

Missing in Action: Fathers Making a Quick Exit in Mojisola Adebayo's *Muhammad Ali and Me*

By Deirdre Osborne and Mojisola Adebayo

Abstract:

Set in an English foster home in the mid 1970's, *Muhammad Ali and Me* tells the story of Mojito, a child who is abandoned by her father and grows up in care. The space her father leaves is filled through a fantastical friendship with athlete and activist, boxer and dancer, pugilist and poet, hero and hate figure, sportsman and disabled man, Muslim and magician, the legendary, Muhammad Ali. *Muhammad Ali and Me* follows the parallel lives of this gay girl child and a Black male hero, tracing their struggle for survival and self definition in a system set against them. The play invites the audience to consider the complex relationship between children, absent fathers and father figures; the establishment, war and Islamic masculinity; the Black community and gay identity; the USA and urban Britain today, through what Adebayo describes as an 'Afri-Queer' multi-media accessible storytelling style. Deirdre Osborne provides an introduction which examines Adebayo's work by investigating representations of sport in plays by Black writers; Black, Mixed and 'trans' racial identity and the experience of the care system in performance; Black male heroism and the marginalisation of Black women writers on the British stage.

Introduction (by Deirdre Osborne)

1 "What am I doing writing about all these men?" asks playwright and performer Mojisola Adebayo, a woman whose personal and artistic profiles repeatedly defy and redefine the constraining categories of social and cultural norms. (Adebayo 2010) Reflecting that her work seems to be thematically fixed upon searching for the unattainable father and maelstroms of maleness – a dynamic at odds with her counter-patriarchal politics - Adebayo finds herself disarmed by this discovery. Does a woman writer have a duty to write good roles for women?

2 As with Adebayo's previous well-received monodrama *Moj of the Antarctic* (2008), where a sole woman actor plays multiple roles, *Muhammad Ali and Me* articulates controversial and confrontational topics. *Muhammad Ali and Me* takes epic themes centred around the quest for self-validity using iconographic heroes, survival against the odds, the havoc wrought by violence (by the state or domestically) upon an individual's life, family fracture and betrayal - and directs them through a very local lens. The play represents the experiences of a South London girl Mojito from aged seven to forty as she struggles to cope with growing up in a foster family where she is renamed Susan by the foster mother and sexually abused by her son. Her coping strategy for surviving in this unbearable situation is to identify with Muhammad Ali, his trajectory to fame as a boxing prodigy, his trials at the

hands of American racism and his ultimate transcendence of the tribulations he faced to become one of the most beloved and celebrated figures of the twentieth century and beyond.

3 The male-dominated world of boxing might appear a curious choice for a woman writer and performer. Adebayo's exploration of familial violence (from both biological and surrogate sources) and her accompanying experimentation with form, style, and subject matter in its aesthetic execution means that Ali as poetic pugilist serves as the perfect and poignant parallel for her protagonist's life performance. This is further enhanced by the connections between performing (and fighting) in the ring and performing in the theatre, where years of training hone one's skills for the physical delivery of what is always a unique performance in front of spectators. Moreover, sport has traditionally been a cultural arena in which black people both in the US and UK have sustained visibility and the use of boxing as a central thematic and staging motif evokes Howard Sackler's *The Great White Hope* (1967) which Ali saw and praised at the time he was resisting the draft to Vietnam and recently, Black British playwright Roy Williams's *Sucker Punch* (2010) whose staging shared with *Muhammad Ali and Me* the same conception of the audience on both sides of a ring. Sackler and Williams used boxing as a means to explore politics and in particular racism, the struggle of black men against white racist society. Adebayo's treatment offers a more nuanced and subtle representation of under-represented lives as this is reconfigured through the in-betweenness experienced by a mixed race female protagonist whose story is beyond the typical national or familial narratives that are habitually staged. In doing so, she asserts black, mixed and queer experience as more universal than marginal.

