

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello again. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to another edition of Arts and Africa. In today's programme we look at a remarkable new book. It's called "A Chain of Voices" and it's the latest novel from the well known South African author, Andre Brink. "A Chain of Voices" is something of a departure for Brink for unlike his other novels such as "A Dry White Season" and "Rumours of Rain" which are set in contemporary South Africa, "A Chain of Voices" is a search into South Africa's past. The setting is the Cape Province in 1825. The subject - slavery and rebellion. Andre welcome to Arts and Africa. Could I begin by asking you why you decided to turn your attention to the past?

ANDRE BRINK

I think first of all I had been going around for years, many years before writing this novel with the idea of doing a novel on slave revolting in Cape history at some stage. I don't know exactly why I had this fixation, probably because a slave revolt is a very obvious metaphor for the whole condition of bondage which I think everybody finds himself in. But I found it almost impossible to find a slave revolt until an historian friend of mine about seven years ago, who knew about this preoccupation of mine, phoned me and said "I think I have the story you're looking for". And the story, I found, was completely shattering in that it had all the possible ingredients I could have hoped to find in something of this nature. It contains everything that is of immediate relevance to South Africa today and to the whole idea of racial conflict which of course dominates so much people all over the world today. It deals with two boys who grow up together, one white and one black, not just as mates and pals but as really close friends who need each other to survive, as it were, and to understand the world and explore the world. But as they grow up they also grow into the role that society has predetermined for them. One has to become the master the other has to become the slave. This, of course, not only inhibits them in their relationship to each other but it also changes their personality. In a sense both of them become slaves to the roles society has imposed on them. Even so accepting these roles because neither has any choice, the slave begins to submit to the most inhuman treatment, humiliations and the most cruel forms of punishment inflicted on him because his reasoning is: "I'm the slave, you're the master. You literally have the right of life and death

over me. I've got to accept whatever comes my way." But there's one thing he cannot accept and that is when in 1824, there's a rumour in the Cape that at the end of that year, slaves will be freed. When that day comes and goes without any changes in their condition, he and his friends and all the neighbouring farms rise up and start killing their masters. They don't get very far, of course, as the rebellion is squashed very soon and very violently. But the main point about it is that the promise of freedom, the frustration of that hope, is the surest formula for revolt and, of course, that is the situation that South Africa finds itself in today.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You made two remarks that prompt me to ask you how close you stick to historical fact in this novel?

ANDRE BRINK

I think by and large I stick very closely to it because almost everything was there. In fact, one of my problems was not to allow the facts to dominate my thoughts too much. I had to live my way into this story for several years and then, as it were, try to digest it to such a point that I could start imagining what actually happened. So the whole structure of the story, in fact even the choice of the form it takes, thirty different voices telling the story, was suggested by the material, the whole long list of depositions by all the witnesses and the accused. All these different voices speaking to me through the yellowed pages I got from the archives. So basically I stuck very closely to history but then, of course, through the indications given in the depositions in the archives, one has to start imagining the whole personality behind that, whole personal history of each of the characters. In that sense it's also a development from history but all the seeds are contained in history itself.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What is the significance of the title? I interpreted it two ways. I wonder if you had the same idea?

ANDRE BRINK

The title was really given to me by a friend after I had written the book. I was agonising over the choice of a title. I couldn't find one and the moment a friend suggested the title "A Chain of Voices" I immediately knew it had everything I could hope for. There is, on the very literal surface, the row of voices linked together like links in a chain. But, of course, the chain also conjures up the idea of slavery which applies to all the characters, masters and slaves because each one of them is the slave of his condition. One white master is the slave of the farm he lives on because he doesn't want to farm and now there's the slave of his history because he would have liked to break away from that but he's not allowed to. The woman is a slave of her condition as a woman in the nineteenth century. Slaves are slaves not only because the historical circumstances enslave them and so on. So there's the slavery idea contained in that, there's the series of voices. But also the fact that it is not a congregation of people,

it's not a conversation between several people, they each of them remain lonely. It is a chain of lonely monologues speaking in the dark as it were. No one can really reach out and touch the other except very briefly, fleetingly towards the end. The main slave character Galent and the main woman character Hester. But otherwise each of them agonisingly cry out in the dark and don't hear anything back.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well you got one more than I did (laughs). But it's a very painful story isn't it? Here are two people suckled by the same black nurse Ma-Rose and actually reared by her and they find that, as you said, they need each other and yet they can't come together. Something stops them coming together. And it's a tragedy not only for them but for the nurse herself isn't it?

