

# Whether You Call Yourself A 'Political

**BIYI BANDELE** is British-based Nigerian writer, dramatist and filmmaker, who trained at the University of Ife, Ile-Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University). His creative credits include *Burma Boy* (novel), *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Fifty* (films) besides other stage productions. In this wide-ranging interview with **OLATOUN WILLIAMS** of *Borders – Africanist & Global Interviews*, Bandele takes the reader through the gamut of his artistic experiences

**You are an Egba man from Abeokuta in the South-West of Nigeria. How did you come to be born and bred in Kafanchan in the North of Nigeria?**

**M**y grandfather on my dad's side was an engineer with the Railways. He started with the Railways when the lines were being built from the South-West of Nigeria to the North. My dad and his siblings were born in Minna and Zaria. But my grandfather was a proud Egba man and liked to cite the names of famous people like the Kutis, Wole Soyinka, who come from Abeokuta. He sent all his kids back there for their education.

**And what was it like being raised in Kafanchan?**

We grew up speaking many languages: Yoruba, English, Hausa and Tiv. I also spoke the language spoken locally in Kafanchan. It wasn't that I was particularly gregarious, you learned these languages by osmosis; they were part of the air we breathed. Kafanchan was very cosmopolitan. I remember going to Abeokuta for the first time after growing up on Abeokuta mythology and not understanding a word anyone was saying! I spoke Yoruba but they only spoke Egba, which I didn't understand at all. No one spoke pidgin; the only English I heard was Standard English. I only got something like the cosmopolitan Kafanchan experience when I came to Lagos in the early 1990s.

**Your grandfather had a sad and ironic part to play in your father's conscription into the army to fight in World War II. Tell us about that.**

Running off to fight in World War II was an act of rebellion for my dad because he had fallen out with his dad, my grandfather. He joined a special force of the Nigerian Regiment called The Chindits who were commissioned to fight in Burma. When my grandfather died suddenly in 1945, my dad thought the news was an April Fool's joke because he heard it on April 1. When he realised it wasn't a joke, the death was so shocking to him he had a nervous breakdown. That combined with the stress of fighting in Burma. It was harrowing. They had to kill people! He was flown back to Nigeria in a straight jacket. **How and when did you start writing?**

Three things turned me into a writer. Witnessing my father after the Burma campaign was a major factor. As I said, he was psychologically badly affected by the experience. He suffered from flashbacks and became violent. I remember my mother picking me up in the middle of the night once when I was a baby and saying, 'He's started again. Let's go to your grandmother's.' But when he was ok, my dad was a charmer and a great dancer! From the age of about six or seven, he regularly took me to the library. That was a major contributor to my development as a writer. I discovered magic in that library. And my Dad was a great storyteller. That helped. He was a nutter. His idea of a party trick was to bring out live scorpions. He thought that was funny. Even as a kid, I knew it wasn't.



Bandele

**In *Burma Boy*, the lead character, Ali Banana, suffered from a nervous breakdown. In what other ways did your father's experience of World War II inform *Burma Boy*?**

The only similarity between Ali Banana and my father is the nervous breakdown. Ali Banana is fiction, total fiction created for comic relief. I had another character in development based on my dad but the character was dead! I realised then that I hadn't known my dad as well as I thought. He told all these stories but they weren't autobiographical at all. They weren't personal. To a large extent, *Burma Boy* was made possible by stories we were told from friends of my Dad, who had also been in Burma. That helped significantly in developing the book.

I was thinking about Ali Banana's breakdown recently when I adapted *Burma Boy* for the stage. It will be on next year, 2019. People were upset by the way I ended the book – with a nervous breakdown. I tried a different ending but it didn't work. The breakdown was the only truthful way I knew how to end it.

**In what way, if any, did you use *Burma Boy* as a tool of political engagement with your readers?**

My daughter was born in 2002. I phoned a family friend who lived in Jos. I asked her to go to Kafanchan to break the news of Temitayo's birth to my mum. She got there to discover my mum had just died. I got news that my mother had died three days after she was born. I spent that period of time see-sawing between these crazy emotions: insane happiness because of

my daughter's birth and feeling grief, being really hit hard by my mum's death. I was very close to her.