4 Black is an identification that many people of mixed origin, African-descent have adopted often due to political and social frameworks that limit or deny the possibility of metissage and mixing in order to preserve the power binary of black and white. This is differently played out in different geographical contexts. Gary Younge (2010) has insightfully explored this in relation to the most powerful mixed race person in the world today, Barack Obama, an American man with a white mother (whose white parents raised him) and a black father from an African country (not African American) who deserted the family. America's one drop rule means as Lenny Kravitz notes, "You don't have to deny the White side of you if you're mixed. Accept the blessing of having the advantage of two cultures, but understand you are Black. In this world if you have one spot of Black blood, you are *Black*." (Hoyles and Hoyles 2006: 14)

5 Britain's long history of problematic and uneasy responses to non-white people means the routes to self-definition for Black and mixed people have not been smooth but in relation

to mixedness, this is intensified as prevailing essentialist paradigms (which reduce or deny the experience of multiple identities) demand an affiliation to a single selfhood. Overwhelmingly, contemporary Black British women writers such as SuAndi, Jackie Kay, Charlotte Williams, Joanna Traynor, Maud Sulter, Zadie Smith and Leone Ross have explored these multiple identities of mixedness across literary genres demonstrating a unique British manifestation of African diasporic inheritances produced by writers who embody a protean identity in terms of racial and cultural knowledge and standpoints.

6 “Trans-raised” is a term coined by writer and performer Valerie Mason-John to describe a generation of people who grew up in Britain in the 1960s and 70s who self-identify as black or mixed race but were reared by white people: adoptive or foster parents or in white-run care institutions. This distinct cohort within the UK population characterises a period of British socio-cultural history which will probably never be repeated due to the less prevalent practice today of placing black children with white families, which Mason-John explains is now “something to avoid wherever and whenever possible.” (Mason-John 2007:339) As the primary caregiver in most children’s early lives (whether as birth mothers or caretakers in foster homes), white womanhood is the first experience many dual heritage British children have. Nearly twenty years ago Tizard and Phoenix’s research explored “the racial identities of young people of mixed black and white parentage”. To the question posed, “Which Mixed-Parentage Young People Identified Themselves as Black?” They report that, Defining oneself as ‘black’ was associated with a more politicised set of attitudes towards racism, for example, defining it as discriminatory behaviour by white people towards black people. [...] 60 percent of the sample had a positive racial identity. [...] [N]early three-quarters thought of themselves as ‘mixed’ rather than black. They were proud of their mixed parentage. [...] [P]articularly in their ability to feel comfortable with both black and white people, and to see both points of view. (Tizard, Phoenix 1993: 161)

7 However, in the time in which Adebayo sets her play, the 1970s, it is clear that white society perceives mixedness as black. As Tizard and Phoenix also found, their participants were not always accepted as black by black people. Thus, looking into society, they see no reflection or validation of themselves. [...] For those who regarded themselves as black this was a disturbing experience, which in some ways parallels the rejection in the last century of mixed-parentage people who tried to ‘pass’ as white. Further, opting for a black identity entails discounting the white part of one’s inheritance. *Most (but not all) of the young people’s closest attachments were to their mothers, who were generally white.* [my italics] (Tizard,Phoenix 1993: 164)

8 As first hand recipient of this 60s/70s social policy, Adebayo renders the individual human consequences of emotional and cultural impoverishment wrought by being trans-raised, in her protagonists' searches not only for an authentic sense of validated social self as coupled with an artistic identity, but she also develops a different perspective towards acts of ancestral reclamation. Adebayo draws upon autobiographical elements to craft her unique responses to contextual and experiential factors and yet, is clear that the work is only ever *based upon* such influences and is not her *only* identity-experience. It is material which she consciously and creatively shapes as it serves her artistic design and hence informs but is not contingent to her aesthetics. The parameters of Mason-John's "trans-raised" can be extended beyond the late-twentieth-century, social services category (Trans-racial-adoption), to add the "trans" dimension of mixed-origin experience to (looked-after) children born to parents of different or intermixed racial lineages. These children have similarly, historically disturbed any straightforward categories of upbringing and cultural affiliation. The conundrums of political identification and self-terming produced, was frequently at odds with social nomenclature - which aimed to do this identifying *for* them - indicated by the indiscriminateness of 1980s social policies where black and Asian people for example, were housed under the same (discriminatory), multicultural umbrella. "Trans" thus embraces dual strands of subjectivity: one's social scope and one's biological compass as they are woven together through the twist of cultural creativities.

