

that would match the depth of the crises narrated in the book. Like the present power holders, particularly Obasanjo and his foreign props, Maier over-emphasizes the effect of corruption on the Nigerian crises, as if it were the chief evil. He fails to see that the difference between domination and hegemony, and state decay in Nigeria is often one of inflection. And that pervasive corruption is only a manifestation of state decay which is the result of the capture of the state since independence by a consumptive and incompetent elite coalescing around a particular ethnic group. Because he overemphasizes corruption and over-looks this linkage, he fails therefore to link the above with the dynamics of the disparate ethnic and religious identities contesting for the power matrix. It is this theory of the social composition of interests, which the French writer Michel Foucault speaks to in *The History of Sexuality*, where he describes the kind of power that is "mobile and transitory...producing cleavages in a society that shifts about, fracturing unities and affecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions ... in their ... minds".

It is this "mobile and transitory" power that produced Obasanjo through the construction of a zone of simultaneous engagement and negation that concedes so as to enthrone or revise an ethos. Unless we

look at the organic unity — if not, in fact, solidity — of the systemic rot (of which corruption is only one manifestation), domination and hegemony, clashing identities and the agency of international interests that demand minimal changes in the structure of the Nigerian state, we may not understand why the crumbling house has refused to fall finally.

However, Maier succeeds, in this readable prose, in traversing several social and political registers to capture the sensibilities — from the solemn to the banal — that define contemporary life in Nigeria. The central argument that overhangs his narrative is this: Nigeria is a potentially, in fact, inherently beautiful country that has been made so ugly and is virtually impossible to *beautify* again. But one can challenge this as a counter-factual argument. How long is 40 years in the life of a nation-state? The fact that Nigeria has not matched her manifest destiny in the past does not mean she will not do so in the future.

Perhaps, finally, a simple thing can be said about the paradoxes and contradictions that Maier narrates in this book: The house has not fallen because Nigeria is largely an aspiration. There are few realities that can obliterate an aspiration. Aspirations cling stubbornly to possibilities — even against reason. That is why, even with Maier's clear observations about the "Midnight in Nigeria", the possibilities of dawn are not extinct. **GBS**

Reconciling The Many Selves

BY ANGELA NWOSU



ALICE Walker's new book, *The Way Forward Is With A Broken Heart*, is not much different from some of her earlier works in terms of subject and expressive mode; she equally does not hide the fact that she has merged fiction and fact. The narrative is largely epistolary: it opens and ends as a letter to her former (first), husband who is Jewish, reminiscing on how

they lived through a ten-year marriage in the "volatile and violent" American deep South state of Mississippi.

As the author states, the narrative continues "with some of the stories that grew out of an era marked by deep-sea changes and transitions, stories that are mostly fiction...but comes out of a singular life." Consequently, the stories, which are of seven broad titles, start with that of her earlier marriage. The other stories act as parallels to this and involve relationships of various forms, especially mixed and broken marriages. What we subsequently find is a fairly complex panorama of American,

particularly black-American, sociology and history.

In itself, the title insinuates an exaggerated feeling of pain through which the stories narrated become a way of gaining maturity and clarity, eventually leading to a state of *feeling*, rather than of that of 'rightness' or 'wrongness'.

Although central to all the stories is love, Walker takes in tandem with this, more 'political' themes including environmental issues such as the depletion of the ozone layer; the race and craze for nuclear weapons; the ever swelling tide of violence in America as well as the continued displacement of peoples, re-presented in the experience of Indians. It would seem she thinks these ethical issues more urgent than "moral" issues such as lesbianism, though throughout the narrative, one overtly gets

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Alice Walker,
THE WAY FORWARD
IS WITH A BROKEN
HEART, Random
House, New York, 2000,
200pp.

Asha Bandele
THE PRISONER'S
WIFE, Pocket Books,
New York, 1999,
219pp.



Alice Walker
©Jill Krementz

the feeling of the author's deep concern with questions of lesbian love.

An interesting part of the book's unfolding is the response to *The Brotherhood of the Saved*, a religious sect which had criticized her about sleeping with other women; of this she says: "If sleeping with women is a crime, it's one for which the whole world is guilty." She continues by deriding society as being highly hypocritical, arguing that men are dying to see women sleep with each other, which is why they patronize pornography. That meaning, if it were not so much on their minds, suggested in the spate of their criticisms, they would instead be thinking of "cirrhosis of the liver or heart disease. Crime in the streets. Poverty in the hinterland. The way the weather is all screwed up." Perhaps it was this outrage at the hypocrisy of society that led Walker to take her mother and two other elderly folks to see a pornographic picture, *Deep Throat*, something that shocked the older ladies into silence.

