

# Yemoja sits on my head: An interview

April is recognised internationally as Poetry Month. Inaugurated by the Academy of American Poets in 1996, it is the largest literary celebration in the world with schools, publishers, libraries, booksellers, and poets celebrating poetry's vital place in our culture. In recognition of the month, every Sunday in April **Bookends** will celebrate the work of established Jamaican poets and their work in a series of interviews by author/poet/visual artist Jacqueline Bishop.

This week, the featured poet is Opal Palmer Adisa.

Opal, I really want to start off by thanking you for your most recent collection of poems, *4-Headed Woman*, published by Tia Chucha Press, which I think is some of your strongest work to date. The poems are like pure fire and ice, and are sharp and clean. I guess my first question for you is: Can you explain the title of the collection for our readers?

As a woman, I feel as if I need at least four heads to function, and that is true for many women, as we juggle the various roles of being artist, first and foremost, then wife or partner in any domestic relationship, then professional - in my case teacher/professor - and then as mother - for me, it is mother to three and even though they are young adults and scattered, I am still on call constantly. So the title emanates from this reality, that in order for a woman in these contemporary times to be grounded, she must be in possession of at least four heads - possession is key, not just to have four heads, but be able to switch from one to the other with ease.

In these poems there are many instructions to women and girls, and you bring us, quite intimately, into the lives of women and girls. What would you hope men and



Opal Palmer Adisa

boys take away from this collection of poems?

There are many men who say they admire strong women, but in reality the admiration appears, when probed deeply, to be from a distant nostalgic place... I don't want to be admired as a strong woman because often what that means is that I am expected to handle everything, and I do, when I am really looking for partnership. I think this is true for many women who are capable, but we would like men and boys to respect our capabilities without thinking that makes us less desirable as mates or that means we can and should handle everything. I hope boys and men will love us skin-deep, and admire and respect how multi-faceted we often are, and how much we handle daily.

Many of the poems in the collection are very sensuous. There

are many poems conflating food and flowers and the female body, for example. How deliberate was all of this on your part? What is the importance of sensuality (and the centrality of sexuality) to your work?

From the very beginning, sensuality and sexuality have been central to my work, to my life, to how I show up in the world. We are sensual beings and while these days vulgarity - men humping girls like dogs in carnivals and on the dance floor is normalised as entertainment or acceptable behaviour of liberation — is sometimes appropriated for sensuality, for me there is no comparison. Growing, preparing and eating food is one of the most sensuous acts, and I certainly believe my body, women's bodies are delicious fruits that must be enjoyed, and therefore I was very deliberate about exploring and exposing

this aspect of womanhood. Women were and many still are agrarians.

Apart from perhaps Lucille Clifton and Sharon Olds, I have never read poems so breathtakingly celebratory of menstruation, even with all the complications that menstruation can mean for some women. Why do you think that menstruation remains such a taboo subject in poetry? And was it difficult for you writing so many poems on this topic?

Menstruation is taboo because despite what many of us would like to believe, the notion of woman from the *Bible* still dominates our society as evil and dirty. Growing up in Jamaica this was the general belief and a woman's power to bind a man. Many members of both genders believe this. I want to debunk this myth. I want all women and men to celebrate women's monthly decision not to carry life, but instead to nurture the earth, themselves, existence. I had great fun writing these poems and interviewing other women to explore some of the taboos and their feelings about their menses, and also researching what has been written about this topic.

In the section entitled "A Certain Time of the Month" I was struck by the fact that over 6,000 women in Puerto Rico and Haiti were, to use your terms, "guinea pigs" in "experimental biology". I wondered if you still believed that certain women's bodies retain the role of "testing sites" for various ideas and corporations?

Yes! Yes! And yes! Black women, poor women, women who are marginalised - stipulations of IMF loans to developing countries - are all connected and we are given discarded birth control pills and others, insecticides that have been taken off the markets in the metropolis as harmful to humans and infants - and are still used as testing sites; that is the hegemony of dominance.

As much as I love these poems, Opal, I found that I was often confused as to who the first person narrators of many of these poems were. Was this deliberate on your part? If yes, where you trying to conflate the narrator and implicating the reader both at the same time?

We have been taught to write one way, and I am still fighting against that way, not simply out of rebellion, but because I don't think the traditional narrative structures speak to the ethos of the Caribbean, and I am still searching to find a way to conflate and combine without being accused of switching back and forth mindlessly...it's the same argument I have with the rigid tense structure - present, past and future -

**BOOKENDS CREDITS**

- **Bookends Co-ordinator**  
Sharon Leach
- **Writers**  
Sharon Leach, Jacqueline Bishop
- **Art Director**  
Rorie Atkinson
- **Layout**  
Janice Johnson Richards

**Bookends contact information:**

**Mail:** Bookends

c/o The Jamaica Observer Ltd  
40—42 1/2 Beechwood Ave, Kgn 5

**E-mail:**

sharonleach715@hotmail.com