9 Adebayo's pioneering experiential aesthetics is in no small part due to her placement beyond the shared, rehearsed narratives of socio-cultural identity. Her disenfranchisement, subordination or displacement from those foundational stories which tell us both who we are and who we are not, is distinctively refracted through the prism of race. Set apart from the white-dominated canon *and* its black British challengers, she operates within a space of being originally dislocated from hetero-social norms of family and other black people yet, also absorbed intimate, intuitive, knowledge of white cultural institutions. The daughter of a white Danish mother and a black Nigerian father who identifies as black British, Adebayo states, "Being raised in care might mean we have a certain awareness, an access to a certain education. We have to negotiate our way within a white institution from an early age – it's much more acute in a children's home. Your tools are sharpened – a little like insider information [...] *we know how to be white.*"(my italics) (Osborne 2009: 8). Trans-raised children are thus paradoxically conversant with the norms of whiteness. I write paradoxically because these very norms (with attendant pathways to longevity and critical legitimacy) are

processes which have historically sidelined or discounted black writers' and performers' work in Britain's cultural landscape.

10 The relationship between identity obliteration and reformulation via casework files testifies to the power of the pen in the lives of looked-after children. It is noteworthy that trans-raised writers have found their own routes to authorship that reworks the social services paperwork that initially defined them. Adebayo shapes her experiences with compelling resourcefulness to acknowledge the fine line between drawing upon autobiography to assert a disregarded or marginalised identity and yet, not allowing the sociological reduction of her work to being a didactic indicator of social issues to dominate its reception. An advocate of Pan-Africanism, Black British playwright Kwame Kwei-Armah accounts for the term black as a 'catalyst for debate' and has commented upon what he feels to be the 'chameleon-like nature of Black British experience'. (Kwei-Armah 2004) Adebayo's female protagonists are chameleons, negotiating not only their lack of moorings to formal family structures as they are raised by stand-in parents care of the social services but also readings of them laden with legacies of passing, and heteronormativity. Although beyond the discursive parameters of this introduction, it should be noted that the multi-tasking performance demands of the roles of Mojito and Corner Man, (the two main characters) and the integration of a British Sign Language performer into the playing space, further serve to challenge assumptions, expectations, and stereotyping regarding age, gender, sexuality, race and disability in relation to casting and performing.

11 In staking Mojito's survival of her trauma to that of a vocal, defiant black male, Ali, who can only ever be her imaginary ally, Adebayo testifies to the vital lifeline that creativity plays in surviving annihilating forces. Adebayo might well be seeking to construct the powerful black male father figure that she confesses she will never have or has had. Ultimately, although this remains viable only in the ephemeral context of performance, Adebayo stages a black male hero who triumphs in a contemporary British theatre context where such depictions are rare. This disturbing fact is no better illustrated than by the number of plays produced in London in the new millennium which featured a young black male character dying of wounds, centre-stage. In 2008 alone, four such examples were: *Frontline* by Che Walker, (The Globe Theatre), *Gone Too Far* by Bola Agbaje, (Royal Court Theatre) and the film of Roy Williams' *Fallout* (aired on Channel 4 as part of the *Disarming Britain* season on gun and knife crime). With a different approach, Debbie Tucker Green's *random* records the teenager's murder off-stage. Arguably, the successful break through into mainstream theatre of the new millennial playwrights, Kwei-Armah (*Elmina's Kitchen*, *Fix*

Up) and Williams (*Little Sweet Thing*, *Joe Guy*, *Angel House*, *Category B*) resides in their gangsta, drugs, dysfunctional families, male violence and crime-related themes. Furthermore, theatre reviewers' tendencies to focus upon these themes, overshadows other possible critical receptions or other possible dramatisations of black experiences.

12 Black women's writing in British theatre has traditionally experienced little mainstream success when compared to that experienced by white women (since the end of the twentieth century) and in the new millennium, black male playwrights. Although limited opportunities exist per se for Black dramatists and performers within the compass of contemporary theatre, when sex-gender dimensions are highlighted, the marginality of women is pronounced. Notwithstanding the fact that Jamaican feminist poet, playwright, journalist and broadcaster, Una Marson wrote the very first play by a Black woman to be performed in London's West End, (*At What a Price*, Scala Theatre) in 1933, the fact today that merely two Royal Court Theatre commissionees, Debbie Tucker Green and Bola Agbaje have been allowed passage through the current hegemonic sieve proves that Black and mixed women still do not receive the nurturing mentorship nor critical recognition that corresponds to their artistic innovativeness. It is not perhaps a "duty to write good roles for women" but more a fundamental necessity to *right* this imbalance *and* write!

