



Biyi Bandele-Thomas

BIYI BANDELE-THOMAS: An Undertaker or a dreamer?

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From the corridor of his apartment you could barely see the rail station, confusingly named Clapham Junction - since there were at least three similarly named stations in the area - half submerged by tall shrubs and the rear elevations of typical architectures, not only in this southern part of London but also for the most of the city. Now, we can only imagine that this backdrop and its incessant offstage noise of rail movements would be a constant source of inspiration for him. Biyi's seat is thus inclined in such a manner that its backrest points in this direction.

He wakes up late each morning, maybe because he also comes in late each evening: early morning phone calls to the apartment were replied to with grunts of a sleep-dazed voice.

And then after about the tenth hour of the day he either poured himself a glass of orange juice or some tea, which is to say nothing of the cigarettes which were out of Biyi's lips only when he was asleep, and faced up to his writing table and chair in order to drive himself into some creative writing. And this, I heard not only Biyi complain, but many other writers I rubbed minds with in Britain, was the most dreadful part of the life of full-time creative writers - the compulsion to write. If you live by writing then it leaves no room to wait for moods that would favour creativity. Inspiration or the lack of it becomes insignificant often. Especially when you begin to get successful and commissions are coming your way. Biyi for example told me that he has been booked up till 1996, faced with a procession of commissions for the theatres, broadcasting stations and publishers. These fortunately (?) always come in

with pre-arrangements on deadlines.

In any case, quite apart from the video of his first film for BBC Television that we watched in his Battersea home; titled *Even God is Not Wise Enough* which has scenes shot in some of London's tube stations, echoes of the rail drums that surround Biyi Bandele-Thomas in this his writing chamber scarcely can be found in any of his writing, most of which were composed in the setting I have described.

But there was an irresistible aspect of his life to notice that, fortunately can be found repeatedly replicated in his creative works. This is the disorderliness of Biyi's house! My first visit met him scrubbing, moving tables, knocking down beds, tumbling books down from their high wall shelves. To enter his kitchen we had to climb up on heaps of household utensils, disused cans abandoned along the way, most obstructively. He assured me that he was only trying to rearrange the house, change the position of tables, beds and chairs. He paid, I thought, a disproportionate amount of time cleaning cobwebs, dust and spider's tracks from window panes and door lintels. But on my second visit, a couple of days afterwards, I was welcomed by a much similar visage except that, this time the former movements had been successfully completed and a new set of movements embarked upon. Rugs were crowded by shoes and heaps of personal effects as before. In his recent play produced by the Gate Theatre on Pembroke Road in mid July titled *Two Horsemen*, he opens with this description of the habitation of his two characters:

'A room somewhere: a dirty, scrap filled

room whose only claim to fame is a broken-down bed, a battered coffee-table and two cane chairs that have certainly seen kinder days. A kerosene stove, pots and plates. A hurricane lamp and newspapers flung carelessly everywhere. A coin-operated telephone is situated by the door'. (Amber Lane Press, Oxford, 1994)

This is not really peculiar to him: most artists invariably write, paint or carve themselves into their works. And as Nadine Gordimer recently wrote in her tribute to Wole Soyinka, all the works of any particular author are essentially only one story, resumed from work to work, even cutting through the edges of genres and in some cases, arts forms. In Biyi's case, a character (which we would suspect to be his very self) reoccurs, in thin veils, similarly from novel to novel. *The Sympathetic Undertaker's* hero (Heinemann, 1991) and *The Man Who Came in From the Back of Beyond's* (Heinemann, 1991) are in this same sense variations of the same person. These heroes peter out into two persons in the play *Two Horsemen* except that here they significantly depart from the characteristic legacies of the previous heroes even though we must still suggest, not significantly enough to sever their umbilical link with the others. Biyi himself or indeed some other enthusiastic reviewer might want to contest this claim on the grounds that *Two Horsemen* indeed must have preceded the novels and so, the protagonists of the play namely Banza and Lagbaja are older creations than Rayo in *The Sympathetic Undertaker* and Pithcanthropus or Early Man or Maude Beso Maude in *The Man Who Came in the Back of Beyond*, bearing in mind that it was the earlier version of this play that took Bandele-Thomas to

