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**Episode 63 - Wana Udobang** (March 2016)
Transcript by Christabel Smith

Host: Michelle Madsem – **MM**
Guest: Wana Udobang – **WU**

**Conversation:**

**MM:** Hi, this is Michelle Madsen for Lunar Poetry Podcasts. I'm here at Freedom Park in the middle of Lagos with the amazing Wana Udobang. We're here watching everyone pile on in to enjoy some amazing theatre and to talk about Wana. How are you?

**WU:** Hello, how are you, Michelle?

**MM:** Very good. A little bit hot, but getting acclimatised.

**WU:** It's quite hot, there's a bit of a heatwave going on.

**MM:** OK, a heatwave, so I don't need to be embarrassed.

**WU:** I almost collapsed last week, I thought I was going through heatstroke. I was like what is going on? It is hot.

**MM:** We need to go and jump in the sea.

**WU:** That would be nice.

**MM:** You are a very well-known poet and writer and broadcaster. I very much enjoyed the piece you did for Radio 4, talking about writing the 'new Nigeria'. I didn't hear that much about you in that. You're obviously very modest, but can you tell us a little bit about who you are and what sort of work you create?

**WU:** OK, so my name is Wana Udobang. I usually describe myself as a broadcaster, writer and poet. I write across different categories. I write poetry, I try to write for stage and I'm trying to write for screen at the moment as well. I also write journalism because my background is actually in journalism. I went to primary and secondary school in Nigeria, then went for A levels and university in the UK. I went to university for creative arts.

I moved back to Nigeria about six years ago, 2009. I have been here ever since. My work usually circles around human rights, human-interest stories and personal identities. I'm very interested in people and personal stories. That's at the core of what I want to write about.

**MM:** How did you start writing? Was an interest in human stories that made you think 'I need to get this down'?

**WU:** With poetry specifically, I started writing out of depression. My parents had split up when I was much younger. It was a really violent marriage and all that sort of stuff. There were just different things I was seeing going on around me and then by the time I got to secondary school, it was really tough because we were typical middle-class kids, we had money and then my dad left and we went broke.

My mum wasn't really educated so it was kind of a hustle, you know? You go from this really cool looking kid to not having any money. Things were kind of tough, emotionally as well. Then I moved to England and there was a lot of depression from different things. There was my parents' drama, there was always this sense of feeling responsible for things that were happening, then I lived with my sister as well.

There was always a sense of feeling like you were a bit of a burden, that you've become somebody else's responsibility because your parents' stuff didn't work out and stuff like that.

Even when my mum was going through stuff, I felt that because I was the last child and I was really young, she couldn't leave instantly and had to endure a lot of stuff because…

So yeah, those things led to a lot of depression for me. At 16, I still tried to scribble down stuff on paper. I didn't think I was writing poetry, I was just trying to code what I was writing because I didn't want people to… Just in case they read my diary, they wouldn't know I was writing about them. My best friend saw a piece of paper I'd scribbled on and she was like 'dude, this is like some poetic shit, man.'

Then she bought me a journal and I kept writing. Instead of reading it out to anyone, I was like 'oh, this is awesome, this is really good'. It kind of grew from there. I started making a deliberate effort to study poetry and stuff. Of course, you study literature in school, but it was boring at the time because you never really connect to the stories or the poems.

**MM**: I know that feeling well. I also started writing poetry in journals, in that kind of confessional way.

**WU:** In a way, of all the writing, I think poetry is the most personal to me. It's always that cathartic experience, letting it out, letting it out, but I think as you grow, you are able to create work out of everything. It's no longer about you, but taking it outside of yourself.

**MM**: Is there a poem you could give us now?

**WU:** Let me see, let me see. Actually, I have a really short poem that I wrote recently. I couldn't sleep at night and I was thinking a lot about how - women's rights are crucial to my work as well - being born a woman with all the interesting disadvantages into a society and I thought of how they compare women to flowers. Oh, she's a beautiful rose, blah blah blah.

Then I thought, OK, so you're born a broken flower anyway and society has all this different crazy stuff to rip you to pieces. So I called it This Is How You Break A Broken Flower.

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**MM:** Amazing. Thank you so much, that was great. I love it. I think those flower comparisons are so dangerous sometimes.

**WU:** You're supposed to be this delicate thing.

**MM:** Slightly poisoned flattery. I would like to be something a lot stronger than a flower.

**WU:** Exactly.

**MM:** So what are you working on at the moment?

**WU:** I'm working on my second poetry album. I've been doing a lot of writing for that as well. The first one is called Dirty Laundry. I'm still trying to decide on what to call the second one. The thing is I know the theme, I'm writing about different women's stories across

different generations because I'm very interested in how, especially as an African woman, or a Nigerian woman, I don't like to say African because I feel like it's homogenising everything, but as a Nigerian woman, in Nigerian society, women are very secretive.