I looked at my daughter and saw that she wouldn't know her grandparents on my side. Her grandfather, my dad, died when I was 14. I wanted her to know about them so I decided to first write about her grandfather. And at some point, I want to write a book about my mum. So, back to your question, the motive for writing *Burma Boy* wasn't political; it was personal.

**In the book, did you in any way address the fact that your dad and the Nigeria Regiment and the Kings Rifles, all these Africans, were fighting a war that had nothing to do with them?**

When it was in script form, I remember showing it to people who read it and said, 'These Africans who went to Burma to fight someone else's war, they should be angry.' With the benefit of hindsight, if I was going to write it that way, you know, impose my own views on the characters, then they would be angry, but my dad wasn't angry at all. Burma was the proudest thing he ever did in his life as far as he was concerned. He would have been outraged with anyone who told him to be angry. He thought he was fighting Hitler. *Burma Boy* was well received but it would have been even better received if I had played that game of saying they were pissed off because they were going to fight someone else's war. But it would have been a lie.

**So you wouldn't term any of what you have**

**written political writing?**

I am a very political writer but I don't go throwing slogans around. When you write, you take a stand. Whether you call yourself a 'political writer' or not, writing is political. **You have adapted the novel for the stage and we look forward to seeing it next year. What about a TV adaptation?**

I had meetings with a broadcaster here in the U.K. after the publication of the book. I was interested in getting him to adapt *Burma Boy* for the TV. Eventually at one of the meetings, an executive producer asked me if I'd seen *Lawrence of Arabia* and expressed his love for the film. I agreed that it was a great film. A few days later, I understood what he was alluding to: a white guy going to save the Arabs from themselves. In *Burma Boy*, there is an Englishman, Brigadier Orde Charles Wingate, who created the Chindits, a specialised force trained to penetrate behind enemy lines. The Nigerian Regiment was part of that force. Basically, the executive producer would have been happy to produce a TV adaptation with Wingate in the role of the protagonist.

**I'm astonished! Is that kind of imperialism still alive in the U.K.?**

I was shocked then, but I wouldn't be now. We're in a post-Brexit world. Brexit has opened my eyes. People pretend. Well, they don't pretend. Sooner or later they tell you what they think.

**The Burma Campaign has been rightly termed the 'least documented and most brutal theatre' of World War II. There's your own impressive and important recording of it, but what are your thoughts on other efforts to memorialize the 12th Battalion Nigeria Regiment, which fought so courageously and resourcefully with the Chindits?**

I don't know of any other efforts to memorialize the Nigeria Regiment but that doesn't mean they don't exist.

**What about Barnaby Phillips's book, *Another Man's War*?**

Barnaby came to interview me when I was living in Notting Hill Gate with a cameraman. During the long interview, he saw a copy of *Burma Boy* on my bookshelf. Then, about three years later, he called me to say he was doing a documentary about a man called Isaac Fadoyebo who had fought in Burma. He had basically been inspired by my book. I loved the documentary. He later converted it into a book, which I haven't read, but I know there are parallels between his character, Isaac Fadoyebo and my fictional character, Ali Banana.

**Barnaby's book is more of a history book. He provides a detailed account of the Burma campaign but I felt, ultimately, that in his own book, the Burma Campaign served to a large extent as a window onto Nigeria's colonial and post-colonial history. It is very broad in its focus.**

When I started writing *Burma Boy*, initially, I was so overwhelmed by the wealth of history out there I thought I wasn't going to write the book. When I started writing it, it was going to be about everyone – the Nigerians, the East Africans, about everybody! But as I was writing, I realised it didn't have a focus, a centre. And then I remembered why I wanted to write it; it was to be about my dad. Then I said, ok, just go for the small focus.

**It was a brilliant and powerful book, Biyi. The way you captured the ferocity and intensity of the Burma episode. I remember it well. Congratulations. You use surrealism liberally in your art. Brixton Stories comes to mind, *The Man Who Came In From The Back of Beyond* and *Burma Boy*. A scholar I admire, Jen Westmoreland Bouchard, believes the surrealism in your art represents your**

# Writer' Or Not, Writing Is Political

sense of 'diasporic unbelonging' and in her well-viewed essay (Academia.edu), she compares your literary art with the visual art of celebrated artist, Yinka Shonibare, because of this striking and common feature. Your thoughts?