England in 1990 when it won a college drama competition and also earned a grant for its production. What this simply adds up to then would be to reverse the chronology of our earlier submission that Rayo and Maude breathed themselves into Banza and Lagbaja to now say that it was Banza and Lagbaja that transferred some of their own essential traits to Rayo first and then to Maude. But let us prove our case of similarities between Biyi's heroes. Rayo is the wild child archetype who pours disdain on all known traditions, he is brilliant and given to asking profound if embarrassing questions from his mother. He is also a literary eccentric who delves at every opportunity into giving narration from his favourite literature books to his younger brother (the nameless storyteller) who is disinterested. In the end, Rayo runs mad, not unexpectedly, and the bulk of the book takes the form of recapitulations from his past told to the story-teller. Maude, a literature teacher is however already pronounced mad by his students who watch all his eccentric mannerisms and receive his bombastic literature discourse with amusements.

Maude however picks interest in the story-teller (a student in his fifth-form) and lures him to his teacher's quarters on the school compound and proceeds first to tell him gory tales about himself and then even more appalling tales of his own invention. Banza and Lagbaja however are equally bizarre but share none of the intellectual bents of the earlier two except in their language and in the very world which they inhabit that are as other-worldly as Rayo and Maude. To put it straight, Banza and Lagbaja are anonymous persons, perhaps non-existent persons who only inhabit the edge of each other's imagination. In some stage through the play we read where one character introduces himself to his neighbour: 'I am your father.' And then suddenly he is not so sure anymore. He tells him yet again that, 'I shot you and you died.' Again he begins to doubt if he shot him

dead but corrects himself in time and says 'Oh you resurrected.'

Biyi told me much about himself that I see played out in his drama, his novels and in his BBC film. He had grown up in Kafanchan in northern Nigeria, born to frequently bickering Yoruba parents (one an Ijebu, the other Egba) who would pick each other up and abuse each other as 'you bloody Ijebu' or 'you bloody Egba', thus occasionally prompting the children to cut in and ask which was their own identity: Egba or Ijebu!

He also had exciting childhood escapades climbing up mango trees and once in a while breaking the heads of unwary wayfarers. Are we then surprised to find this duplicated in Rayo and his junior brother (the story-teller's) life? Not only this, his mother was a devoted member of the church of the Cherubim and Seraphim, which predictably, Biyi himself attended through his childhood years in Kafanchan.

The film, *Even God is Not Wise Enough* which is an expose on the life of British Nigerians in the city of London has scenes taken from services of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church in England - obviously informed by materials from his own background back home. He confirmed this to me however and said:

'I am fascinated by these people. No doubts because of my own mother.'

This film, like Biyi's drama boasted of no plot, no real story-line. The main character is a British-born Nigerian who is only trying to scrape a living from his entitlements with the social security department. But as is characteristic of Biyi, he has no real identity in the end but is only living out the fantasies about himself created in the world of his own imaginations. He runs into an apparition (a young Nigerian girl) in the underground trains, imagines himself crowned in a pop-house gig, his dream

girl beside him, obstructs traffic and is brought to answer charges against him in a London court-room, tells the court and jury off and climbs up tables stomping out into the street in spite of the hot pursuits of the police.

Finally he weds his apparition who also commits suicide under a Bakerloo couch, goes to visit his heart-broken father on his death-bed (the actor playing this role, Biyi told me, was actually dying of AIDS in real life, although it was unknown to Biyi and other crew members at the time of the shooting, and the man has now died since. Let me add in this parenthesis as well that I was to meet another sufferer from the AIDS virus in the company of Biyi on Nottinghill High Road, an actor as well; Biyi assured me that he was now waiting patiently only for the ultimate moment.) Biyi's film, though lacking in the usual symmetry of a linear story-line, is a statement on the trials of the Nigerian youth, especially the British-born who has to adapt to the vagaries of an alternative society in Britain and faces conflicts more within himself than with the society that in one sense appears considerate and in another, cold and anonymous.

