

WOLE SOYINKA

Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism

Biodun Jeyifo examines the connections between the innovative and influential writings of Wole Soyinka and his radical political activism. Jeyifo carries out detailed analyses of Soyinka's most ambitious works, relating them to the controversies generated by Soyinka's use of literature and theatre for radical political purposes. He gives a fascinating account of the profound but paradoxical affinities and misgivings Soyinka has felt about the significance of the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century. Jeyifo also explores Soyinka's works with regard to the impact on his artistic sensibilities of the pervasiveness of representational ambiguity and linguistic exuberance in Yoruba culture. The analyses and evaluations of this study are presented in the context of Soyinka's sustained engagement with the violence of collective experience in post-independence, postcolonial Africa and the developing world. No existing study of Soyinka's works and career has attempted such a systematic investigation of their complex relationship to politics.

BIODUN JEYIFO is Professor of English at Cornell University. He is the author of *The Popular Travelling Theatre of Nigeria* (1984) and *The Truthful Lie: Essays in a Radical Sociology of African Drama* (1985). He has written essays and monographs on Anglophone African and Caribbean literatures, Marxist cultural theory and colonial and postcolonial studies and has also edited several volumes on African drama and critical discourse.

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BIODUN JEYIFO

Cornell University



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For my mother
Morounranti Aduke Jeyifous (nee Oyebanji)
(In memoriam: “*ope mi ko i to*”)

For my sons
Okunola Bamidele and Olalekan Babajide

And for their mother
Sheila Walker

My task is to keep company with the fallen, and this word rose
in pride above spiked bushes. We must all stick together. Only the
fallen have need of restitution.

The Road

Words are mad horses
running hard to collect
recalcitrant debt from my teeming head
I will not tame them.

John La Rose

Any culture contains essential and secondary elements, strengths
and weaknesses, virtues, defects, positive and negative aspects, fac-
tors for progress or for regression.

Amilcar Cabral

Contradictions are our only hope.

Bertolt Brecht

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Preface

When one scholar published a book-length study of the writings of Wole Soyinka in 1993 and gave it the title *Wole Soyinka Revisited*, he was reflecting in that title the fact that at the time, there were already about eight other book-length studies or monographs on the Nigerian author in print. Since then, the number of books and monographs on Soyinka has grown steadily to the point that to date, studies devoted exclusively to Soyinka's works number more than a dozen and a half. And this is without reference to important works like Jonathan Peters' *A Dance of Masks: Senghor, Achebe, Soyinka* (1978), Tejumola Olaniyan's *Scars of Conquests, Masks of Resistance* (1995) and Kole Omotoso's *Achebe or Soyinka* (1996) which involve exhaustive comparison of Soyinka's writings with the works of other major African authors or writers from the African diaspora. Moreover, there are at least five collections of critical essays on Soyinka's works, with others planned or projected. Finally, there are several special issues of academic journals devoted specifically to the many facets of Soyinka's works and career.

Given this impressive number of full-length and full-scale studies of Soyinka, it does seem obligatory to explain why I or anyone else should set out to do yet another study of the Nigerian author. One explanation is one which every single author of a study of Soyinka will perhaps henceforth have to invoke: our author has produced a quantitative and, more importantly, *qualitative* body of works which, for a long time to come, is sure to generate diverse revisionary studies and totally fresh works of interpretation and evaluation. While this book has definitely in part been fostered by this factor, there is a more determinate basis for the publication of the study. This arises from the fact that because Soyinka has sustained an almost unbroken literary productivity over the course of the last four decades, his output has generally tended to very quickly outstrip the scope of each successive study of his writings. And on this point, it is important to note that the more substantial of the full-length

studies of Soyinka were published nearly a decade ago, leaving a vacuum which has only partially been filled by the plethora of slim monographs on specific genres and themes which has dominated Soyinka criticism in the intervening years, monographs like Tanure Ojaide's *The Poetry of Wole Soyinka* (1994), Tunde Adeniran's *The Politics of Wole Soyinka* (1994), and Mpalive-Hangson Msiska's *Wole Soyinka* (1998). Thus, that another major, comprehensive study of Soyinka's writings is long overdue is an evident fact; that this book aspires to be such a study is a matter that requires a prefatory statement. What follows is an attempt at such prefatory "annunciation."

Sometime in April 1975, Kole Omotoso, the Nigerian novelist and critic, and I visited Wole Soyinka in Accra, Ghana, on a special mission. Soyinka was then in the fourth year of exile from Nigeria. With the fall of the military government of Yakubu Gowon and the assumption of power by General Murtala Mohammed and indications of a probable change to a more open and perhaps even "progressive" military rule, we felt that it was perhaps time for Soyinka to return home. "We" here refers to a group of writers, critics and academics based at the Universities of Ibadan and Ife called the "Ibadan-Ife Group" who had started the journal *Positive Review*. A few members of the group had been Soyinka's students, and all were ardent admirers of his writings. Moreover, we all felt greatly inspired by the courage of his political activism, and by the fact that we saw him as one of two or three of the most progressive writer-activists on the African continent. Omotoso and I represented this group on that mission.