I have never heard that before. Yinka Shonibare is a friend of mine and I'm a big fan of his work but it would not have occurred to me in a million years to think that there are similarities in our work. I don't reject that description. I'm just saying it wouldn't have occurred to me.

**What about 'diasporic unbelonging'?**

I was having a conversation with my daughter a few weeks ago. I said to her that at some point in my life, I've been an insider-outsider but at most points I've been an outsider. I wasn't complaining; I was just trying to describe myself to her. Where I was born, in Kafanchan, was home. I knew no other place but my surname was Thomas (Bande-Thomas) and as soon as people knew my first name and my surname, they knew I came from a Christian home. Immediately, I became an outsider. I didn't speak Hausa with an accent. I spoke Yoruba with an Hausa accent but I didn't know that until I got to Grammar School in Abeokuta. The kids called me 'mullah.' They took the mickey out of me a lot. It was done in love - I was like a mascot - but it still made me feel like an outsider. (laughter) Then many years later, I moved to the U.K. You know, because of my outsider status, home is everywhere for me. Home is where my daughter is. Here. That's home.

**Fascinating perspectives, Biyi...**

Quite often when I tell people about my life, they say, wow, you should be in therapy. I've come to the realisation that my idea of what's normal doesn't coincide with other people's notions of normality. I wouldn't have my life any other way. It's a richer way of being.

**That's beautiful, Biyi! But you now see why someone - an informed person - would compare your artistic expression to Yinka Shonibare's? Think of the *Diary of the Victorian Dandy*. An African man is not who you would expect to find in that position - it's a real surprise - but he looks so completely at home! (laughter from Bande) Winning the International Student Play script competition led to your migration to the UK in 1990 and - effectively - launched your career in theatre. Since then you've written and staged many including: *Rain*, *Two Horsemen*, *Marching for Fausa*, *Brixton Stories*, *Oroonoko*. Share up to three of your most memorable moments from your theatre practice in the U.K.**

I did a stage adaptation of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in the late 90s. It was an unexpected success. Chuck Mike, an African-American, who taught me at University of Ife, directed it. It opened as part of the London International Theatre Festival and at a theatre in the West End. Kids from an inner-city black school came to see the play. There's a scene when Okonkwo goes to kill his son after a deep love relationship built into the drama; one of the kids, a little boy, about 14 years old - he'd never been to the theatre before - jumped on stage and attacked Okonkwo! I don't know how it happened, whether he thought it was really happening or whether he was just caught up in the moment. (laughter) We had to stop the play.

Another memorable moment was during the opening night of *Marching for Fausa*. It was my first major play and my first at the Royal Court. Annie Hasseldine directed it. An amazing woman. Two members of the cast had had a tiff off-stage, which they carried onto the stage. They started beating the hell out of each other in a scene, which contained opportunity for improvisation which is how Annie directed it. Actors who weren't in the scene had to come on the scene to separate them. I was dying in the audience! Annie turned round, grabbed my hand, saw me shaken and said, 'Biyi darling, the audience doesn't know it's not in the script'. She was right! The audience spontaneously broke into applause because it was so real! (laughter)

**By migrating to the U.K. in the 1990s, you escaped the onslaught of the military years, didn't you?**

No. I didn't escape. I travelled back to Nigeria every year and experienced my own run-in with the military. During Abacha's rule, Wole Soyinka was wanted dead or alive. He had to escape; so he jumped on a motorbike and found his way to the U.K. Just before coming home one time, I saw Prof. He had a request. He asked if I would visit a colleague of his and bring back a document for him. I agreed.

The document was on a floppy disk. Someone must have tipped off airport security because they stopped me and took me to an underground room at the airport. There's a whole network of underground passages in the airport. Because Wole Soyinka was a wanted man, I realised what I was doing, taking the document to him, was dangerous. I put the floppy disk in my shirt pocket deliberately - hiding it in plain sight. They searched me, put me through an x-ray machine. I had taken

the floppy out of my shirt pocket and put it on the desk in front of me - again hiding it in plain sight. The security men interrogated me about Soyinka. I said, yes, I'd seen him. He had come to see my play at the Battersea Art Centre. When they asked what we discussed, I told them "We discussed the play". (laughter)

**Did they rough you up?**

No. They were very polite and very friendly. Hyper-educated. They were just trying to catch me out. They eventually let me go with apologies, about half an hour before my flight was due to take off.

