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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey. And today I have pleasure in welcoming one of Africa's foremost novelists to "Arts and Africa".

As far as I'm concerned the novel is one of the great art forms. There's the entertainment I get out of reading; the humour, the passion and tragedy of the story; the craftsmanship to admire. But today I'm expecting that for much of the time we'll be discussing the power of the novel.

Nadine Gordimer was born in South Africa a little over sixty years ago. She's white. She's written many novels and short stories and won many literary prizes. And now her ninth novel has just been published. Nadine Gordimer, welcome to "Arts and Africa". Your new novel, "A Sport of Nature", roams around the African continent, following in the footsteps of the young white girl, Hillela. Are you now wanting to feature more of the continent or is it a new way of focussing on the South African situation?

NADINE GORDIMER

Well I think it depends upon the character. What happened to her and what was going to happen to her demanded that she should move around in Africa, as well as having experience in her own country where she was born. But, perhaps it also symbolises in a way my feeling that, more and more, South Africa must become conscious of being part of Africa.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, how much travelling have you actually done outside South Africa?

NADINE GORDIMER

Well I've been really very lucky because being a writer means one has friends who are also writers. My political stand is well known, not just through my writings but through my actions at home, so it's known that I am a strong opponent of apartheid, with the result that I have been lucky enough to travel in other parts of Africa. I've been to Ghana, I've been to the Ivory Coast, I've been to Tanzania, I've been to Zambia, to Zimbabwe, Angola. I've travelled widely in Africa. It's really only in extreme North Africa and Arab Africa I haven't had the opportunity to go.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And have your views been formed by the travelling you've done, or did you have your ideas right from the beginning?

NADINE GORDIMER

Well you know your ideas as a writer - writers being mostly great readers - your ideas of the countries you have visited come from the literature. And I've always been very interested and read everything that I could that came out of other parts of the continent.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Do you consider yourself an African writer?

NADINE GORDIMER

Yes, I do. I'm an African writer in the English language and therefore I'm also part of English literature. I consider every black writer writing in English part of English literature as well.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What is most important to you as a novelist? Is it the telling of the story or is it the bringing to the fore historical truths and facts?

NADINE GORDIMER

The story comes first. For me the characters come first because I believe that the story comes out of the characters. But since I've lived my whole life in a country in which personal life is so imbued with political meaning, of course the political side comes into it very strongly - political ideas come in. But I think a novelist is not a propagandist, a novelist is not a journalist. You begin with human beings and you begin with the mystery of life. Where I live the mystery of life is very political.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And do you think the novel is influential enough to change people's ways?

NADINE GORDIMER

It's a very difficult question. I think in some countries novelists count and have been influential. I think that the influence of novelists within South Africa is not very strong, whether they are black or white. But I think when their books are read outside they have helped to show the world what really happens to human beings under apartheid, and under all the new names that apartheid now has and it's so-called reforms. They show this to people in depth through human beings the way that newspaper and television reports never can. I think that's all a novelist can do.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What lesson would you say there is in "A Sport of Nature", which is the book we're now talking about specifically?

NADINE GORDIMER

Well, to try and sum up a rather long and complicated book is difficult, but I will try to look at my book from the outside. The title, "A Sport of Nature", comes from genetics, the science of genetics or heredity, and nature sometimes plays a trick, is "sporting", and produces an off-spring that is completely unlike the parent type. I am suggesting that my character in this book, Hillela, doesn't run true to type (as determined by) her family background and as a white in South Africa. And she instinctively rejects the various solutions that her white background offers her, the kind of solutions that, it is suggested, will serve when there's black majority rule. She has a kind of healthy instinct about that, and she solves this problem in her own way. She succeeds in becoming identified with South Africa as indeed a white African, but in a rather original and unusual way that would not be approved of by many whites, who see only certain ways of reaching an accommodation with black power.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Can you give us an example? In what way does she not behave as you would have expected a white girl to?

