

A Most Enduring Legacy

BY NIYI OSUNDARE

MARTIN Carter's poetry made a thunderous entry into progressive literary circles in Nigeria in the late 70's. Its arrival couldn't have been more apt, more timely. The country, like most others in Africa, was reeling in the maelstrom of "post-independence disillusionment", and the neo-colonial arrangement which precipitated this condition was undergoing severe analysis and interrogation. University curricula were being decolonized, the reading lists were being updated and made more relevant, more responsive to indigenous needs. An exciting radicalization spread through Nigerian academe, beginning most fervently with the Humanities and the Social Sciences.

Tired of the "Wasteland" pessimism of T.S. Eliot, repelled by the fascist leanings of Ezra Pound, and the formalist tinkering of most 20th century verse which had little or no bearing on the post-independence African condition, many Nigerians started craving for "alternative" voices and visions. To be sure, there was the home-grown anti-colonial verse of Agostinho Neto, Antonio Jacinto and others, but this was mostly in Portuguese, a language not accessible to the majority of Africans.

There was also the lively experimentation of Okot p'Bitek in East Africa, but his songs were considered too neo-traditional for the radical project at hand. Only David Diop, the highly gifted and revolutionary poet (who unfortunately died in an air crash at a young age) provided a rallying song within the African continent. But again, he wrote in French and many of us had to be content with whatever portion of his works came to us in English translation. The soul-lifting poetry of Edward Kamau Brathwaite came later, as did the fiery verse of Amiri Baraka. But it was the poetry of Martin Carter that provided the most immediate, most direct song for the barricades. "The University of Hunger" and many of his other poems passed from hand to hand and from lip to lip. These poems were so lyrical, so relevant that many of us began to wonder why we hadn't known their author much earlier. We also yearned for more knowledge about the political career and personal circumstances of Martin Carter, the author of these remarkable songs. We waited for many years without a satisfactory answer.

But the appearance early this year of *All Are Involved: the Art of Martin Carter* has put an end to that waiting. Painstakingly edited by Stewart Brown, this is a valuable

collection of essays and tributes by eminent figures in Caribbean literature and culture on and to one of the world's most important, but most neglected poets. The richness of this book, the caliber and diversity of the contributors, are themselves a measure of the awesome respect with which Carter is held, and the continuing relevance of his vision.

All Are Involved is organized in seven sections: "The Necessary Contexts"; "The Literary Contexts"; "Reading the Poems"; "Recollections by Martin Carter's Contemporaries"; "Martin Carter's Impact and Influence Upon Younger Writers"; "Obituaries"; "Bibliography". In the Introduction, Stewart Brown places Carter alongside other great poets such as Césaire, Brathwaite, Walcott, Gullien, whose works chronicle the Black journey from slavery, through colonialism to independence. Like all great poets, Carter never abandoned his "concern for craft" (p.8), his "commitment to place and truth", and to "social justice beyond the contagion of radical politics" (p.12). But his was the "fiercely intelligent, sternly poetic sensibility" (p.10) which never received the kind of critical attention it so richly deserved.

Two solid contributions take up "The Necessary Contexts: History and Politics" section: Clem Seecharan's "The Shape of the Passion: the Historical Context of Martin Carter's Poetry of Protest (1951-1964)", and Rupert Roopnaraine's "Martin Carter and Politics." Both demonstrate intimate knowledge of Martin Carter the person, the poet, and the politician and the interrelatedness of these roles. Seecharan provides an impressive history of the politics of Guyana, locating Carter in that history: his political alliances, first with Cheddy Jagan, then Forbes Burnham, and his disillusionment with both of them; his navigation through the racism-infested waters of Guyanese politics; his mission as one of those "people who had freed their minds and were determined to free their country" (p.28); and the several ways the vicissitudes of Guyanese politics reflected in the change in the voice of the poet, even as it went from the euphoria of the early stages to the self doubt of the middle, and the "Despair and bitter Hope" (p.37) of the last. Seecharan highlights the genuine passion of Carter's commitment and his

Stewart Brown (ed.)
ALL ARE INVOLVED:
THE ART OF MARTIN
CARTER. Peepal Tree
Press, U.K., 2000.
413 pp.