**What happened to the floppy disk?**

It was still on the table, untouched.

**So hiding it in plain sight worked!**

Well, yes... It was only after sometime in the air that my hands started shaking. That was when I realised what I'd just lived through! (laughter)

**At least you had the floppy disk! Did you feel like a hero?**

No. I was scared s\*\*\*\*. I didn't feel like a hero. (laughter)

**Tell us a little about studying drama at University of Ife in the 1980s.**

Ok. There was a girl; I was absolutely in love with her. She was studying English. I was studying Drama. The Drama department was next to the university zoo so they called it the zoo. That tells you what they thought of us, the drama students. She liked me, and she told me she liked me but she made it clear she could only go out with me if I changed to Law! (laughter)

**The military dealt a deathblow to the arts in Nigeria. So, what happened to your peers who studied Drama with you? You migrated to the U.K. and remained very visibly in the field, but what were their own outcomes?**

The military dealt a deathblow to the entire system. My friends went into various fields like advertising, business. Some went into academia.

**Between the year 2000 - 2002, you were the Judith E. Wilson Fellow at Churchill College, Cambridge here in the U.K. Was that a return to an academic setting after so many years of practice? Share some of that experience with us.**

It was great! At the high table where we ate every day, we had amazing conversations with some of the brightest human beings on earth: physicists, mathematicians. I loved being there but I also realised that I was an artist not an academic.

**What's the main difference?**

Well, when I read an essay and someone goes to great lengths to legitimise everything they write by citing this person or that person, that's academia. Artists, we go out on a limb which means quite often we are so wrong but when you're right, we create something new. I lectured in Drama but I was given the freedom to do things in my own way. I was invited to stay on and I was tempted to...

**You're a natural teacher then?**

I love teaching but I was turning towards directing round about that time and I knew that if I stayed on at Cambridge, the directing wouldn't happen. The ideal scenario for me would be to teach and retain an active theatre practice. There's a security in the predictability of an academic environment which is conducive to sanity unlike the kind of free-lance work I do in which there are no givens. It demands far more energy.

Let me give you an example. Recently, I was hanging out with a filmmaker friend of mine, Akin Omotoso, here in London. In May when I was in New York, I had spent time with him and his sister, Yewande. I was telling him about my new film and he was surprised. He said, "You didn't mention this to me in New York." I told him it was because in May, I didn't know I was going to write it! It's a crazy way to live! (laughter)

**Your detour into films has been a glamorous affair, hasn't it?**

It wasn't a detour! I wrote my first screenplay in 1992. I'd come to live in London in 1990. This was more or less a year after my first stage play was put on. I've been writing plays and screenplays for a long time.

**I remember *Bad Boy Blues*. Clive Owen starred in it. didn't he?**

Yes, he did. But before *Bad Boy Blues*, I'd written a screenplay, which Danny Boyle directed called *Not Even God Is Wise Enough*.

**How did you get into directing?**

I didn't know I was interested in directing until I met Danny Boyle at the Royal Court (Sloane Square) where he'd started as a stage-hand. There was nothing abstract about the way he did things. After working with him on *Not Even God Is Wise Enough*, I started getting commissions to write screenplays. I was working with directors who were not good directors compared to Danny and I thought I could direct better than they did. Especially when I saw things being done the wrong way. I'd complain to Danny who told me to stop complaining and go do it myself!

But it was extraordinarily difficult as a writer to tell people I wanted to direct. I'm black and I'm Nigerian. I think that had a lot to do with their reaction. When you are black, everything you do is a statement. For me, I wanted to do it and discovered I loved doing it. I had this joy being on the set, you know. I've heard of writers who suffered nervous breakdowns when they were trying to direct. That's incredible! Why would they suffer nervous breakdowns from directing?

If you're a director, you're working with lots of people and you have so many days to shoot the film. People are coming up to you constantly asking for your opinions. And these opinions have consequences. Real consequences. Some people are paralysed by having to make decisions because being held responsible for consequences terrifies them. But I love it.

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