

# Arts and Africa

**BBC** AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

ARTS AND AFRICA

No. 305P

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and welcome to Arts and Africa.

NURUDDIN FARAH

You see the novel is about power; traditional power and state power and how the two meet, encounter, travel together up to a certain distance, then part. How a dictator, wherever he is in Africa, would use tribal chieftans who do not understand the political mystifications of a regime, in order to maintain the status quo in a country.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was the Somali writer Nuruddin Farah talking about his latest novel "Sweet and Sour Milk". The novel is set in the early 1970's in the Somalia ruled by Siad Barré, and it tells the story of the rebellion of two twin brothers against the force of the government. One of them dies by poison and the other sets out to discover who killed him and why. Their actions, the actions of Youth, are juxtaposed against the compromises made by the older generation, represented by their father, Keynaan, who sides with the central authority.

Nuruddin says "Sweet and Sour Milk" is the first part of a trilogy and tells the tale of those who do not compromise. The second part, due to be published early in 1980 and called 'Sardines', is about those who do compromise. The last part which is still being written will tell of the Patriarchy, the traditional elements of a society, and the erosion of the strength and virility of the Fathers. Well, "Sweet and Sour Milk" is a complex novel with many levels of thought surrounding the central theme. I asked Nuruddin Farah why he came to write it.

NURUDDIN FARAH

I lived in Somalia during that period and I remember the pain on the peoples' faces. This inspired me to write this novel.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It seems to be an attack on society, . . .

NURUDDIN FARAH

I attack no society. I didn't attack society here; I attacked a regime. A regime is not a society.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, you talk about a dictator making use of the traditional rulers in a society, to impose their own authority on the people. One would have thought that that was more true of the colonial governments than of the African governments.

NURUDDIN FARAH

No, nothing has changed in fact, as what the African governments have inherited is the Colonial System. I don't call them independent African states, I call them post-colonial governments. What they have done is actually structure their government on the basis that colonial governments had left them.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well I also find that there are serious conflicts within the plot. There is the conflict between the traditional system, the traditional beliefs of the father versus what I would call the modern system, the people who are the intelligentsia. And there is also the striving between Islam, the authority of the Koran, and Communism.

NURUDDIN FARAH

Talking about Islam and Communism, I have this beautiful incident. In 1974 Gaddafi came to Somalia when Somalia had been a Socialist, pro-Soviet government for about four or five years. Just before Gaddafi came, all the placards with portraits of Lenin were removed from all the strategic points of the city of Mogadishu; they were cleaned of them and the posters that were there being displayed were posters of Islam. So how do you talk about Islam or Communism? It is just another way to remain in power.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Do the incidents in the novel actually happen?

NURUDDIN FARAH

Yes, they do. These things have happened. Maybe they didn't happen exactly in the same way as I relate them in the story, but these things have happened and are happening today.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Do you find that when you write anything like that you take sides ...

NURUDDIN FARAH

Of course I do, I am a committed writer, a committed writer takes sides.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I know you are against Dictatorship in the book, but you don't make it clear whether you are on the side of the Traditionalists or on the side of the Modernists.

NURUDDIN FARAH

Well, you couldn't actually part them the way you would part hair. You wouldn't be able to say this is traditionalist and this is modernist. I would say that there are some traditional aspects of Somali life that appeal to my sense of being, to my sense of humour and to my reality; and also there are non-traditionalist views which appeal to me.

ALMA TETTEE-LARTEY

You seem to show more sympathy towards the characters who belong to the lower division of society. For example Kumaan who is the mother of the twins, she is what I would call a traditional believer in superstitions and the supernatural. And you also have Bedan who is the second wife to Cuman's husband. You show sympathy towards them; those people who suffer, who are on the lower level of the scale. And then you attack people like Keynaan, the father of the twins.