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Selected Extracts From *Muhammed Ali And Me*

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Muhammad Ali and Me was first produced in 2008 at Oval House Theatre in London. It was directed by Sheron Wray, designed by Rajha Shakiry and performed by the following cast:

Mojitola (M) and Muhammad Ali (Ali) were played by the same female actor – Mojisola Adebayo (the Fighter).

All the other speaking parts were played one male actor – Charlie Folorunsho (the Corner Man).

A British Sign Language interpreter was fully integrated into the show and – Jacqui Beckford (The Referee).

The following extract is from early in the play on Mojitola's 5th birthday. Mojitola is playing outside when Daddy calls her in.

Daddy: (*Calling from the balcony*) MO-JI-TO-LA!

M: (*calling up to him*) Daddy I did my sums already it was just a little bit hard!... (*She is consumed with her new bicycle*).

Daddy: MOJITOLA! Come along!

M: Aaaw... is it time to pray *now*?!?

Daddy: Ah-ah! (*a telling off*).

(*M reluctantly goes inside with her bike*).

M: Is it time for prayers?

Daddy: You do not shout about prayer in front of the whole of Colchester Court. Do you understand?

M: (*She doesn't understand*) Yes Daddy, not really.

Daddy: Be seated.

M sits. Daddy stands. He addresses the child with the following speech in a certain pained formality but trying to keep emotional control.

Daddy: There are rumours of war. Home is calling me. You are no longer a little baby. You will be starting school in September. You know your ABC. You count. I have seen you can multiply. You will eventually divide. I am satisfied I have made good progress with you, despite all of the... distractions. From now on England will provide. She will be your mother. You will receive the best education in the world. As for time outside of school, I have appointed an English lady to be responsible for your welfare. Mrs Groom. In all probability there will be many African children like you there. We are often faced with few alternatives in this life. My father too had his own struggles. But step by step, by the grace of God, we do our best. (*He looks at her during the following*). I have invested a substantial sum in Mrs Groom. So as we step to the door tomorrow morning, do not cry. If you cry, you will be severely punished. Do you understand? (*M shakes her head, 'no'*). Remember *who you are*. Act – always, as a good girl. Eat no pork. Study hard. Stay away from boys.

M: Yes Daddy. (*Beat*) When are you coming back?

Daddy: At the right time. God willing. (*Small pause*).

M: Daddy when?

Daddy: Be upstanding for scripture.

(*Daddy indicates 'Get the bible'. M gets the large book. She is upset*).

M: Daddy... Is it a *story*?

(*Small pause. Then with a rare tenderness...*)

Daddy: No my daughter, it is not a story.

The following extract is taken from where Mojito's new foster parent, Angie Groom, (a white woman, played by Charlie Folorunsho) leaves Mojito alone for the first time with her grown up son Jimmy (also played by Charlie Folorunsho).

Mummy Angie: Jimmy! Make sure the little one settles in. We'll call her 'Susan'. I'm off down the Elephant with this lot. I'll be back in time for the Spaghetti Western at 3 and if you don't mind por favour I plan to place my plates of meat on that poof with a Peter Syvestant and a nice cuppa Rosie and I don't expect to hear a peep out of any of yous. Comprehendo? *(To M who looks baffled)* Didn't they teach you English? *(Then softer)*. Uncle Jim'll see you right.

Jimmy sits with M. They watch 1970's children's TV.

Jimmy: Ha, ha... (he starts to sing the theme tune from the following advert) Everyone's a 'Fruit and Nut' case... I like a nice bit a chocolate. *(He stares at M)*. So how long you gonna be with my old Mum I wonder?

M: Until my daddy gets back from Africa.

Jimmy: Africa? Messy. Could be some time... You got pretty little hands. Bet they feel soft too. *(He continues looking at M. Time passes)*. Touch this. *(Gently indicates his penis)* Come on. Let me feel how soft. Touch it. Come on Susan. It won't bite. *(A moment of sexual abuse is symbolised. M starts to shake. She screams an invocation)*.

M: Daddy!

Daddy come back!

Save me!

Daaaaaaaaaaaaaddddddyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!!!

She shakes uncontrollably until she freezes on a loud boxing ring bell. A huge puff of smoke, a pyrotechnic, lights go wild. Muhammad Ali (played by female actor also playing Mojito) suddenly appears. Jimmy magically disappears....

Ali *(played by M throughout)*: TIME OUT!

M: Muhammad Ali?! What, what are you doing here?!? I thought you was in Zaire!

