

WOLE SOYINKA: THE ACTIVIST AND THE WRITER

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Wole Soyinka was born on July 13, 1934 in Nigeria which is the most populous country in Africa and which has offered to the world the largest number of literary men and women in modern Africa. Soyinka is indubitably the most distinguished among them. His contribution to African drama, fiction, poetry and even to the polity has been unrivalled. It has been testified by the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to him in 1986. The Nobel committee, while awarding him the prize, cited his artistic commitment to render in literature his African culture in all its complexity. A literary critic of note Henry Louise Gates, Jr. reiterates Soyinka's concern in the following words:

The universality of our experience he never claims, he assumes. In his poetic representation of Yoruba beliefs, rituals, proverbs and history, Soyinka allows the African part to speak for the human whole. (421-24)

Soyinka states his literary philosophy in his two collections of essays, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976) and *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage* (1990). In the former book he defines literature and in the latter he states that African literature should be judged on its own terms and not by western standards. He further argues that no single African writer can represent all the Africans. There are innumerable African voices that have been recreating African life in a variety of literary forms.

Soyinka himself attempted his hand at a great variety of literary forms. As of now, Soyinka has to his credit seventeen plays, two novels, six collections of poetry, and eight non-fictional works including five memoirs. He is however chiefly known as a playwright. His basic training has been in the specialization of drama. During his years in England he worked for some time at the Royal Court Theatre in London. He was very active as a theatre personality back in Nigeria as well. He even started his own amateur theatre group called The 1960 Masks. The aim of this group was to forge a new Nigerian drama which would be in English but derive its inspiration from African performing arts. Soyinka headed the Department of Theatre Arts at the University of Ibadan for some time during 1967. Early in his career as a dramatist he demonstrated a rare ability to project traditional Nigerian themes in the English language rather than in his mother tongue Yoruba. Next to T.S. Eliot Soyinka is credited with reviving poetic drama in the 20th century. Very often he used the drama form to achieve some political and social aims in the interest of his motherland. For example, his play, *Kongi's Harvest*, first performed in 1965 at the Dakar Festival of Negro Arts, faithfully reflects the degenerating political situation in Nigeria. In *The Swamp Dwellers* he satirizes and condemns the greedy religious leaders who manipulated for their own selfish ends a community of poor farmers living in the swamps.

Soyinka's personal ideology, philosophical outlook and his view of Nigeria's past and present too often find an eloquent expression in his dramatic works. He was, for instance,

impatient with people who romanticized Nigeria's past. This view finds its proper expression in his play *A Dance of the Forests*. Through this play Soyinka cautioned his fellow countrymen against the danger of repeating the violence and atavism which were characteristic of their past and also against attempts at romanticizing their past ignoring the realities of the present.

Soyinka's spectacular achievement as a dramatist often obscures his achievement as a novelist and poet. Soyinka has published only two novels to date – *The Interpreters* and *Season of Anomy* – but from the point of view of African fiction and Soyinka's literary achievement they are as significant as the best of his plays such as *The Road* and *A Dance of the Forests*. Dramas, which are obviously meant for performance on stage, suffer from limitations of space and time. It is not always possible for a dramatist to state the philosophy of life or articulate his ideology of life in sufficient detail within the covers of a drama. A fictional work suffers from no such limitations. Soyinka's most faithful and eloquent commentary on postcolonial Nigeria, with all its hopes and beliefs, aspirations and disappointments, loyalties and betrayals, violence and upheavals, social unrest and political instability, find their proper artistic expression in his novels. Soyinka comes out as a fuller and more accomplished postcolonial African literary artist in his novels. He also states his philosophy of life and sets down his ideological prescription for Nigeria in these novels rather than anywhere else in his literary corpus.

