

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey. Today we are speaking to a man who is seeking to understand what he sees as the unity of Southern African literature. Stephen Gray, now a senior lecturer in English at the Rand Afrikaans University, recently published the book on which he'd been working for seven years; titled "Southern African Literature: An Introduction". Certainly there has been an upsurge of interest in African literature in recent years - but usually by black writers of modern literature in European languages. However, in his book, Stephen Gray tries to cover a whole range of Southern African literature, both white and black, written and oral. But can there be a Southern African literature - or is it merely literature dominated by South Africa?

STEPHEN GRAY

Well, I feel that South African literature usually grabs the area of post-Second World War up to the present times. Key periods are Sharpeville and recently the Soweto riots, and the well-known writers who are functioning today comprise South African literature, as it were. But I've got two, very mild, academic-type quibbles with that naming. First of all, the literature in South Africa stretches, let's say, from the fifteenth century to the present. It's the background before 1945 that's not been investigated at all really, and I think my book is the first book on the background to what we know as South African literature. Secondly, it's rather like the Americans; they'll say "America" and just grab Canada and Mexico as part of theirs. Whereas in purely literary terms, "South Africa" is too loose a term for the area that's really Southern Africa geologically and geographically speaking. We consist of Zimbabwe/Rhodesia, Lesotho, Swaziland, Botswana; they are certainly not South Africa, but we are a Southern African English unit and the literature fits in that triangle beautifully. There is an interchange across these national boundaries. So I thought instead of South Africa,

Southern Africa would be a more appropriate description.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

Well, I think to me and to a large number of listeners, literature in that part of the continent is really South African rather than Southern African. I don't know much about literature from places like Zimbabwe or Lesotho or places like that.

STEPHEN GRAY

Well, that can be a little sweeping, because there are Botswanan writers. I agree that many have South African roots and possibly none are untouched by some kind of strictly South African experience, if you want to put it that way. But just across that boundary, you have really two literatures, one in a pre-independent state in South Africa, one in a post-independent state in Botswana and claiming them all as South African is a little unjust, for example, to the Botswanan writer. So "Southern Africa" defuses the political label a little bit, but makes very good sense in terms of the literature.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

I think maybe its because we've heard so much politically about South Africa, the tragedy of the situation there, that's why we tend to think that everything comes from there. Now, you describe Southern African literature as being like an archipelago.

STEPHEN GRAY

Yes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

In what sense is it?

STEPHEN GRAY

Well, its a simile that runs through the book. Its a sort of exploration of many of the branches of the literature that have not really been explored at all. And when I said an "archipelago" I meant that you get fixed points that are well-known. For example, a little bit earlier let's talk of Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer, in the present times writers like Bessie Head, Sipho Sipamla; if we go back a little bit further (its all done by names) Peter Abrahams; or older writers, Sol Plaatje, for example. Those are the tips of the peaks of this strange configuration that hasn't really been plotted. And I meant to try and track the underground reefs and barriers that connect up this vast and under-explored literature. So that I hope the ocean will dryp up and show its pattern.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

That's a very massive subject. Well tell us about this mass underneath?

STEPHEN GRAY

I think there are many writers who are not studied, perhaps because their names haven't become household words, but nevertheless who are part of the patterning of the literary experience. I go right back to pre-English times on the sub-continent, to pre-the earlier European explorers, notably the Dutch (now Afrikaaners) to the original traditions of Southern Africa, the oral literature which has literarily been in eclipse since the coming of the first white man. And just as we can't think in terms of names, we mustn't think in terms of languages, and the true configuration of literature in Southern Africa is a multi-lingual experience and a very uniquely multi-cultural one. And I think literary scholars can't just say: "so and so came and the next and they all wrote in English". So I am hoping to announce the fact that we have a polyglot multi-faceted literature that must be studied comparatively.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

Is there any unity at all in Southern African literature?

STEPHEN GRAY

The literary notion in Southern Africa is that first there was nothing and then there was the first of a string of spontaneous geniuses. I don't think that's true. I think the literature comes out of the environment in which you live and whether it's good or bad is not the point; what we must look for is what that literature crystallises about society. So I am very strong on the "literature and society" line.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

A lot of this literature is written in English, so it's part of English literature rather than South African literature isn't it?

STEPHEN GRAY

Well, no, I think we must drop that one. I think the student of Southern African literature must become a very polyglot, multi-lingual person. For example, a key writer like Thomas Mafulo, writing in Sotho we don't need to quibble about it, he wasn't an English writer, although part of his life was an English experience. But why do we have to, sort of, colonize him as English, let him be a writer in his own language. But the points to analyse in the inter-change of ideas that's gone across that apparent language barrier. Mafulo is a very important writer for "English only" writers as well as for Sotho writers and readers.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, who is a South African writer, is he somebody who is born in South Africa or is he somebody who writes about South Africa?