A cognate manifestation of the female emotional response to social norm driving Walker's narrative revolves around questions of sexism and gender differentiation, which is piquantly related to in one of the stories in the book. This story, "Kindred Spirits," speaks of Rosa who goes to nurse a broken heart in

Greece where she meets a man who is grieving over his deceased son. The man keeps talking of how important a son is, to the lesser possible valuation of what a daughter could be. The trope of feeling which this singular act raises ultimately leads back to the author, the valorization attendant upon her focus on the female continuum of relationships, and her purpose for a magnification of such: why would Walker keep harping on the issue of lesbian love? Why would she defend it so passionately? If we choose to ignore the seeming complementarity of heterosexual relationships, what we then see in the narrative is lesbianism as essential female bonding, alternative emotional support, respite to heartbreaks, and extension of sisterism, which could also spark off sexual feelings.

The depth and range of emotions evoked in the narrative arises from the fact that Walker does not deem any dimension of love superficial. She affirms family love for instance through acts of reconnections with the past, and this epistolary address to her husband becomes a way of looking back to salvage all that was beautiful in order to make the present worth living. This is also an extension of what one of the characters in her book says: "Greatness of beauty is how I

see God."

There is an element of spirituality in this new work, which sometimes hinges on the sensuous, and for a woman who says she had a miscarriage when "Martin" (Luther King) was murdered, that spirituality could also be sublime. Walker keeps returning to the subject of love in all its variegation because "no matter how distressing the world is...there never seems to be a shortage of love." Towards the close of the book, she sends her ex-husband "her sorrow and her art in the sure knowledge that...(in) the American race, lovers who falter and sometimes fail, are good." Love then becomes a Sisyphean reference to resilience necessary for the salvage of society from immanent chaos.

Simply put, Asha Bandele's memoir *The Prisoner's Wife* is a love story as she states at the beginning and end of the narrative. It is about how she falls in love with Rashid, a prisoner convicted for murder who is serving a twenty-year term in an upstate New York correctional facility. She had gone to read her poetry to a group of prisoners during a Black history month program when she met Rashid. Essentially, the narrative is about the many transitions the relationship passes through and how this evolves in the lovers a better spirit of being.

However, the story is not all that simple, it is also about how the past needs to be reconciled with the present. At the time Rashid and Asha meet, he had already done ten-years, was twenty-nine years old, had this not-so wonderful childhood, a nine-year-old son and a marriage on the precipice of divorce. And yet there is another stretch of time he has to do. Asha also had a litany of turbulent events on her trail: drugs, sex abuse, alcohol and conflicts arising from yearning for an illusive innocence couched in an exclusive sense of freedom. She married at twenty-one, divorced at twenty-three and continued wallowing in personal tragedy.

In an ironic way, then, Asha finds a path of redemption in her association with Rashid, a Moslem, which establishes a sort of contrast: the paradoxical nature of the relationship underscoring on her own turbulent individuality. At the beginning of the narrative, she describes their love as "everything beautiful - bright colors, candle-scented rooms...lavender amethyst. It's everything grotesque, disqualified. It's long twisting wounds, open and unhealed...it's an Alvin Ailey dance, ...it's as a freedom song, a 12-string guitar, a Delta blues song..."

This antithetical construct would seem employed by the author to present a picture of an impossible relationship, which she

embraces alongside the psychic bonding between them. She recognizes that they both want the same things and describes Rashid like herself as "a human being fighting off loneliness while craving solitude..."

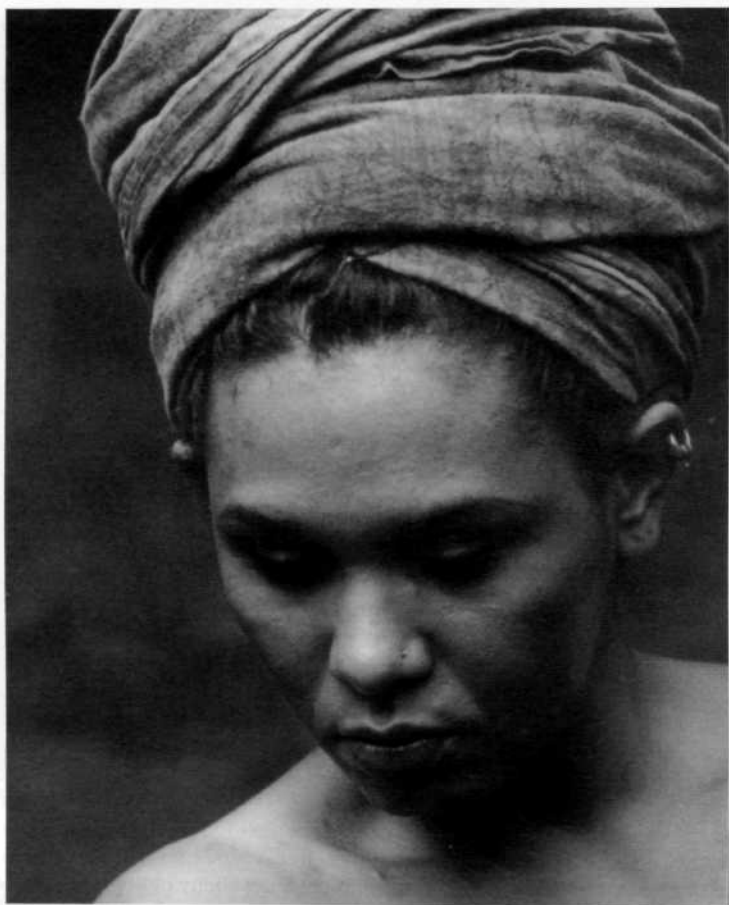
It turns out that she becomes very open with Rashid and tells him things she never admitted to herself; more than this, Asha's need to be honest shows a wild innocence that she cannot help. She talks about other affairs and the many silly things she has to do in order to survive Rashid's cruel absence. After four years they are married by an Imam in a near-solitary ceremony. And then begins another transition of emotional turbulence.