The film which was neither a serial nor a series but was only one late night broadcast spoke, as I said, by means of unrelated snap-shots from the thoughts and day-dreams of a man on a personal trial. It was also a commercial success in a way, like Biyi's earlier play produced at the Royal Court Theatre on Sloane square titled, *Marching For Fausa*. The budget for the film which BBC television mopped up was a staggering 600,000 pounds. The second movie, *Bad Boys* would cost BBC as much.

Asked about how he has been coping with his alienation from the Nigerian society and culture, he said he has had to face this problem even back in Nigeria. On his return to south-west Nigeria from the north, family friends and relations,

he recalls, were quick to adopt the unsettling epithet 'Molla' him, meaning 'Mallam'. Which was a comment of cultural and social alienation.

With the ever-enlarging community of Nigerians in Great Britain and even the

transformation of parts of cosmopolitan London to an extension of Nigeria, a writer like Biyi has useful reminders of life at home almost on a daily basis, coupled with the vast library he has managed to keep for himself. He is equally undaunted by the uneasy feeling

of producing almost exclusively for a foreign world and culture, seeing that the whole universe itself is merging, metamorphosing into one unitary and homogeneous fold, more anxious than ever to learn about life in lands beyond their immediate surroundings. **[GR]**

ZIMBABWE

The Zimbabwe International Book Fair has become an exceptionally well publicized and popular annual event in Harare and the 1994 Fair was no exception. It has been described as a 'crossroads for world literary cultures' and is rapidly expanding in terms of breadth of participation and trade opportunity. The facts are as follows: two hundred and twenty-six exhibitors, four hundred publishers represented, thirty-eight countries represented, one thousand and one hundred trade visitors on trade days, and estimated business transacted - over Z\$2 million.

Two traders-only days were introduced last year, after suggestions were put forward in 1993, to facilitate the setting up of contacts and the transaction of business which is surely one of the central aims of a book fair. The fact that thirty-three thousand members of the public visited the ZIBF may be impressive, but the real success of the fair should be judged by what came out of it in concrete publishing terms, by the results of the activities and events that were organized. These were extensive:

ZIBF served as the venue for an African Publishers Network (APNET) Board meeting. Such meetings are vital, given the diverse geographical locations of its members.

The APNET Publishing Resource Centre was officially launched. APNET has been compiling its own

collection of documents related to African publishing, which will be housed with Hans Zell's invaluable and unique collection. This was shipped to Harare last year.

Forty-two South African publishers were represented - an appropriate influx following the political events in that country. They included multinationals, independent presses and small innovative publishers. The opening up of South Africa and the spreading of its publishing wings beyond its borders must impact on African publishing soon. Contact with South African publishers should make this a positive and effective impact.

The First African Rights Indaba was held on the two days preceding the fair. This was a crucial meeting, which should practically affect African publishing in terms of rights protection and trading in rights and licences. Publishers were strongly encouraged to look into selling rights overseas as well as buying the rights to publish overseas books here. ZIBF '95 will host a buyers/sellers meeting and there are also plans for a Phase Two Indaba.

A Writers' Workshop was held to support the theme of **Science and Technology**. Its title was **Accessible Science** and tackled the problems of the writer in verbalizing complex scientific

concepts for the consumption of pupils and 'laypeople'. In the light of the domination of imported textbooks in Africa, this was useful for local and regional writers whose books need to be relevant but also professional.

The Fair was visited by a twenty-seven-person British publishers' outward mission which was *en route* to South Africa. This will result in more international publicity. **[GR]**

ZIBF 95

Friday 28 July — Saturday 5 August

Applications are invited for participation in the 1995 ZIBF sponsored exhibitors programme. Applicants should be prepared to participate in a full 3-year development programme during which their participation at the ZIBF will be on a sliding scale ranging from total sponsorship to waiving of stand fees only. Interested parties can obtain application forms from:

ZIBF
78 Kaguvi Street
Harare
Zimbabwe.

Early application is advised to avoid disappointment.