preferred to write plays, because I like to see what I've written acted out, and I like to watch the audience and see their reaction also. But it takes a little less time to write poems. But I also agree that they're a bit more difficult to write. I've had some chapters already of a novel, which I haven't had time to complete, but I'm still experimenting.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Do you find that poetry gives you emotional satisfaction?

GRACE OSIFO

Yes a lot of it. I find that if I feel something very seriously or deeply, the first thing that comes to my mind is to write a poem about it.

ALEX TETTEH -LARTEY

"A Mad Woman and Her Son" is about a bizarre topic. How did the idea occur to her?

GRACE OSIFO

What happened was that there was a story about a mad woman in the newspapers, of a mad woman who carried a dead son of hers to a hospital, hoping that people would give her some assistance. What actually bothered me about this story in the paper was the fact that no one seemed to want to associate with her. You see, they all saw her, the nurses, the doctors, everybody in the

hospital and the other patients too, they saw her there but no one came to say 'well, this child of yours is dead!' No one tried to do anything to bring her to some reason. She didn't understand. I felt very much for her because I felt that she was suffering from something she didn't cause herself.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The picture is a vivid one of a woman alone and bewildered, of the strong love of a mother who cannot accept the awful reality of her child's death.

EXTRACT FROM POEM

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Why does she feel that the dead child is deafened by this new disease of pompousness, the puffing up of inflammatory pride that swells itself in stomach and cheeks. Was she thinking of proud people and thinking that the way they carry themselves, this is the way the child who is actually dead and swollen is also trying to do?

GRACE OSIFO

Yes because she didn't understand. I mean, it also goes back to what I said earlier that she is suffering in her loneliness, suffering all alone. There's nobody to tell this child is dead, and she's considering: well, why wouldn't this child suck. Why wouldn't he behave the way he used to? Is he now becoming proud and arrogant like all the others, pompous? Why is he swelling? Is he now growing wings? As we might put it. And it all boils down to the fact that she could not understand what was happening.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It's a very original poem and very original in thought as well. Now let's come to the other poem "The Cat that Mourned". Here it looked to me as if the setting is in a cool climate, rather than a warm African climate. Well, did you get the idea from your experience here in England?

GRACE OSIFO

No, well when I wrote this poem actually, I hadn't come to England. It was a friend who told me a story of a widow who lost her husband and who refused to get calmed over the whole idea. She couldn't get over the fact that she has lost somebody. So she kept weeping all alone, and the only companion she had was the cat. The cat is very sympathetic, as you can see, that while the woman is weeping, it looked like the cat also is weeping, and the two of them almost become one in their war.

EXTRACT FROM "THE CAT THAT MOURNED"ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You know these evenings, when lorries are returning from the markets and so on, in Nigeria, in a city, where everybody's in a sort of hurry, no one seems to care really about what is happening to the other person. Well, this man, he either was just coming from the market or coming from a day's work and he was up in the lorry. The lorry stopped for him to come down and he tried to jump down and missed the step and fell. I suppose the driver didn't know anything about that and he went on. But other people, who were passing in the evening - it was about 8.p.m., saw him there and nobody did anything. Again I felt this sort of loneliness or this type of idea of people actually not caring. You see, I see the image of salt, salt losing its savour and becoming chaff. This is biblical if we think of what Jesus said, and I feel very bad about things like that. I think human beings ought to be keepers of one another, and we shouldn't just pretend not to notice when somebody is suffering.

EXTRACT FROM "MOVING SHADOWS"ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, why do you treat this theme of loneliness again and again? Does it attract you, or is it part of your nature?

GRACE OSIFO

I don't know if I could say that it is part of my nature, but I know that I enjoy being all by myself on several occasions. But even then, when I'm all by myself, I also have the feeling that probably somebody should come along and say 'Why are you by yourself?' So that's the conflict. But I have people to care anyway, so I don't know. I keep thinking of lonely people and I keep feeling for them. I don't like being lonely, maybe that's why the last poem "Between Two Worlds" is more philosophic and describes the predicament of a person caught between cultures. Finally she stands still, being enriched by both.

EXTRACT FROM "BETWEEN TWO WORLDS"ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

A rather involved concept, you might say, but it is a confusing situation for a person caught between two worlds. Our thanks to Grace Osifo.

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SIG TUNE "LIMPOPO"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And so we come to the end of this week's programme. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye. Join us again next week for another Arts and Africa.