>>

<< abiding integrity, a virtue given equal articulation by Roopnaraine for whom Carter was a "seeker of truth in an era of degradation" (48), a man who "educated us into the habit of thinking and proposed for our consideration a politics of decency rooted in the moral sense" (p.55).

The section on "Literary Contexts" complements the historical and political background provided in the preceding section by delving into the broad conceptual and critical contexts of Carter's poetry. Ivan Van Sertima in "From 'Astride Two Visions'" takes us through the fiery enthusiasm of the early Cheddy Jagan days, the way the later political atmosphere was poisoned by the "unbending extremism of Jagan" and the "private ambition of Burnham" (p.60), and how Carter's poetry was influenced by these events. Louis James ("The Necessity of Poetry") calls attention to the "cleansing indignation" (p.67) behind Carter's poetry, while Samuel Asein situates his poetic practice within "The 'Protest' Tradition in West Indian Poetry." Jeffrey Robinson concludes this section with his exploration of "The Guyanese-ness of Guyanese Writing," and how Carter's poetry falls within the form and spirit of this geographical genre while helping to define it.

By far the longest of the sections, "Reading the Poems" boasts twenty-one contributors, each with a remarkable perspective on Carter's poetry and poetics. Kamau Brathwaite has two entries here: the first, "Resistance Poems: the Voice of Martin Carter", takes a dispassionate look at Carter's poetry, identifying the poet's lack of direct embrace of Guyanese physical and socio-cultural landscape as a factor in the "reversion to sympathetic models" (p.40) largely responsible for his slide into Yeatsian

pessimism — a reading which seems to find an unstated refutation in Stanley Greaves' "A Vision of Land and Landscape in the Poems of Martin Carter". Brathwaite's second essay, "Martin Carter's poetry of the Negative Yes" is a fascinating study of Carter's "perception of self and the world" (p.201) and the dialectical parameters of his engagement with Caribbean reality.

Stephen Stephanides' "The Dislocated Idiom of Martin Carter" and Gordon Rohlehr's "Assassins of the Voice": Martin Carter's Poems of Affinity 1978-1980" examine the relationship between language and (enforced) silence, the former exploring the status of language as a "dialogue between two polarities — desire and time, self and history" (p.221), and the latter seeing the "perversion of the word" as prelude to "perversion of thought and deed, and ultimately to subservience and degradation of spirit" (p.184). Carter's struggle to re-locate the idiom and protect it from decay constitutes a vital aspect of the "undying, human spirit of resistance" (p.95) that Frank Birbalsingh celebrates in "Martin Carter's Earliest Poetry." Also noteworthy in this section are the linguistic-stylistic perspectives on Carter's poetry in A.J. Seymour's "A Commentary on Two Poems" and Barbara Lalla's "Conceptual Perspectives on Time and Timelessness in Martin Carter's 'University of Hunger'". No defense of Carter as a political poet could have been more eloquent, more erudite, more passionate, than Eusi Kwayana's "The Politics of the Heart" with its aphoristic clincher: "Martin Carter is a deeply political poet; this is another way of saying a deeply human poet" (p.168). Kwame Dawes, Gemma Robinson, and Nigel Westmaas close this section with contributions on different aspects of Carter's prose.

The section on "Recollections by Martin Carter's Contemporaries" features major co-witnesses to the Caribbean dream and some of the interpreters of that dream: Wilson Harris, Jan Carew, John La Rose, Janet Jagan, Anne Walmsley etc. But the two most revealing contributions come from Derek Walcott in an interview with David Dabydeen, and George Lamming with Stewart Brown. Great authors themselves, they both profess their admiration for Carter's poetry, while proffering their guesses as to why such good poetry "hasn't attracted foreign publishers" (p.309).