ANDRE BRINK

Oh yes. I think she is one of the greatest sufferers among them all. She regards herself as the only free person in the whole group of characters in that whole society. Because of her whole position in it, the way in which she links up with the forces of earth and so on. But she is very, very intimately concerned with the fate of these two children who to her aren't a black child and a white child but two children who she loves. And they grow away from her. She loses both, she sees both of them becoming victims of this tragedy unfolding. So as you say certainly she suffers very deeply.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

She's a sort of personification of life of the earth. She finds herself very closely linked with the earth.

ANDRE BRINK

She's sort of an earth mother as it were.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes and it's therefore a sort of tragedy for the whole of society. Do you see the same thing what is happening in South Africa today as a tragedy for the South African society?

ANDRE BRINK

Oh yes because there is such an incredible wealth of human potential in South Africa, there live so many wonderful people of all colours living there and each of them is deprived of the possibility of realising his full potential as an individual because of this separateness because of this apartheid imposed on them by a small group of masters as it were.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now how do you think readers in South Africa are going to react to this story and how is the government going to react to this?

ANDRE BRINK

That is always very difficult to predict. I think that ties up the question in a sense with the one you asked first about why go back to history. I think if one presents a South African audience with a story from the actuality, from the terrible situation created by apartheid today, many of the readers I would like to reach white Afrikaans speaking readers who belong to the ruling class, are immediately put off by that because they put up all their defences because they see this as an immediate frontal attack on them. So what may be conveyed by the novel really does not penetrate but when they read something in an historic context, they feel slightly easier. It's a bit remote, a bit removed from their immediate concerns. So I think their defences are lowered a bit and in rushes the story (Laughs). I hope it work more effectively.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You don't think you might be trying to stir up the idea that the black man as a slave in the book is entitled to rebel and also you make the point in the book or at least Ma-Rose makes the point in the book that the earth really belongs to the black person and the white South African as represented by Piet is an immigrant, who decided that the land should be subjugated by the white man and taken to himself.

ANDRE BRINK

I think one can approach that as a statement. One can also approach it as a question or as a warning. I would really like to see it as a warning, as a sort of plea, a cry from the guts to the effect that for God's sake look what happened one hundred and fifty years ago and this is going to happen again because all those ingredients are in our society today so try and stop it before it's too late and realise that unless you resume your ties with the continent, with the earth, with Africa and acknowledge that and start from there, and unless you start approaching people as people, this tragedy is going to repeat itself.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Andre what do you think the blacks in South Africa will think of this book, especially of Galent who in the end defiantly says: "I'm not free yet but at least I have tasted freedom, I know what freedom is like".

ANDRE BRINK

I find it very difficult to anticipate any readers reaction. One thing I know very surely and that is that I dare not presume to tell a black man the nature of his suffering. He knows that himself. He suffers that personally. He knows it much more acutely and if he wants to see it interpreted by someone else, he'll probably pay much more attention to a black writer who shares his fate with him. I have no illusions on that score. But I think judging from the sort of reaction I have had in the past, a black reader in South Africa may ideally react by discovering that at least he is not alone in his suffering that at least whites do not all react like the monolithic nationalist government. There are whites who understand and who extend their hand and who try to be brothers.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well a lot of readers have been puzzled by your relationship with the Afrikaaners in South Africa. You say things that obviously they don't want to hear or they don't like to hear. At the same time they honour you in all sorts of ways with literary awards and that. Now how do you explain this strange relationship?

ANDRE BRINK

It is indeed a very ambiguous situation. I think if one has to simplify the situation, the establishment, certainly the political establishment try to minimise my possible effect on society, they try to act against me as much as possible and have done so in quite a variety of ways in the past. They try to ostracise me to reject me totally. But the younger generation of readers, of white readers, specifically of white Afrikaaner readers, have reacted in the past with an incredible measure of enthusiasm to what I write. They seem to want to hear about this because they've been denied the sort of experience, they have so little access to black people and through reading they acquire a bit of insight into this situation. They really respond very warmly. So on the one hand you have the establishment trying to reject me, on the other hand you have this substantial portion of people reacting very warmly. That means that I am not rejected and the government, I think, has realised that it has to take note of this. It cannot simply go on rejecting writers who write in this vein because in the process they may alienate their voters or voters of the future.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Andre Brink thank you very much indeed. And there I'm afraid we must end the programme. I hope you will join me at the same time next week. Till then this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

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