Your pain is hidden. Your joys are hidden. You can't express your joys because everybody thinks you're bragging. You can't express your pain because you're not supposed to express your pain. I just feel everything is such a deep secret.

**MM:** What is it in society that does that? Where are the boundaries coming from?

**WU:** I think for me, these things have just been seen as this weird rule and then it just permeates itself over and over again. People get married and things are happening to them, they're probably being abused and you can't talk about it because you're not allowed to talk about your family outside. Everything is so personal.

I remember being in secondary school and my parents getting divorced. I went to boarding school so during visiting day, just my mum would come. So it was, where's your dad? I was like, my parents are not together. 'Don't say that outside!' I think we have this weird preoccupation with perfection or supposed perfection. I just thought it was very weird.

It even made you feel more broken than you actually were because you're not even allowed to say that your parents are divorced. Growing up, now I realise, there was actually a stigma to dating a girl from the divorced parents because the assumption is maybe her mum was either wild or had issues or her mum couldn't keep the family together, so therefore she's probably taking some of those attributes.

**MM:** So the judgement comes down on the woman?

**WU:** Totally! Or it's seen as you're going to have issues. So she's going to have issues and she doesn't have those morals of being family-oriented because she comes from a dysfunctional family. So then she wouldn't be able to have a happy home anyway so I shouldn't get married to that girl. I didn't even know about this stuff until I was running a radio show and it was a topic one day. I was like, wow, people think about things like this?

Actually, myself and my friend were talking about this. We didn't even know there was a stigma to coming from a divorced household. I'm just very interested in how we harbour secrets and wanting to split the lids on all those secrets, everybody's stories. I wrote a poem about my friend, whose daughter is visually impaired.

It's so weird because having a child with challenges should be normal, but because my friend talks about it on the internet all the time, it's seen as this revolutionary thing, which is so weird to me. This is her child, it's not a big deal. I want to tell all these people's stories, across different generations. I'm interested in things my mother has been through, people's mothers have been through.

**MM:** Are things changing?

**WU:** Things are definitely changing, but I feel I'm in a generation where we're stuck between a future and a past, so we are in a time zone where we're exposed to what the world has to offer, but we're still tied to this umbilical cord of culture and tradition and what it says. We're trying to fight our way. I feel like our kids will maybe be the 'free-borns', so to speak. Fingers crossed.

I want to be able to write about that and what it would be like to be a woman in the future, in 20, 30 years' time, where you can be what you want to be and it's not a conversation, an argument and you talk about how you feel and when stuff's not working, you can say if it's OK, and I want to talk about what it means to be this sort of caged character and personality, what it also means to tell a woman to supress her ambition and the fact she has money, she wants to buy a nice car she shouldn't buy because people are going to be intimidated.

I want to be able to tell all these kinds of stories, so that's what this album is going to be about. I'm still trying to decide what to call it. I had a couple of names in mind. I had the name Secrets in mind because there's a poem I've been trying to write, which I haven't written yet, but one line has been coming to me, which is my body is buried in secrets.

**MM:** I like that a lot. Have you got any of the poem about the blind child in your brain? I'm rubbish at remembering poems.

**WU:** I think I remember the first three lines. 'She was the…' I don't remember.

**MM:** Don't worry, I'm exactly the same! It sounds like an absolutely fascinating project and definitely something that speaks to people, women, all over the place.

**WU:** Totally. I want to connect with different kinds of people. I don't want anything that's whitewashed. I want to be honest. I want it to feature all kinds of poems. I want angry poems. I want positive poems. I want I'm tired and fed-up of being fed-up poems.

**MM:** What sort of platform does spoken word have in a) Lagos and b) Nigeria as a whole? Because this is obviously a very big country.

**WU:** I think for us, spoken word is still quite new. The audience is not typically paying for stuff yet, so compared to where say a musician is coming to play, people pay lots of money for a ticket. No, you wouldn't be getting that kind of love for a spoken-word artist, but the space is opening up. People are interested. People are coming to listen who would not have cared about poetry before, which is great.

I feel like every time we're performing, there is a new person there, new audiences as well. Funding is such a huge issue. Even to put a show together, you need something. Even if we regularly perform for free, that's fine, but we need to be able to create the avenue for people to come and watch.