NURUDDIN FARAH

Well Keynaan I attack because he represents authority, and abuses the power which is invested in him. Keynaan is the head of the patriarchy, and he intercedes on behalf of the dictator. Naturally he does not realise what he is doing. But he easily compromises with the regime. Because society invests power in him, he makes Loyan's position, (Loyan is the younger twin who survives), he makes his position very difficult. Because on the one hand Loyan is fighting against corruption, against fascism; and on the other hand he is also fighting against being taken into an area which does not really concern him. And what is this area that does not really concern him at this point in the story?, this is about "superstition". He knows what his mother believes, he respects her for her beliefs, and yet he wants not to be taken away from the things that concern him - which are to de-mistify politics, and to bring out and expose the weaknesses of the regime which is what his brother had tried to do. So naturally I understand their position of compromise, and I respect their position just as much as I actually respect the position of anyone with whom I disagree. I disagree with Siad Barré's regime, but that does not mean that I would if, for example, Siad Barre would give me a chance to be able to live in Somalia and work and write: I would go back tomorrow. But because Siad Barré cannot and will not be able to tolerate anyone who is in disagreement with any view that he puts forth, then there is no point opening a dialogue. The dialogue must be two-way. So with dictatorship, dialogue is one way, and with society, with tradition, dialogue is two.

ALMA TETTEE-LARTEY

Now there is another aspect of politics which you touch upon. The desire of the younger generation to exercise their own power of influence on society, instead of the government which makes use of the fathers to bring the family, the youths to submission.

NURUDDIN FARAH

"Sweet and Sour Milk" is about the politics of confrontation. In "Sweet and Sour Milk" the group of young men refuse to accept the status quo and fight against it and therefore one of them encounters death. And another one is about to be deported to another country, and lots of others are tortured in the novel. There is a great deal of torture because the security in Somalia actually tortures people a lot.

NURUDDIN FARAH contd.

And you have then all these people who refuse to compromise and refuse to open their doors. This is because, in Somalia between 1971 and 74 people talk about the "dawn removals"; the security men would come and knock on your door and take you away.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Is it all the result of, would you say, Communism?

NURUDDIN FARAH

No Somalia is not a socialist state.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well you mention the Russians a lot in this novel.

NURUDDIN FARAH

The Russians were the ones who built this cemented structure for Siad Barre. If the Russians had not come in, the Americans would, because the Americans had built a similar structure for Southern Korea. And if the Russians and the Americans had refused to enter, then maybe Gadafi would enter. Siad Barre would use whatever means that are in his possession, in order to continue remaining in power. One day Islam, the next day Communism, the third day Africanism, the fourth day Siadism, the fifth day Tribalism; anything to maintain himself in power. So the book is about these very difficult years of Siad's regime.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now you have exposed the short-comings of dictatorship in this book. Do you think this is going to help improve the situation?

NURUDDIN FARAH

I don't think one writes in order to improve a situation. What do you mean by improving the situation? Do you mean helping in building more effective security methods?

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

No what I mean is that you are attacking dictatorship and you are hoping that after pointing out short comings ...

NURUDDIN FARAH

Exposure is all I want.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That's right exposure. Now you hope by exposure to try to rectify ...

NURUDDIN FARAH

There is an underground movement in fact in the book, and their main aim was actually to inform people of what was happening in Somalia. Information is a very important phenomenon in state politics. I don't think I have ever written anything about corruption in state

politics. Because by virtue of being a state you are already corrupted. A state enables one to get away with things. I am thinking of any state, of any regime anywhere in the world; they are corrupt. I am not interested in what is corrupt and what is not corrupt. I am interested in how the truth is unveiled. How exposure of what is happening in Somalia (and what I am quite sure has happened in a great number of African countries) can take place. This is applicable not only to Somalia; it is applicable to Malawi, it is applicable to the Central African Republic, or Uganda, it is applicable to situations in Kenya, it is applicable to a great number of countries. I took Somalia as a case because I know Somalia sufficiently well. So my hope is that when people actually realise what is happening, they will open their eyes and then circulate this information and remain awake. They shouldn't go to sleep.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Nuruddin Farah talking about his new novel "Sweet and Sour Milk".

And that's all from Arts and Africa this week. We'll be back with you in seven days time. Until then this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.