ABOUT DEVELOPMENT AND ITS CONTENTS

BOOK REVIEW

MISSIONARIES, MERCENARIES AND MISFITS BY RASNA WARAM REVIEWED BY: ANNA WHITE

L ast year, former World Bank economist Dambsa Moyo made waves with the publication of her controversial book, Dead Aid: Why Aid is Not Working and How There is Another Way for Africa. Over the past 60 years, she laments, at least US$1 trillion of development-related aid has flowed into Africa, but the number of people living on less than a dollar a day has nearly doubled. Moyo was not the first observer to contrast the size of the multi-billion dollar development industry and the blatant lack of progress on its stated goals. Over the past few decades, a number of development insiders – William Easterly, Robert Calderisi and the like – have underscored the ineffectiveness of the aid industry and offered their critique of its failings. With the publication of her edited anthology, Missionaries, Mercenaries and Misfits, Daily Nation columnist Rasna Waram adds her voice to this disillusioned set.

It was whilst working as a UN bureaucrat herself that Waram first began to question not only the efficacy of development assistance, but its entire philosophical basis. “Like most professionals in the development industry,” she writes in her lucid introduction, “I had failed to see that my work and the structures within which I operated were serving.”

Echoing the arguments of post-development provocateurs such as Susan George and Arturo Escobar, Waram’s conclusion is that ‘development’, in the form of donor-inspired policies that perpetuate the exploitative relations underlying many of the book’s contributors, has played a role in reproducing and exacerbating the inequalities of one of the country’s poorest ethnic groups.

While Waram’s account focuses on the complicity of African governments and the World Bank in replicating colonial power structures, Faahamu director Firoze Manji draws attention to how development NGOs have, unwittingly or otherwise, maintained an unequal relationship of power with the communities they seek to ‘empower’. He argues, “NGOs are used to manipulate and exploit the local population for their own vested interest.”

The NGOs considered in Waram’s anthology are in many cases the products of donor-driven development and are thus dependent on the donor’s approval and funding. In the case of Waram’s NGO, the Gateway Trust, a “culture of fear and intimidation” is the norm. The NGO, which is supported by a number of large donors, is concerned about the “negative impact of the donor prescribed neoliberal policies on African economies.”

While Waram’s NGO is not working in the traditional sense of providing aid, it is instead working to educate, to raise awareness and to build solidarity. The NGO’s approach is to build on existing communities and networks in order to build a movement for social change. While this is not the traditional notion of ‘development’, it is a more effective approach to achieving social change.

With her incisive analysis, Waram raises important questions about the role of NGOs in development and the need for a more radical perspective on development. By interrogating the role of NGOs in development, Waram challenges the traditional notion of ‘development’ and offers a more radical approach to achieving social change.

This radical perspective from that of the ‘development experts’, he argues, “is justified by a discourse framed not in the language of rights and social justice but in a ‘vocabulary of charity’, technical expertise, neutrality, and a deep paternalism which was at its heart.”

While the book is thought-provoking and often entertaining, it is also a challenging read. For anyone actively interested in the plight of Africa’s poor, it has the potential to provoke some serious soul-searching on their activities. Author and scholar Issa G. Shyvi extenuates this rebuke with his admonition of what he calls the “silences in NGO discourse”. If African NGOs are to become true champions of the poor and marginalised, they must not only re-examine their relationships with donors, but the entire philosophical and political premises that underpin their activities.

Presumably, the main target audience of the book are the very protagonists whose professional raison d’etre is being questioned. For anyone actively interested in the plight of Africa’s poor, it has the potential to provoke some serious soul-searching on their activities. Author and scholar Issa G. Shyvi extenuates this rebuke with his admonition of what he calls the “silences in NGO discourse”. If African NGOs are to become true champions of the poor and marginalised, they must not only re-examine their relationships with donors, but the entire philosophical and political premises that underpin their activities.

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Rating: ****

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THE STAR ★ Thursday, April 29, 2010

A place where food is deliciously sinful and prices reasonable

RESTAURANT REVIEW

THE BAMBOO ORIGINAL RESTAURANT LOCATION: LOWER KABETE ROAD ROAD PRICE: 1,500 PER PERSON [FOR THREE COURSES] REVIEWED BY RUCHILA ADATIA

Once in a while you get lucky enough to visit a restaurant that is decorated with elegance, and style, food is deliciously sinful, prices are reasonable, portions are generous and service that is fit for kings and where writing a review is pure joy. Plus if you want to be where the trendy are, then this is the place for you.