Ali: My rumble in the jungle's over with a long time ago. I don't fight no more. I have Parkinson's disease. *(Ali starts shadow boxing and dancing)*

M: I saw you arguing with him on the tele. Did he make you sick?

Ali: No, it has nothing to do with that old Yorkshire bro. Parkinson's means I shake, and over that I have no control. Some said I was traumatised in the boxing ring but that, unlike my title, is disputed. Sure the fight game didn't make it no better. But I'm done fightin. I don't

move too good or talk too good and I put on a little weight, but don't you dare feel sorry for me, I'm not bitter. And I'm still pretty. Pretty as a girl... *(Ali stops to look in the mirror. Then takes a piece of rope and starts doing a rope trick)*. I mostly do magic now, give away my money, try to be a good Muslim: defend women, look out for orphans, tend to those in trouble, care for the sick, how do you like my trick? *(Ali completes the rope trick)*.

M: Wick-ed!

Ali: Now its late, and time for all God's children to go to sleep.

M: Don't go! Everybody goes. *(Trying to amuse him into staying)* Last night I turned off the light switch I was in bed before the light was out. *(M jumps into bed)*. I'm faaaast!

Ali: You baaaad! *(He goes to leave, she stops him with her words)*

M: Ali I get really scared. Sometimes I wake up in the night and I don't know where I am. And I don't know who I am. And it looks like there's a man in the corner of the room but I don't know if he's real or if he's there. Can you tell me a story to help me sleep please? Sometimes in nice times my Daddy tells me stories...*(Daddy re-emerges as an African Griot / storyteller. It is as if Mojitola is dreaming her father. He wears an African hat and sash. African instrumental music e.g. kora)* ...like about Moses, the little baby in the basket and the burning bush and the two mums and the man splitting their child in half and Samson cutting his hair and loosing all his strength and the writing on the wall and the lion's den and locusts and plagues and Pharoahs and slaves and techni-coloured coats and dreams and parting the seas and the salt and the thou shalt not and the wife of Lot who turned to stone when she looked back at Sodom and Gomorrah with the men and the men and the women and the women laying down together with the angel and all stuff like that... But can you tell me a new one please?

Ali: Sure we'll tell you a story - the greatest of all times!

Ali hands over the storytelling to Daddy as Griot who in turn tells the story of Muhammad Ali...

Later, there is a merging of Daddy telling the life story of Muhammad Ali, Muhammad Ali boasting and baiting journalists, Jimmy attempting to abuse Mojitola upstairs.

Daddy Griot: Out of 21 fights,

17 of the Prince's predictions were precise.

Ali: I am a scientist! I am a scholar!

Daddy: The sports scribes hated him, the press just baited him -

Ali: It's scientific evidence! You ignore it at your peril!

Mummy A (*calling and watching TV*): For christ sakes will you shut your cake hole!!

Ali: I am greatest. The best that's ever been born!

Jimmy (*in M's bedroom*): Can I touch you?... I just want to touch you.

Ali: I am the greatest. I'm in a world of my own.

Jimmy: Let me touch you... I just want to touch you.

Ali: As pretty as girl I'll be the champion of the world! The champion of the world –

Jimmy: - who's a pretty little girl?

Mummy Angie: (*Annoyed because she can't hear the TV*) I don't Adam n' Eve it.

M: See me... Save me...

Mummy Angie: I don't friggin believe this!

Jimmy: Its only my thumb.

M: Come back Daddy!

Jimmy: Come on bitch come on...

M: Where's my mummy?

Jimmy: A little taste, a little tongue.

M: Why did you leave me?!

Jimmy: A teeny touch won't hurt.

M: I need you ALIIIIIIII! (*Mojitola shakes vigorously which summons Ali again*)

Jimmy: You little Black cunt.

Ali / M: You can't touch me! Nobody can touch me! Your hands can't catch what your eyes can't see!

Mummy Angie: I am trying to watch the TELE!!!

Years later, another birthday, Mojitola has been getting into trouble at school. She attempts to phone her father in Nigeria, from the London foster home but another relative picks up the phone. Simultaneously Muhammad Ali hears a phone ring in his apartment in the United

States, picks up, speaks to a journalist who is giving him news about being called to fight in Vietnam. Again, Mojisola plays Mojitola and Muhammad Ali, Charlie plays all other parts.

Ali: Ali...

M: Hello, Daddy?

(Pause)

M: Daddy?

Ali: Don't call me that.

Journalist: Mr Ali.