This real life story that reads like a gothic romance becomes a dialogue between a personal conscience (the hidden self) and the societal one. Asha, it would seem, subconsciously dislikes order and her expressive spirit, perhaps, finds 'freedom' in an unusual relationship with a prisoner who seems to have achieved a near perfect humanity through prison life. At a higher level then, the relationship becomes a journey of a re-birth that spiraled 'inward' into a greater understanding of life. Love is the battleground leading to *liberation* and *imprisonment* in the many absences that she has to negotiate. This imprisonment, however, helps to expand the scope of liberation as a possibility of hope.

This is an engaging memoir in its probe into psychological depths and the wealth of its narrative style. It is very interesting to see how "real life writing" fictionalizes reality. It spawns a wealth of imagery giving off powerful poetic overtones made more forceful through a fascinating descriptive prowess. At some points she describes their love as "a renegade boxer" and herself as "perched at the edge of an 'air-plane' miles above an 'unknowable landscape.'" There are also interior narrations (mostly expressing thought), italics that highlight dialogue and the state of her mind. Through this we largely get to know Rashid and the emotional whirlpool the lovers find themselves in.

Although the memoir focuses on the life of the author, it also expands to admit insights into the larger American society. Consequently, the reader finds out the ugly sides of the prison system and the trauma people go through in coping with various forms of absences. Asha in order to keep up communication with Rashid has to task herself financially, and is sometimes at the mercy of the phone company that connects them. She writes of an occasion when they are cut off, not because she has not been paying but because the company felt that they were over communicating. Even, at the

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Asha Bandle
Photograph by John Sann

prison, visitors are subjected to all kinds of humiliating experiences before gaining access to the inmates.

As an intersecting fictional construct, Bandle sometimes drifts into melodrama, not so much as a weakness in narrative power but as a magnification of pain. Before she reads her lover's letter, she goes through a romantic ritual of burning candles and soaking herself in perfumed oil. Thus, reading letters become a dating game to her. Sometimes at the height of loneliness (due to Rashid's absence) she suspends reality, in order to cope with the life she has chosen. At other times, she seeks God in desperation, pleading with him through a thousand names and media: "Sweet Jesus (Mary? Joseph? Peter or Paul) Allah, Jah, Yemaja, Ra, Obatala. Buddha, Kalima, oh Great-Spirit, you, you whose name cannot be known or spoken. Look, look. Can you see me...Jesus here I am, here, here, genuflecting at the altar." Another point of interest in the narrative is the reconciliation of her many selves. Over the years she had been through a lot (religion, drugs, astrology, meditation) just to get to know who she is, but Rashid broke the ice and Asha discovered that all she needed was

the "openness of his spirit."

For more as long as the memory can serve, writers have drawn from real life circumstances for their literary endeavors, but its peculiar manifestation in recent times makes Per Wastberg observe that "We belong to a confessional age. The intimate luggage of our souls we unburden in diaries, faction, pseudofictional documentaries."

Asha herself posits in an interview that literary works in this mode thrive because "they concern themselves with people...have the ability to make us feel less alone, perhaps less crazy and more connected." This then suggests the need for some kind of catharsis from the hidden self.

Some critics have raised issues with the *truth* in real-life writing. I wonder if such can still hold, especially, in an age when people are saying it all. Asha is very candid and honest in her memoir, she even tells about the abortion she gets because she is not ready for a baby, and how she masturbates on her wedding night because her husband is serving time.

Perhaps, it is for this reason that some critics say autobiographies celebrate individuality. I think that real-life writing is not so much a celebration, as it is a liberation of self. The memoir Asha has written is a testimony to liberation and courage and the defiant act of sacrifice for love. The ambiguous ending in which she writes Rashid in prison becomes both a metaphor and an affirmation of hope, how their pains are being redeemed through a love which liberates them from ugliness.