NADINE GORDIMER

Well you see she's a girl who doesn't live with her parents; for reasons that we haven't got time to go into, she's sort of an orphan and she is farmed out between her two aunts. Her one aunt is a rich South African white woman who is used to gracious living and who is used to belonging to the ruling class that she doesn't even imagine that things are ever going to change in South Africa; whites will always be on top and there will always be a nice house full of smiling black servants. Hillela has the instinct that somehow this isn't right for her, that survival doesn't lie there. Then she's living part of the time with the other aunt, whose husband is a fine man; a lawyer who defends blacks and whites in political trials, in treason trials, and the aunt herself belongs to a kind of liberal reformist grouping. But Hillela has the instinct that somehow that isn't getting anywhere either. She's seen so much betrayal and distrust - I can't go into the incidents in the book - of people not being equal to the demands of the historical situation, of having black friends and then failing them when danger comes along, that she has the instinct to withdraw from that. And she feels that the only thing to be trusted in life, indeed, is sexual love, that brotherly love is a bit of a lie. And she becomes something like a courtesan, a sort of professional mistress, this girl. She really falls into a political context more or less by accident, because she has a love affair with somebody who is politically involved and has to flee the country. She goes away with him and she lands up among political refugees in Dar-es-Salaam, where she is deserted by the lover with whom she went there and she is living there in poverty, but quite happily. This is a passage about her time there:

QUOTE FROM "A SPORT OF NATURE" BY NADINE GORDIMER

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

During this period she is drifting from one place to another ...

NADINE GORDIMER

She drifts a lot. She's a pretty little girl, she's really regarded just as a bit of a tart, you know, an easy lay, and she, in other words, finds her way in an unconventional manner. She finds her way to a serious life. She falls in love with a black South African revolutionary and he changes her very much. He makes her into a full person, which means that you don't only take responsibility for your own life but you take responsibility for your society and for justice in that society. And then of course there's a rather ironic ending in the book that I don't want to reveal just now - why spoil it!

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well she drifts from one African country to another and from Africa to Europe and back - collecting experience?

NADINE GORDIMER

Well she begins at a certain stage in her life then to work seriously for liberation in South Africa, but she's working for the ANC in various countries in various capacities, first in Europe, then in America and back in Africa again. And then there's another big change in her life. I think that probably I'll get into trouble with the feminists, because Hillela seeks power and political power through her sexuality and her ability to please men. Tongue in cheek, I'm suggesting that there are more ways than the conventional ones.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And when you place her in these different countries in Africa, is it so that you can spotlight certain facts about these countries, or is it just part of the general drifting process?

NADINE GORDIMER

Well, for instance when she's moving among refugees from South Africa, it is a way of examining what has happened at home and also what happens to people in exile. I've become very interested in what exile does to people, how some survive, some grow; and particularly among writers there have been some tragedies, in that we've lost some wonderful black writers who simply haven't been able to survive the pressures of exile. Others have continued to grow and to write.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Would I be right to say that you have admiration for Hillela?

NADINE GORDIMER

She fascinates me because she's so unlike me.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I was wondering if she reflected some of your own nature or some of your aspirations or dreams.

NADINE GORDIMER

Maybe I would like to have been like her.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You seem to be very sympathetic towards the liberation movement in South Africa.

NADINE GORDIMER

I'm not only sympathetic, I identify completely with the liberation movement in South Africa.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You're not actually a member though of these movements.

NADINE GORDIMER

Well, as you know, you cannot be a member of the ANC in South Africa; it's a banned organisation. I'm close to the United Democratic Front, which at present is still not a banned movement, but which adheres to the Freedom Charter.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Nadine, there's this President Nomo in the book who has become the chairman of the OAU and to whom Hillela is married. You say of him that "he was a man of high intelligence whose style makes him popular in Africa and the Eastern Block, and whose humour and sophistication do the same for him with the West". Now is this the sort of man that you hope or expect, when liberation comes about for the blacks in South Africa, who will govern South Africa?

NADINE GORDIMER

No, I hadn't thought of it, but this is not a bad set of characteristics for a President, and indeed it's the kind of characteristics I've observed in black leaders when I've travelled about.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, Nadine Gordimer, I would like to thank you very much indeed for this most interesting conversation. I've really enjoyed it.

NADINE GORDIMER

Thank you.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

"A Sport of Nature" is published by Jonathan Cape and costs £10.96 in the United Kingdom.

Next week at this time I'll be back with more news and views in "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey inviting you to join me then. For now it's goodbye.