

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome from Alex Tetteh-Lartey to "Arts and Africa", and today it's poetry.

POETRY READING

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was "Homecoming" a poem from the collection "The House By the Sea" by Kofi Awoonor, who is one of Ghana's leading poets, and certainly a controversial personality. He is as well known for his political views as he is for his literary achievements. He was Managing Director of the Ghana Film Corporation during the Nkrumah era and when Nkrumah was overthrown in 1966 he took up an appointment as a lecturer at the State University in New York. He returned to Ghana in 1975 to lecture at Cape Coast University but he was arrested shortly after his return and spent ten months in prison for aiding the escape of one of the leaders of a failed attempt to overthrow the Government of General Acheampong. His release came after considerable pressure on the Ghana Government from friends in the academic community in America. He returned to America as a lecturer but did not divorce himself from events in Ghana. At the time of the Referendum he was back at Cape Coast University and clearly associated with the newly formed groups opposing Union Government. He began to suspect that the authorities were planning to move against him so when the police surrounded and searched his house during his absence he decided that the time had come to leave. He went into voluntary exile and he is now in London and here with me today. Well Kofi that poem "Homecoming" seems to me to be a combination of frustration and hope, but most of hope because you definitely reject the idea of death.

KOFI AWOONOR

Well this is one of the poems I wrote when I was in solitary confinement in Asher Fort in 1976. I spent seven months of the ten months in solitary and it sort of cleared my mind as to the uses of literature, as part of ones struggle for self-liberation and ones assertion of the things that make for life as against the things that make for death. And in prison where you see so much that is so painful, and so much that is horrendous you tend to wish - I mean - you wish you could end your life. There were a couple of times when I felt terrified and suicidal, but then you believe that you to have life and that poem sort of sums up that belief. More often than not I had hope and this is what "The House by the Sea" - the whole collection is about - even though it has moments of despair - always the book ends on that note of hope.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You are a writer and you are a politician in the sense that you're involved with political thought, political action - in other words you couldn't be - your political views couldn't be - divorced from your writing?

KOFI AWOONOR

Absolutely. I see myself as a writer in a very extended sort of way and I see myself also as a political animal, in a very all-embracing sort of way, but how can I talk about the world and write about when so much around me is full of pain and suffering and that will be my political challenge to address myself to that pain and suffering and seek, however inadequately, to end it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now this pain and suffering is it concerned with humanity on an abstract scale or are you concerned with immediate problems facing the community in which you are living.....

KOFI AWOONOR

With a specific community in which I am. I said in an interview in West Africa which was rather misunderstood by someone when I was asked "do you see yourself as a Ghanaian poet or as an Ewe poet?" I said "yes indeed I see myself as an Ewe poet first, because I have to deal with a specific of where I came from. I have to deal with that village and that town in which I was born then move outside of that to deal with a wider world".

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now since you write most of your stuff in English how do you solve this problem when you come to it of expressing in the vernacular, say vernacular action.

KOFI AWGONOR

Yes, I believe we have to take a lot of liberties. The English language I'm afraid to say is dying slowly - we are going to rejuvenate it bring in our native tongues, rifle it and rape it. And that is going to be a gift to the language too. I mean if I hear the West Indians talking, or I hear the black Americans speaking I hear African voices, but at the same time African voices married to a language which was created within a certain specific historical or geographical condition, but now in the streets of Kingston or in the streets of Harlem. I hear this language as having been reborn through an African consciousness even though that consciousness is Transatlantic.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I've noticed that especially in the field of novel writing and not so much in the field of poetry. African writers particularly West African writers, and even more particularly Nigerian novelists have tended to deal with the traditional theme of culture, the white verses black or the modern verses the ancient, and that kind of theme. Do you think that this forms a genuine subject for contemporary writing, at the expense of say modern things that are happening in the practical field.