As narratives which deploy the mode of 'real-life writing', either overtly or covertly, to confess the many negotiations made around the self, Walker's and Bandle's books hit on certain peculiarities which both link them and yet pronounce their difference. While Bandle's memoir focuses mainly on the self and a near impossible relationship with a prisoner husband, Walker's narrative extends the boundaries of the self to fuse in experiences from other characters. If Bandle looks inward in efforts to come to terms with happenings around her, Walker on her part ranges outward in order to understand the internal aspects of humanity. Still, in spite of this, both are concerned with issues involving racial problems, displacement of values and violence.

Although Bandle battles her loneliness by focusing on polytheism to boost her spirituality, Walker seems to encourage the free expression of individual feelings and advocates the freedom—through characters, especially female, in her narrative—to choose one's own path to happiness. She, more so,

hopes for a society that will show greater understanding and tolerance for the many disparities of life.

However, the greatest point of similarity between Walker and Bandele is the eagerness to be open about their lives. The 'literature of openness' is surely on ascent. There is this feeling that after years of being relegated to the background (through ancient and modern slaveries) and suffering through humiliation, nothing could be too weighty to say. Walker describes herself as a "shameless writer" and Bandele does not feel shy in talking about what she is going through in a bleak but hopeful relationship. Perhaps because both writers draw from the same historical

experience, pain becomes a romance toward clarity for them. Bandele's life reflects Walkers' shock at a society becoming more and more hostile and lost.

Bandele's memoir is so intense and spontaneous, perhaps reflecting her deeply internal concern, and Walker through introspective contemplations serves a needling social commentary; yet something of one reflects in the other. This is possibly due to the fact that, as most African-American writers would agree, what they have become can hardly be separated from where they are coming from. Importantly, both writers subscribe to an internal courage that is capable of always triumphing. GBS

A Great Feast of Return

BY OGAGA IFOWODO

A

20-year period separated the publication of *The Poet Lied* from the three new collections released at the same time by Odia Ofeimun on the auspicious occasion of his 50th birthday celebrations. These were years burdened with the expectation of more poetry and not many were prepared to acknowledge that after *The Poet Lied*, Ofeimun did, in fact, publish two more collections: *A Handle for the Flutist* (Update, 1987) and *Under African Skies* (Hornbill, 1991). Perhaps, understandably so, given the literary excitement and polemical furor bearing upon the release and quick withdrawal from circulation of *The Poet Lied* by Longman (London), and given the fact that the two latter titles hardly caused fundamental stirs within literary waves unlike the former. It is no surprise, therefore, that in coming out finally from his deep silent rendezvous with the Muse, echoes of *The Poet Lied* should be heard all over the new poems, especially those collected in *Dreams at Work*.

Many had adopted every style of non-combative verbal assault possible to get Ofeimun to publish the poems he was famously honing in the past two decades. The more they tried, the faster his embrace of silence. Despite — or shall we say, *until*? — the intervention of his older compatriot and friend, Wole Soyinka.

In the Nobel Laureate's first post-Stockholm collection of poetry, *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems*, he not only borrowed the title of one of the poems in *The Poet* — "My Corpuscles Don't Readily Marry Slogans" — in his own, but also dedicated the 171-line poem to Ofeimun.

Essentially a poem in which Soyinka, finding a unity of political and literary temperaments with his younger colleague, sought to respond to sloganeering revolutionaries, especially the campus variety who "dribbled slogans a thousand safety/Miles away, holding forth by the Staff Club swimming pools", and who "midnight missed at the barricades" but found "snoring sweetly in a mistress'/Arms, secured by, wage-slave proletariats", it began with a typically Soyinkan mischief that is worth quoting at some length:

Sooner plead a writer's block, a cramp,
Akaraba worked by the envious,
enchantment
Cast by a beloved siren, jealous of
That constant rival, Muse. Sooner plead
A seven-year dream of leanness, the fat
to follow.
Plead a passing inhibition, overdose of
reality
That stuns the mind and beggars lyric.

One is tempted to quote the entire first stanza, but I would rather take from the last four but one lines of the poem:

But if phrase-mongers have indeed
usurped the world,
And dreams come packaged, handy like
a sausage roll,
The poet chooses: DANGER — DREAMS
AT WORK.

Never one to drop a challenge, Ofeimun was stung out of the *akaraba* spell that had seen to those lean years (only, seven then!).

**Odia Ofeimun,
DREAMS AT WORK
AND OTHER POEMS,
57pp.**

**A FEAST OF
RETURN/UNDER
AFRICAN SKIES,
66pp.**

**LONDON LETTER
AND OTHER POEMS,
64pp.,
Hornbill House,
Lagos, 2000.**