Absolutely quotable here is Walcott's robust vote of confidence in West Indian literature, and Martin Carter: "West Indian literature even in English is totally underestimated, totally (Walcott's emphasis),



Martin Carter

The literature is astonishing, the quality is astonishingly high. And Martin's position in all of this is special" (p.310).

The distinguished multitude in the section titled "Martin Carter's Impact and Influence Upon Younger Writers" is an eloquent testimony to the power of Carter's poetry, the reach of his voice, and the enduring resonance of his vision. In prose and poetry, members of the younger generation touched by Carter's fire, pour out their appreciation in toasts and tributes: John Agard, Grace Nichols, David Dabydeen, Merle Collins, Fred D'Aguiar, Linton Kwesi Johnson, E.A. Markham, Sasenarine Persaud, Mark McWatt, Kendel Hippolyte, Karen King-Aribisala, etc. In one packed, explosive page, Dabydeen narrates the story of the marginalization of Caribbean literature and history in the United Kingdom until the 1980's, how he was introduced to Carter's work through a young English student, and how that encounter became part of his "journey of discovery" (p.335). Reading Persaud's piece, we are made thoughtfully aware of the need for a closer study of the affinity between Carter and Rabindranath Tagore, the great Indian poet.

The section on "Obituaries" continues the outpouring of tributes, this time from a

posthumous perspective, with Eusi Kwayana, Ian Macdonald, Mervyn Morris, Vanda Radzik, and Ken Ramchand sounding the last trumpet for the poet who "binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society..." (p.374).

All are involved is a difficult book to review. Its contents are so packed, so vital, the statements so well made that paraphrasing them becomes an act of egregious violence. Here is Martin Carter, that "gifted, paradoxical man" (p.45), that "friendly, dream-ful, dangerous man" (p.370), analyzed, extolled, lavished with the recognition which eluded him in life because of the politics of his poetry, and the poignant truth and moral force of that politics. This book demonstrates how wrong we were to have neglected Carter's voice, how diminished. *All Are Involved* is a treasure so empowering, a tribute we pay through Martin Carter to all that is human in us. It is a most enduring legacy. GBS

'Homeland' of The Mind

BY EBENEZER OBADARE

AFTER twenty-seven years in jail, a man has every good reason to be a different person, with the exception of Nelson Mandela who emerged from behind bars with his treasure of magnanimity hardly depleted; hence Albert Camus' memorable statement still rings with a certain truism—prison overhauls. So does exile, as Diawara confesses: "Exile transforms a man forever." Here, the kinship between the experiences of exile and the penitentiary is unmistakable. Both involve a degree of spatial disconnection, spiritual translocation and mental anxiety. To be an exile is to be torn off, mostly without choice, from the land of one's progeny. It is to find oneself im-prisoned within a strange spatio-temporal universe. "There is no greater sorrow on earth than the loss of one's native land", says Euripides.

Exile fosters experiences that produce a variety of attitudes: from the wary pessimism of the cynic, to the restless inquisitiveness of the academic: how is the land that one left behind doing? What has happened to its political institutions? Has the land's culture

stagnated or flourished? For the exile, these are questions to which satisfactory answers are quite difficult.

Matters tend to get worse when the land that you left behind is a portion of Africa, the continent which seems to revel in the identity of being the Sick Man of the World. The image of Africa that the (Western) media projects is not the kind to assuage one's worries; and so after thirty-two years, Manthia Diawara, a Professor of Comparative Literature and Film at the New York University decides to find out the truth about the country he was banished from in the teeth of nationalist/Communist fever. This was to be a heart-rending, if not unhappy encounter. To be away for more than three decades from the only place that one can confidently call his own is no easy experience, emotionally speaking. Diawara was carrying a painful sore, and "the only cure I had to seek" lay in Sidime Laye, a childhood friend. In between the tortuous

**Manthia Diawara,
IN SEARCH OF
AFRICA, Harvard
University Press,
Massachusetts, 1998,
288 pp.**

>>