M: Is it you?

Ali: Yes.

M: I want him not you.

Ali: Who are you?

Journalist: Sports Illustrated.

M: I need to talk to him. They might suspend me. And it's my birthday.

Journalist: How do you feel?

M: I really need to talk to my dad.

Ali: About what?

Journalist: About being re-classified for the army?

M: I'm going fucking mad here.

Ali: What did you say?

M: You're not listening.

Journalist: A boxer on the battlefield.

M: Where is he?!

Ali: Fight-in the war, me?

M: Please! Tell me.

Journalist: They have lowered the level.

M: I don't wanna stay here.

Journalist: So are you saying won't serve?

M: No. They're are nasty to me.

Ali: How can they do this?

Journalist: It appears it was just for you.

M: At home, in school...

Ali: They said I was dumb. Why do they want me now?

M: Why you asking me? I don't know -

Ali: Because I am a Muslim! Because they're scared of me. Because I speak up for my people and they wanna stop me. Because it's the only way they can draw blood!

Journalist: Will you accept the draft?

Ali: No way!

M: This is a waste of time.

Journalist: Any further comment?

M: Just give him this message -

Ali: This conversation's over.

M: Don't hang up!

Ali: *(To someone off the phone)* Get my lawyer on the line.

M: Tell him to come back and get me! Come back -

Ali: - now!

Ali now speaks to his lawyer on the phone. The male actor puts down the phone, and speaks into a mic. He is now a TV or radio news reporter outside Ali's house. Cameras flash.

Ali: You heard the news? What the hell is going on?

News Reporter: The most disgusting character to appear on the sports scene.

Ali: How can they re-classify me when they haven't seen if I'm better or worser or smarter or dumber?

News Reporter: Join in the condemnation of this unpatriotic, loud-mouthed, bombastic individual.

Ali: For two years, they told everybody I was a nut, and made me and my parents ashamed.

News Reporter: Should be held in contempt by every patriotic American.

Ali: I don't know nothing about the war.

News Reporter: A sad apology for a man.

Ali: Yeah I know where Vietnam is, its on the TV.

News Reporter: All time jerk of the boxing world.

Ali: Asia, man.

News Reporter: A Black supremacist.

Ali: Man, I ain't got no quarrel with them Viet-cong.

News Reporter: Nothing but a yellow bellied / nigger'

Ali: *They* never called me / nigger!'

News Reporter: Self-centred spoiled brat of a child

Immediately back to the foster home. News Reporter switches to being Mummy Angie in an instant. She is fuming. M is now 16 years old.

Mummy Angie: Self centred spoilt brat of a child! You heard the latest Jimmy? It's her birthday right. So I give her record vouchers. She gives *me* a moody school report. Then she throws the present back in my face, says she didn't want vouchers for her birthday she wanted *driving lessons*! She's having a bubble bath! (*to M*) You're having a laugh. Where d'you get that idea? Ungrateful little madam. I ask ya...

[cut to later in the scene]...

Mummy Angie: Why don't you call Daddy and ask *him* to buy you driving lessons?

Jimmy: - and teach you some manners while he's at it –

Mummy Angie (*calling round the room and then picking up the phone*): "Daddy?!... Daddy?!... Daddy?!..." (*Sarcastically*) Oooh no answer. How strange...

Jimmy: Cheeky little monkey.

(*M is enraged*).

M: You only want me for the money anyway, poxy bit of money you get out of me and my *name*. If I wasn't here to look after you'd be nothing. If I wasn't here to have a go at you wouldn't even have a job. I come from a longlonglonglonglong line of

h-educated people. My grand-dad was the very first Nigerian accountant...

Jimmy: (*Overlapping M*) One banana, two banana, three banana four...

M: And my dad is an accountant too, or he will be soon when he comes back from Africa and takes his exams.

Jimmy: (*Overlapping M*) Five banana, six banana, seven banana more.

M: ...I can do anything. I can be anything. And without me and all us Black kids in care you'd be nothing. You didn't make us! We made you! I don't *come* from you! I don't *belong* to you! I don't even *look* like you. And thank God, cos for your information, read the poster, Black is Beautiful... (*M ignores Jimmy*).

Jimmy: Who you trying to convince?

M: (*ignoring him*) Black is best!

Jimmy: (*sarcastically nice*) Thought you was half Danish Princess.

