

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey. And today's "Arts and Africa" is devoted to African writers - and to one writer in particular.

BESSIE HEAD

I, in fact, had a lot of difficulty initially with the sequence of biographical novels. I needed to express some attitudes to life and I couldn't create a feminine vehicle for my thoughts. Autobiographical materials specifically relating to my preoccupations I could only express through male characters.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The unmistakable voice of Bessie Head whose death at the age of forty-nine I sadly have to announce. She died last month in Botswana, the country that gave her refuge from South Africa more than twenty years ago. Another South African writer, Lauretta Ngcobo is going to be giving an assesment of Bessie Head in a few minutes, but let's begin with a passage from one of her novels, "When Rain Clouds Gather" to be reminded of the stength and economy of her writing.

FIONA LEDGER

Quotes from "When Rain Clouds Gather".

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Bessie Head's life in her adopted homeland (she became a citizen of Botswana in 1979) provided the raw material for her novels, her short stories and an account (it's been called 'almost a work of contemporary oral history') of the village where she lived, and where she died, Serowe. Her short stories in "The Collector of Treasures" shows her writing with her ear close to the village people. She described this process in an interview for "Arts and Africa" like this:

BESSIE HEAD

I had lived in a village in Botswana for thirteen years and became a part of the life of the village. Over the years, you know, you would walk down the road and someone would stop you and say: "Did you hear...?" People are so good at describing an event exactly as it happened, the last words the deceased said and so on. The stories, when I look back, are pieced-together dramas. In a village you participate actually in the death and the drama so intensely and I looked back on my thirteen years stay in the village and decided to piece together the village dramas, often rewritten and decorated my way, but based on real life events, where descriptions of death and so on are vivid and alive and I threw it all together into a collection of short stories.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

For a personal view of Bessie Head and her books we've turned to Lauretta Ngcobo, a fellow South African novelist and someone who's taken a keen interest in her writings. Lauretta has also taken refuge abroad - here in England - and it's that element of exile that she first mentioned when she talked to Florence Akst about Bessie Head.

LAURETTA NGCOBO

It was the one and only opportunity she had, really, of expressing herself because she is on record as saying she was unable to write about her South African experience in South Africa because people live with such barriers that communication is impossible.

FLORENCE AKST

So going to Botswana was some sort of release?

LAURETTA NGCOBO

It was the one important decision she ever took with regard to her writing.

FLORENCE AKST

Why did she go there? Was she in danger in staying in South Africa or was it that she wanted to write?

LAURETTA NGCOBO

It had something to do with her politics because at the time the Pan Africanist movement in South Africa was moving very fast and she joined it. She said the day after she joined she was detained and that helped her decision - and of course it also coincides with the time of the break-down of her marriage. So it was an escape out of South Africa and out of everything.

FLORENCE AKST

For most of us she is a person who only comes into existence once she becomes a writer in Botswana. What were her early days like? I gather they were dreadful.

LAURETTA NGCOBO

If there is one person who in her being encapsulates the South African spirit of division, of separation, it is Bessie Head's own life. She was born of a black father and a white mother.

FLORENCE AKST

She didn't live with her parents?

LAURETTA NGCOBO

Of course they could not marry under the South African situation. Not only could they not marry, there was the added racial tension, the embarrassment of the arrival of this child and in the end she was brought up by a coloured family like herself. Unfortunately, in her early teens the step-father died, whom she believed up to that time to be her natural parent. The whole story was apparently finally exposed by her head-mistress, very cruelly unfortunately. So the whole impact of this birth and upbringing comes out in her writing. In fact, it is the heat that comes out of her writing. There are parts of it like "A Question of Power" you could read more than once and make very little sense of, until you understand what she is saying - talking of love and sharing, suffering and love, and all those things - they are part of that upbringing.

FLORENCE AKST

Anybody who has heard her voice finds it very distinctive, that rather high-pitched and slow way of speaking, would you say that her writing is equally distinctive?

LAURETTA NGCOBO

Very, very remarkable, in fact. Remarkable not just for the South Africans but for the whole continent, men and women. She is very political but at the same time she does not support the day-to-day popular politics of Africa. She is speculative and less sentimental about Africa - she loves Africa but at the same time she is guarded about some of the things we hold dear, like our traditions. She feels that tradition is one form of prejudice and that it can cut out a lot of other people. As a person who herself, perhaps, had no tradition she would feel cut out and so those are the things that affect her writing.