Soyinka's mind and outlook have been shaped by a variety of forces and influences since his early years. He recounts these experiences and his responses to them in a series of memoirs. Soyinka records in his first memoir *Aké: The Years of Childhood* the experiences of his first eleven years of his life, *Aké* serves as a valuable introduction to Soyinka's literary output because it gives us a vivid picture of the childhood world that shaped his vision as an adult. Contradicting images of Christian saints and Yoruba spirits co-existed in Soyinka's childhood imagination. His mother, a devote Christian, dedicated him to Christ and his maternal grandfather initiated him into Yoruba manhood by means of a ritual sacrifice. However Soyinka was not troubled by these contradictory claims on him. He felt happy to be cared for by his extended family that included relatives as well as ancestral spirits. Soyinka also records in this memoir his growing perception of the fissures in his world, occasioned by the contradictory pulls of tradition and modernity. He turns to this theme quite often in his literary works.

Soyinka followed up *Aké: The Years of Childhood* in 1980 with a prequel titled *Isará: A Voyage Around "Essay"* the occasion for writing this memoir was the death of his father when Soyinka was away from home as a political exile. Soyinka chanced upon a collection of his father's papers which were so interesting that he felt a desire to reconstruct the life of Nigerians belonging to his father's generation. His father left his native village Isara in pursuit of education in a teacher training seminary. He and his mates found themselves pulled by the conflicting claims of western and African cultures. He made brave attempts to reconcile his western education with traditional African life. The experience of the cultural dilemma had profound implications to postcolonial Nigeria since, in the postcolonial period, Nigerian life is characterised by cultural ambiguity. Soyinka satirizes the cultural uncertainty of the Nigerians and its consequences in his novel *The Interpreters*.

As it has been noted already, in Africa, writers frequently double as activists for social and political causes. Their activism in most cases also provides the inspiration and raw material for their literary works. It is for this reason that the African fiction tends to be firmly rooted in reality even if the reality is ugly. Soyinka and his works are no exception to this

general rule. The postcolonial Nigerian situation disillusioned him no end and in his own way he protested against the forces that sought to enslave Nigeria in pursuit of the neo-colonialist agenda. Successive Nigerian political leaders betrayed the hopes of the people by playing themselves into the hands of the neo-colonialist and capitalist western forces. In his activist role Soyinka protested against rigging in election and was arrested and incarcerated for three months in 1965. His peace mission during the 1967 Nigerian civil war was misinterpreted and he was arrested a second time and imprisoned for about two years at Kaduna. At this prison facility he was kept in solitary confinement, denied medical attention, not allowed to read or write and subjected to other forms of harassment. Still Soyinka managed to write his prison diary called *The Man Died* and some poetry as well, admittedly on cigarette packets and toilet tissues. Soyinka's second prison term had a profound impact on him in that his tone significantly darkened in the writings that followed. During the civil war Soyinka was a witness to the massacre of more than thirty thousand Igbos in North-East Nigeria. Their rebellion was brutally put down. Despite belonging to the Yoruba tribe, which supported the Federal Government, Soyinka lobbied for a ban on arms sale to both the parties to the conflict. For all his efforts to bring back peace to Nigeria he was arrested, thrown into jail and subjected to inhuman treatment. He recorded his prison experiences in his memoir *The Man Died*. This book may not be a significant achievement as political commentary but it certainly serves as a faithful chronicle of Soyinka's changing states of mind and his attempt to survive as a man in the face of denial, deprivation and brutality. Soyinka's second novel *Season of Anomy*, which paints a rather bleak picture of the state of affairs and security situation in Nigeria many years into independence, proceeded from Soyinka's experiences during the civil war in terms of detail and his prison experiences in terms of mood and state of mind.

Soyinka has always been a lonely crusader. He did not easily subscribe to populist ideologists such as Negritude. He questioned the relevance of the Negritude movement to modern Africa by saying that a tiger does not have to proclaim its tigrity; it pounces. John J. Su however has a slightly different take on Soyinka's position on Negritude.