M: Africa is the birth place of the human race. We built the pyramids. This ain't my *home*! This is a dirty little pre-fab meant to be knocked down after the Second World War! Dirty nasty smelly pissy little bungalow on a nasty shitty tiny little island (*indicating her small finger provocatively*) that everybody wishes was AMERICA! **Jimmy:** Now that's below the belt!

M: You'd know all about that wouldn't ya?!

Jimmy: Say that again?!

M: BELOW THE BELT!!!!

Jimmy punches M in the face. She is knocked out.

Years later, Mojitola has left home and gone to study drama at University. She has come out as gay. She has just performed in her first play. Simultaneously there are visuals of Ali's fight with George Foreman, the 'rope-a-dope' in the Rumble in the Jungle. Ali wins. Wild Applause. M takes her bow. The following dialogue M moves rapidly between playing Mojitola and Ali, the male actor moves between playing Ali's Corner Man and Mummy Angie.

Mummy Angie: (She is very emotional) Oh Susan! I always knew you had it in ya. And I always said it would come out one day. I always knew you'd grow up to be a thespian! (*pronounced like 'lesbian'*).

Ali: Yes! I am the three time champion. I'm the only man to win it three times. I fooled him with my rope-a-dope. George boxed himself out! He boxed so hard he got tired. I said George this ain't no place to get tired. I am the greatest champion of all time!

Corner Man: Of all time.

Ali: Of all time.

(*To Angie after a show*)

M: Was I pretty?

Mummy Angie: You was pretty.

M: Say it Angie! Say it!

Mummy Angie: You was pretty, you was pretty! You was the greatest.

Ali: Was I moving? Was I fighting? Was I sticking? Was I a Master?'

(*Now as themselves, 3 Black actors Mojisola, Charlie and Jacqui, celebrating Ali*)

M: Impossibilities!

Charlie: Black possibilities!

M: Pacifist,

Charlie: Antagonist,

M: Butterflies

Charlie: and bees. Necesaaaaary...

M: By any means. Contrary,

Charlie: Revolutionaaary,

M: Sexyyyyyyyy,

Charlie: Masochist.

M: Is there something I have missed?

Charlie: He's the 'smiling pugilist' [Ali as described by Marianne Moore]

Charlie & M: Eat your words!

Eat your words!

He shook up the world!

I shook up the world!

You shook up the world!

(Charlie repeats the words 'shocked the world', and 'shock' in Ali's speech below):

Ali: 'When I beat Sonny Liston I shocked the world. When I joined the Muslims I shocked the world. When I beat George Foreman I shocked the world. I am from the House of Shock'

(M starts to shake until all but her left hand is frozen. Charlie is now Mummy Angie).

Mummy Angie: Susan. Susan! What's wrong? What's happened to you? You look like you seen a ghost.

M: There's a man.

Mummy Angie: Where?

M: There's a man.

Mummy Angie: Who?

M: I don't know. I don't know who he is. Or what he means.

Mummy Angie: Susan...

M: There're a man

who sits

in the corner of my life.

The corner man.

Mojitola is now 40 years old and has become a somewhat jaded television actor. One day, after the last take, her father walks into the studio whilst she is in her dressing room. Daddy returns slowly. Like a ghost. Mojitola pops back into the studio to pick up her jacket. Daddy speaks. She hasn't noticed him until now. She is stunned.

Daddy: MO-JI-TO-LA.

M: Daddy?

Daddy: What are you doing?

M: Daddy?

Daddy: What is this place?

M: *(She looks around)* My home. *(Beat)*. Where have you been all this time?

Daddy: 'I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the March wind. What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted'.

M: I said where have you been?

Daddy: 'Again I looked and I saw all the evil that was taking place under heaven. I saw' –

M: *(finishing the sentence)* 'I saw the tears of the oppressed and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors, and they have no comforter'. Same scripture? Same script. Someone else's words. Where have you been old man?

Daddy: What did you say?... Who are you?

M: 'I can't say who I am, unless you agree I'm real'.

Daddy: What did you say? I don't think I can take any more blows.

M goes to leave, then stops and says:

M: I said... I said... *(quoting Ali)* I know where I'm going and I know the truth, and I don't have to be what you want me to be. I'm free to be what I want.

Long pause.

Mojisola & Charlie & Jacqui: Aaaaaaah.... Rumble woman rumble!

Ali: Now you're talking. Time's up. We're done. See my trick. See me. Me. We.

Ali levitates. Black out. End.