From the moment we set foot in Bamboo we felt welcomed in the elegant, trendy and sophisticated restaurant. Warmly greeted by our waiter, our noses were treated to the fresh smell of gorgeous roses. The open plan setting decorated in modern dark wood and warm red and cream also added to the warmth and style of the restaurant.

The Bamboo restaurant offers a combination of Chinese, Thai and Japanese cuisine. So since I love Japanese food and my friend Mr S 5 doores Thai, we were beyond excited to start ordering from the menu. We immediately set off by ordering the spring rolls accompanied by a sweet chilli dip, spicy chicken wings and some Tom Kha soup. The spring rolls made us halt in our conversation as we savoured their crispiness and enjoyed the sweet chilli dip that accompanied it. The chicken wings came fried in dark soy sauce and were cooked to tender perfection and drizzled with just the precise amount of soy sauce. Simply delicious!

It was a delight to savour Bamboo Tom Kha where the flavours balanced, complimented and flirted with each other. It was tangy with a kick to it thanks to the taste of galangal, lemongrass and ginger, the prawns were generous and not rubbery, soft and crunchy. So if you are looking for comfort food, then the Tom Kha with mushrooms seasoned with coconut cream, chilli and lime is the embodiment of comfort.

The futomaki platter is a treat for the Maki lover which the aid industry is based, it apart the romantic illusions upon perceptions, does not seek to offer any grand alternate. The restaurant is fit for kings and where writing a review is pure joy! Plus if you want to be where the trendy are, then this is the place for you.

For desert try the bamboo sampler. It consists of a piece of heavenly praline ice cream, deliciously creamy chocolate mouse and yummy passion fruit panacotta served on a narrow, long plate. Talk about bliss. The futomaki platter is a treat for the Maki lover that melts in your mouth. I recommend this with the Jasmine rice that comes in a cylindrical bamboo dish covered with palm leaves and tastes divine. That is another thing I have to give Bamboo credit for. Food is served beautifully in stylish, modern cutlery with such elegance that you don’t want to eat the food on your plate because it is garnished and set in such an artful manner. For desert try the bamboo sampler. It consists of a piece of heavenly praline ice cream, deliciously creamy chocolate mouse and yummy passion fruit panacotta served on a narrow, long plate. Talk about bliss. That is another thing I have to give Bamboo credit for. Food is served beautifully in stylish, modern cutlery with such elegance that you don’t want to eat the food on your plate because it is garnished and set in such an artful manner. For desert try the bamboo sampler. It consists of a piece of heavenly praline ice cream, deliciously creamy chocolate mouse and yummy passion fruit panacotta served on a narrow, long plate. Talk about bliss. That is another thing I have to give Bamboo credit for. Food is served beautifully in stylish, modern cutlery with such elegance that you don’t want to eat the food on your plate because it is garnished and set in such an artful manner. For desert try the bamboo sampler. It consists of a piece of heavenly praline ice cream, deliciously creamy chocolate mouse and yummy passion fruit panacotta served on a narrow, long plate. Talk about bliss. That is another thing I have to give Bamboo credit for. Food is served beautifully in stylish, modern cutlery with such elegance that you don’t want to eat the food on your plate because it is garnished and set in such an artful manner. For desert try the bamboo sampler. It consists of a piece of heavenly praline ice cream, deliciously creamy chocolate mouse and yummy passion fruit panacotta served on a narrow, long plate. Talk about bliss. That is another thing I have to give Bamboo credit for. Food is served beautifully in stylish, modern cutlery with such elegance that you don’t want to eat the food on your plate because it is garnished and set in such an artful manner. For desert try the bamboo sampler. It consists of a piece of heavenly praline ice cream, deliciously creamy chocolate mouse and yummy passion fruit panacotta served on a narrow, long plate. Talk about bliss. That is another thing I have to give Bamboo credit for. Food is served beautifully in stylish, modern cutlery with such elegance that you don’t want to eat the food on your plate because it is garnished and set in such an artful manner. For desert try the bamboo sampler. It consists of a piece of heavenly praline ice cream, deliciously creamy chocolate mouse and yummy passion fruit panacotta served on a narrow, long plate. Talk about bliss.

While this thought-provoking and often entertaining look at the failure of Africa’s development machine tears apart the romantic illusions upon which the aid industry is based, it does not seek to offer any grand alternatives. There are a few scattered, and in some ways contradictory proposals for the way forward, but these act only to further illustrate the diversity of perspectives that challenge the status quo. Warah’s anthology is not an introduction to a world beyond development, but rather a challenge to begin imagining one.

Rasna Warah’s Missionaries, Mercenaries and Misfits: An Anthology is published by AuthorHouse and is available at Bookstop Yaya Centre

Rating: ★★★★★

- Share The World’s Resources.

Rating: ***