**MM**: You need to tell people about it.

**WU:** Exactly. What's happened is we've had the open-mic things and sometimes, it's not moving so much beyond that. One thing that's great is that people are asking for the events now, which is quite nice. I think it's changing. It's definitely moving. It could move faster, but it's moving.

**MM:** Is the spoken-word scene in Nigeria connected up with other international scenes?

**WU:** Not as much. That's what we hope to start working on. Unfortunately, there's this thing where they say 'a prophet is not respected in their homeland' and we also need those international connections to move around and have people say 'OK, this thing is really cool, people in the world are asking after this person'. We're trying to do that.

I know Efe Paul, who started the Lagos International Poetry Festival last year. We had a couple of international poets. Innua Ellams was here. We had TJ Deman, we also had Nick Makoha from the UK as well. We had Lebo Mashile from South Africa and Natalia Molebatsi. We used Freedom Park here and it was really good. We used the Muson Centre for a concert and it was really beautiful and huge as well.

We are trying to do as much as we can, but because we are not so many, it feels like such an individual push. At least four or five of us are really trying to push and push. You need to make sure you're promoting yourself online, you're releasing snippets of your poem so people can connect to the work, trying to make videos and stuff.

I'm also realising, working on this album, I have to approach it almost like I'm a singer, you know? Try to get some kind of visuals done, where people can watch stuff, do the radio rounds, print CDs and a single, take it round. A bit of melody in there as well to help people who probably wouldn't have paid attention, to pay attention to it. We're in a position where we can't afford to try to be so super-purist about the arts.

'Do you know what? I want to write very deep stuff and if you don't understand, that's your business'. Every single time, you're talking to people who don't really care. You're like, I need you to care. So you need to give them stuff to work with.

**MM:** You're making stuff that wants to be heard. That's really exciting. I think that's something happening with lots of people who are poets and spoken-word artists. Everyone's learning how to exist on lots of different levels. I'm a filmmaker, I'm a journalist, I can tell my message in many different ways. You're a butterfly of many colours.

**WU:** I say to people primarily, I am a storyteller and I'm working in different mediums. That's what it's about. I don't make words for myself, it's not intellectual masturbation for me. The biggest compliment I get after performing a poem is someone saying thank you, like thank you for telling my story. It's not like, 'oh my God, that was so dope, I love the way you'… No.

When someone just says thank you with tears in their eyes, that's all you need. 'Thank you, that was necessary. Thank you for telling my story. Thank you, that's what I'm going through. Thank you for making sense of my life'. That's the biggest compliment I could get.

**MM:** Could you give us another poem?

**WU:** This poem, I wrote about being sexually abused. It's titled Tales from a Dark Planet.

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**MM:** It's very much of a chorus-type voice and it does touch me and I say thank you very much. My last question is what you would like to do next? You talk about growing the seed of something very exciting in Nigeria and it does feel exciting. There's a buzz in the air. If you look at the programme, there's a real mix of interesting fringe performances, theatre, poetry, people pulling together real-life stuff and multimedia to create stuff.

I was saying to [my friend] Maria it feels like a very small Edinburgh fringe programme. We're enjoying it very much. People are out here, drinking beer, and there's a vibe. We also couldn't understand the programme so it felt quite a lot like the Edinburgh Film Festival.

So you've got the album coming out. What would you like to do, either in your writing or in terms of performance?

**WU**: Certainly with my poetry and performance, I really want to be able to make more interesting and complex pieces of work. I want to move from reciting poems on the stage. I want to do stuff with dance. I want to be able to work with dancers and have choreographed pieces to poetry in the background. I want to write plays that are written in verse.

I want to do a one-woman show that's not just a series of poems linked together, but an actual play, punctuated with poetry. I want to be able to do really complex, mind-blowing stuff. I want people to see my work and be like, oh my God, I never knew you could do stuff like that with poetry. I want to be able to create crazy things with words and, of course, travel the world as well.

**MM:** I hear you. Come and join us, we'll come over here, let's make some stuff that's really mind-blowing and amazing. Wana, it's been an absolute pleasure to talk to you. Thank you very much for making us feel so welcome. If you would like to follow Wana, she is blogging at…

**WU:** www.wanawana.net On Twitter, I'm @misswanawana and Instagram is mswanana. I couldn't get Miss on Instagram, someone took it. On Facebook, I'm Wana Udobang.

**MM:** She's very brilliant and very lovely and I highly recommend that you follow her.

**WU:** Michelle should be my manager.

**MM**: Let's make it happen, darling! It's Michelle Madsen and Maria Stevens in Lagos for Lunar Poetry.

**End of transcript.**