KOFI AWGONOR

Yes, I think that's a very important point you've raised. I think there was a period when this was necessary, writers like Chinua Achebe, and others who dealt with the whole question of the clash of cultures were, in my view, restoring as it were the balance of history. Achebe had continuously said that he as a writer was a teacher and he wanted to teach his people that their past was not one long and inglorious darkness from which the European acting on behalf of God came and redeemed him. And so in essence that particular segment of the writing period, the time, was important, but I agree with you that we have moved beyond that. Most of the novels of Ikwe Amha and even the writings and plays of Wole Soyinka and a number of other people are now addressing themselves to the question of our contemporary malaise. "Who are we?" "What are we?" This kind of introspections self-criticism, self examination is very important after all we cannot eternally blame the European colonizer for all of our problems - we cannot and we must not and the writers seem to be among the first group of people recognising this fact and they are dealing with that in their more recent works. I really see myself as a cultural activist, I like to see myself in that frame,

KOFI AWOONOR

my mother whose never been to school has no knowledge of the world outside her community - but I do - and I can link the various forces that impinge upon my community and interpret the impingement to my mother, to my uncle and perhaps those other ones who haven't had the fortune of being exposed to this world to which I was.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Very often if you decide to be a leader you come up against the forces of officialdom, now what do you think a writer in such a position should do, should he fight head on, a sort of head-on clash.

KOFI AWOONOR

Yes. Well you know the Kenyan writer, who's a good friend, Ngugi Wa Thiongo has been in prison since January and he did a play in which he dramatised the problem, the sorrow of the ordinary peasants of Kenya who were the so-called Mau-Mau who fought against the British in order that the land should come back to them, who now, of course, have no land. In the West and in many other parts of the world you go to see a play, its a nice evenings entertainment its marvellous, you know, you can go there - go there from dinner somewhere and drink a lot of wine and talk about how great the playwright was or the actors were, but here we are bringing, I mean Ngugi is bringing into focus the reality of that theatre which is that it deals with the specific blood and guts problems of everyday living and that is what the play is about, and that is what the novel is about and that is what the poem is about, the poem is not about daffodils and roses and (timid hares) its all about that reality which literature has always been about.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Do you, for example, believe in martyrdom for the cause of literature. In other words if you find that the way you are going is going to land you in trouble part of which you may never come to continue your artistic works - is it worthwhile pursuing - soldiering on?

KOFI AWOONOR

Yes. During my trial I was asked by the Prosecutor who interestingly enough happened to be a good friend but we were on the opposite side of the struggle, he said: "Are you a coward?" and I said "No I'm not a coward, but I'm not a fool either". We say we stand in the house of the coward and point at where the brave man's house used to be. In other words I'm saying here that to be a writer and confront the issues of politics head-on you have to be aware of the consequences. If you don't

KOFI AWOONOR

know how to run you must know how to hide. Again that's another proverb from my language. So, therefore, the techniques of hiding behind words have to be acquired and learnt as weapons, miraculous weapons with which to deal with every single situation. If need be that you're going to lose your life because of a poem, so be it, but of course, I would wish you not to lose your life because of a poem. One of the things I said to the students, I don't believe in un-necessary martyrdom especially when you are dealing with fools, and morons who may use every weapon available because they're not interested in the niceties of intellectual discussion or the finesse of any academic point. If you are going to put your head in their mouths they are going to bite it off and I wouldn't do that. I wish to live to a very ripe old age.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now Kofi what are your plans for the future - what have you got in the offing by writing?

KOFI AWOONOR

I've been labouring on a book - a prison book for sometime now, my prose account of my experiences. I am also planning that I might have to move on to the United States where I had a greater rapport with the academic community, and also my publishers are all there and if I could get a small job somewhere in a small town, preferably in the South, because I hate the northern winters of the United States I could hide somewhere and write it. My only worry is that I would be without my kids, and so on, but that's just one of the prices one has to pay.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That will probably give you a new experience altogether and I'm sure that you hope that in the not too distant future you'll be going back to whatever you were doing in Ghana before you left?

KOFI AWOONOR

Yes, very much so, this is my wish - I really want to go back. The only place I want to be now is in Ghana.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Kofi Awoonor thank you very much. And that's it from "Arts and Africa" for today. I'll be back next week, so from me Alex Tetteh-Lartey it's goodbye.

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