STEPHEN GRAY

I've had to keep it very loose, I don't think a South African passport or a United Nations passport makes you a South African writer. Anybody who has picked up and recorded some facet of the Southern African experience, for my purposes has been one.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And where do you think the strength of Southern African literature lies, in which genre, is it in the novel, in poetry?

STEPHEN GRAY

Yes. It's not in theatre, but it's certainly in short story writing and the novel and recently in poetry. I wouldn't like to chose one as a leading one, but it's in the mixture of genres that little sub-continent has turned out some quite extraordinary works.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And why is there such a dearth of theatre?

STEPHEN GRAY

Theatre needs organisation, it needs money, it's geared to a particular type of white bourgeois living, I suppose. But theatre in workshop conditions is actually flourishing at the present time. But that has not been true in the recent past, let's say.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

But you've got all the conditions for theatre. You've got the money in South Africa. Its a very wealthy country; if theatre is for the "white" population, it must be very strong as well?

STEPHEN GRAY

Currently it isn't. I think it's black audiences who are discovering theatre and finding that its a very congenial medium for the writer. But it needs one guy to come along and say: "Look, this is what we are doing, this is how we do it" and then the thing takes off.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And now you also have two distinct lots of Southern African literature, I mean South African literature I should say. You've got literature written inside the country now, which is available

to all living there, and then you've got the literature of the exile, which is not allowed in, but which probably trickles into the country.

STEPHEN GRAY

Well, I start my introduction with a demurrer. One is in a terrible dilemma here. South Africans within the country, not including the other Southern African countries now, are indeed cut off from the other half of their culture, let's say the international diaspora of South Africa in exile. Some works do filter back, but the odd work doesn't make the impact that a full interchange of experience would make, as the coming and going of people across frontiers would make. We are exiled morally and spiritually from the rest of the world. I don't view my work as definitive or final in any way, but it seemed necessary to describe what has happened inside, even if the contact with the outside world has not been restored.

ALEX TETTM-LARTEY

Well Stephen, so far we've said that Southern African literature is very amorphous at the moment; how would you classify it rather more specifically?

STEPHEN GRAY

Well, the old-stages in University English departments would put it in the last appendix of their histories of English literature. It's the "baby toe" of the great body of English literature, (that's a problem that many extra United Kingdom literatures have.) Secondly, certainly up to 1961, it's seen as a part of Commonwealth literature, and that's a fast expanding field of scholarship and there are comparisons to be made between South Africa and Australia, Canada and the Caribbean, for example. And then it also is in some ways related to the vast body of the literature of Africa itself. There is this strange little triangle of the bottom of black and white writers, (I'd like to say black and white Africans or Africans altogether), writing their literature which is related to everything that the continent has produced. So we are part of English literature, we are a part of Commonwealth literature and of African literature, and I would like to point out that there are some unique features of our own as well.

ALEX TETTM-LARTEY

Yes, when you talk about unique features are you thinking of Afrikaans literature: I mean there is Afrikaans literature which people know very little about unless it's translated into English?

STEPHEN GRAY

Yes. The inter-reaction between English and Afrikaans is enormous and totally unassessed at the moment.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

Are there any budding writers at the moment, apart from the established ones we know, the Iphahlale and the Sipamlas and the Umchalas?

STEPHEN GRAY

Let's say that I think that there is a birth of a post-Soweto '76 generation, and they are poets in the wake of poets like Oswald Umchale and Wole Sorote, for example, and many poets who are now putting out their first volumes, who comprise the new generation; these are mostly black.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

It seems to me that, so far we have had Black literature in waves, something has to happen, something spectacular, and then you have a flood of literature, and then there's a subsidence and you hear nothing again until the next wave starts.

STEPHEN GRAY

That's a very contraversial point. I can't quite agree that it does go that way, that's the way publishers make it go and newsmen make it go. And here am I saying a second wave, that's sheer publicity. But nevertheless it is true that crucial events like Soweto '76 have turned up an enormous amount, a very persuasive skillful literature dealing with that event. But in the natural course of things it also goes broader and becomes, just as all this literature that's in this book, becomes part of a huge and composite experience.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

Apart from scholars and academicians like you, is Black literature accepted in South Africa as South African Literature?

STEPHEN GRAY

Oh, very much so, and increasingly so.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

In spite of all the bans imposed?

STEPHEN GRAY

Oh yes. The younger generation at present is very much accumulating a spirit of interest in Africa and in Southern Africa and I am a product of that interest as well.

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Stephen Gray talking about the literatures of Southern Africa.
And that's all from "Arts and Africa" for this week. Don't forget
to join us again at the same time next week. Until then this is
Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

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