FLORENCE AKST

What was the first sensation you had when you heard the news of her death?

LAURETTA NGCOBO

I just was stunned, I was stunned. I can't believe, even now, I cannot believe that Bessie is dead. There was so much in her. She was just beginning to change direction in her writing: whereas most of her earlier books were very personal now she was beginning to write about the history of Africa, of that region of Southern Africa, and her approach again, typically, was unique. She breaks down all the barriers of that history, all the boundaries that had been created by the colonial situation she ignores. She just writes as though she was way back before there were any barriers.

One moment she is in South Africa the next she is in Zimbabwe, then in Botswana and that whole area is liquid for her. Her last book "The Bewitched Crossroads" is so different from anything one has read that you feel she was opening new approaches and was getting very interesting in a different way.

FLORENCE AKST

And this has come to an end.

LAURETTA NGCOBO

Very suddenly. I can't believe that Bessie Head is dead. She was perhaps, in terms of depth, she was the best African writer I would say, African woman writer anyway.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Lauretta Ngcobo talking about the late Bessie Head whose death in Botswana has just been announced. She was talking to Florence Akst.

Bessie Head died on the 17th April, one day after a gathering of African writers came to an end in Stockholm, Sweden. It was an event marking the nineteenth anniversary of the first conference of African writers organized by the Scandinavian Institute of African Studies. Apparently a host of well-known names assembled there to discuss the theme of "The Role of the Writer in National and Cultural Liberation". Lauretta Ngcobo was there, so was Ngugi wa Thiongo, Eldred Jones, Taban Lo Liyong, Sipho Sepamla, Wally Serote, Ama Ata Aidoo, Chris Wanjala, Wole Soyinka amongst others ... 'Others' included Jack Mapanje, the Malawian poet and University teacher, who was on his way home from Sweden when he called in to "Arts and Africa" to give us this account of the proceedings.

JACK MAPANJE

Soyinka started with a very, very good, provocative paper in his tradition on the critics in Africa, writers and critics. I think the central point that he made was that in the last nineteen years there have been too many critics chasing too little writing in Africa. Then he set out a category or structure of the different critics that have come out in the last nineteen years. He gave five categories, the first is the finest category and the last he dwelled on, he called the "chichi dodo school" because they are becoming too personal.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Was there any point at which national liberation, which appears in the title of the conference, actually came out to the fore?

JACK MAPANJE

Yes, you had a lot of writers from South Africa and independent Africa where again, in spite of independence, cultural liberation has not been totally achieved and it is the writer's duty to help in the achievement of this. There was a day dedicated to African women writers and critics in this cultural liberation and it was one of the most fascinating discussions. It was led by Lauretta Ngcobo and Ama Ata Aidoo from Ghana and Buchi Emecheta from Nigeria. Women, writing in Africa, have been ignored and that is their argument: that there is very little criticism on women writing and yet women writers are some of the best in Africa.

But there were other issues like censorship. There is a lot of repression throughout Africa not only in South Africa but in lots of other countries as well. Debate is scorned even constructive criticism is not liked. In this case what does the writer do? Does he decide to write to the detriment of his life or does he decide to go away. Suggestions were made: one of them was if you decide to live in your own country but your work is censored in one way or another you must still try, in this century, to use as much of your own imagination as you can: to write inspite of the crippling situation. And there was a suggestion that although the battle against censorship may be lonely, may be thankless, occasionally the writer does get a bit of satisfaction after he has won it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So Jack, what do you think gave you the greatest satisfaction about this conference?

JACK MAPANJE

The greatest satisfaction we had was the actual gathering itself with some of the writers we respect - we call them our "fathers of African literature", a getting together of the women writers, male writers and critics, solving or trying to solve several problems. That was extremely satisfying and, in fact, we ought to thank the Scandinavian Institute in Stockholm for bringing us together there. The other thing we were all extremely delighted about was the sudden unity amongst African writers. Whether you are writing within a country or outside that country everyone is contributing to cultural liberation. The careless line which used to be drawn a long time ago between "you are collaborators and others are not collaborators" that was no longer on and that was quite exciting.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Jack Mapanje on the recent Conference of African Writers in Stockholm.

To return for a moment to the announcement of the death of Bessie Head, the South African and Botswanan novelist. I'd like to mention that her novels are in print in Heinemann's African Writers Series.

And now, till we meet again next week, goodbye from Alex Tetteh-Lartey.