While Soyinka grants that this attitude represents a logical and even inevitable response to *ne'gritude* and other aesthetic and political movements that have exploited racial identity, he resists the conclusion that the solution to the "recurrent cycle of human stupidity" requires the wholesale repudiation of the past. Hence, despite his own affinities with the political Left, Soyinka characterizes such writings as presenting as much danger as the more politically conservative work of the *ne'gritude* movement... A "blanket iconoclasm" is no more dialectical than *ne'gritude* because it assumes that the critique of existing cultural, social, and political institutions is the sole imperative for the writer. Put another way, iconoclastic writers still essentialize Africa, only in negative terms. Instead of critically engaging with the past, they simply repudiate it. (162)

John J. Su hasten to add that

While Soyinka is very explicit in his critiques of both the Right and Left in politics and *ne'gritude* and iconoclasm in art, he is less specific in his explanation of how to utilize the "progressive potential" of the past, or even what constitutes this potential. One thing that does become apparent in his more mature writings is that his critiques are motivated

by a concern that a younger generation of politicians and artists has lost touch with the vision of Pan-African identity that motivated members of his own generation during the 1960s. This concern becomes particularly apparent in *The Open Sore of a Continent*, in which Soyinka laments the loss of a sense that the nation state was only part of a broader continental idea. (162)

It is precisely this concern for the younger generation which makes him populate his novels with young intellectuals who have a perspective on not only the present but also the past.

Soyinka also spiritedly resisted the temptation of official favours and instead constantly voiced his protest against injustice and abuse of power indulged in by military regimes that ruled Nigeria for the most significant part of its independent history. His lonely fight against injustice frequently put him on the collision course with the ruling elite of Nigeria. His activist interventions in the political affairs of Nigeria took such dramatic forms as his barging into the Ibadan radio studio in 1965 and forcing the announcer at gun point to replace the tape of Prime Minister Akintola's broadcast with a different voice commanding Akintola to get out. Soyinka was arrested but was acquitted after three months because of a technical error committed by the prosecution. This and other several interventions, including the peace mission during the Biafra War earned him the wrath of the Nigerian dictators who often contemplated extra judicial means to deal with him. Although the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986 was officially celebrated in Nigeria and in spite of his international visibility as an activist-writer Soyinka never ceased to run into trouble with the Nigerian official machinery. In 1990 Soyinka had to flee Nigeria in the most dramatic circumstances to evade persecution by General Sani Abacha who placed a reward on Soyinka's head and ordered his elimination because he protested against the general's brutal and dictatorial rule. Soyinka continued his campaign against Abacha till the dictator's death.

Soyinka represents today the unfailing conscience of Nigeria as a postcolonial nation, albeit a nation beset by innumerable problems. He continues to participate in the Nigerian affairs in spite of the heavy demands made on his time and his frequent and long academic assignments abroad. He is currently immersed in evolving a people's constitution for his homeland. Soyinka's political activism and social engagements have not blunted his appetite for writing. At regular intervals he comes up with plays, collections of poetry, prose tracts and other works of literary significance. In fact, his activism and literary works stem from the same creative repertoire which Soyinka has in abundance. They both have the same aim and purpose too, which is to fight injustice in whatever forms it obtains in Nigeria. Soyinka finds in his country a lot to complain against, a lot to find fault with, a lot to be ashamed of, a lot to enquire into, and a lot to transform. He chose two methods – political activism and literary production – to make his statement on the Nigerian situation. As it has been stated earlier on, his activism and literary output work in tandem. In most cases his activism provides the staple subject matter, the direction and the spiritual sustenance of his literary works. Being a lonely crusader his activism per se did not achieve its intended target but its value lies in the inspiration it provided and the basis it formed for his works. His international stature as a Nobel Laureate and the immense popularity of his works among the common readers as well as literary scholars have certainly helped popularize his activist ideology and foregrounded the issues that Nigeria is seized with. In either case Soyinka has achieved his purpose of raising the consciousness of the Nigerians themselves and in drawing the attention of the world to the

postcolonial Nigerian situation characterised by political violence, exploitation of resources by the neo-colonialist and multinational corporations and the consequent disillusionment prevailing among the Nigerians.

In order to understand Soyinka's literary works it thus becomes imperative to study his life and ideas described in his non-fictional works. Quite helpfully for us, Soyinka himself has stated the facts of his life, and his thoughts and ideas on the postcolonial Nigeria, in a series of memoirs. Of the five memoirs he has authored so far *Ibadan: the 'Penkelemes' Years: A Memoir 1946-65* has the greatest bearing on and relevance to the commentary and ideology contained in his fictional and dramatic works. This and his other autobiographical works which, while helping us understand Soyinka as an activist, also provide the ideological basis on which his literary works are founded.

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