In Accra, we found a Soyinka who was as productive and as ebullient as ever, a man for whom exile was no state of angst-ridden complacency. He was working full-time as editor of the journal, *Transition* (which he had renamed *Chi'Indaba*) and had just released the first issue of the journal under his editorship, an issue which contained an important statement on the exemplary nature of the revolutionary anti-colonial struggle in Guinea-Bissau under the leadership of Amilcar Cabral and the PAIGC. We found also that Soyinka had turned the journal into a very effective forum for mobilizing opposition on the African continent to the brutal, murderous regime of Idi Amin in Uganda. Indeed, his editorial office in Accra was a veritable beehive swarming with the diverse activities of the Nigerian playwright and his small administrative staff: planning future issues of the journal; serving as a port of call for many local and visiting foreign writers, artists, academics and publishers' agents connected with the arts and cultural scene of Africa and the Black world;

coordinating contacts with writers, diplomats, academics and activists, in Accra itself, and throughout the continent in a truly massive effort to isolate Idi Amin and ultimately cause the downfall of his regime. Beside these round-the-clock activities, Soyinka was also busy on a new venture, this being the then newly formed Union of Writers of the African Peoples of which he was the *Protem* Secretary-General; he was drafting notes and statements laying out his vision of what the organization could be and accomplish. One of these was a drive to make Kiswahili the continental *lingua franca* and in furtherance of this goal, encouragement of all African writers to work for the translation of their writings into that projected continental common tongue.

Our discussions with Soyinka on that “mission” touched on all these Pan-African issues, but ultimately we settled on the realities of the new situation at home in Nigeria. Like us, Soyinka also felt that things were looking as auspicious for “new beginnings” as they had ever been at any other time in the fifteen years of Nigeria’s post-independence history. With this in mind, we discussed the details of his eagerly awaited return to Nigeria: what could be anticipated from the new regime in power in Lagos; what was the state of things with various groups and persons in the political and intellectual life of the country; what specific talks or public lectures we could schedule upon Soyinka’s return home.

Not too long after this, Soyinka returned to Nigeria, took up appointment as Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Ife and generally began what could be called the Nigerian extension of the phase of his career which has been described as “post-civil war” or “post-incarceration,” a phase of intense political and ideological radicalization which had started in the years of exile. Thus, it was a totally unanticipated development that in this same period, and within a year of his return from exile, a big falling apart developed between him and most leftist writers, critics and academics in the country, a falling apart that was particularly acute between Soyinka and us, members of the Ibadan-Ife Group who had been so eager for his return from exile. Since a lot has been written about the ferocious intellectual and ideological battles that ensued between Soyinka and ourselves, I will give only a brief summary of the issues involved in the controversy.

At the most general level, the “quarrel” centered around our call for the application of a rigorous class approach to the analysis and evaluation of the production and reception of works of art and literature in Africa, especially given the fact that a class approach in African literary-critical discourse was at that time decidedly marginal to the far more

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dominant racial and ethnic “imperatives.” Moreover, we felt that a class approach was definitely appropriate to the work of a writer-activist like Soyinka who is a self-declared partisan of egalitarian and revolutionary possibilities in the desperate historical and social conditions of Nigeria, postcolonial Africa and the Third World. In the light of such perspectives, we felt that Soyinka was often ideologically irresolute or ambiguous in that his works and activities seemed to promote a sort of “bourgeois” radicalism in representing the lower social orders in ways that did not show a belief in their readiness or capacity to overthrow the conditions of their oppression. From this we concluded that Soyinka’s political activism was without question often courageous and powerful in protesting specific policies and trends consolidating misrule and inequality, but left much to be desired with regard to the deep-rooted systemic and structural bases of imperialist domination of the Third World and internal oppression of subaltern groups and classes in Nigeria and Africa.

On his own part, Soyinka felt that our positions were too doctrinaire, too dogmatic, and consistent with his genius for satiric phrase-making, he dubbed us “Leftocrats” in a major essay, “Barthes, Leftocracy and Other Mythologies,” which is included in his volume of essays on literature and culture, *Art, Dialogue and Outrage*. He was particularly affronted by what he considered the extremely formulaic, textbook derivativeness of our materialist analyses of his use of myth, ritual and other expressive forms which come from the African precolonial past. One of his most serious charges against us was something he called “literary infanticide”; by this he meant that the narrow and dogmatic application of Marxist principles of class politics and ideology by us, as he saw the matter, was extremely destructive to young, aspiring writers. Such fledgling writers, in Soyinka’s view, felt intimidated by the “authority” of our claims to be speaking on behalf of the oppressed masses and by our location as university teachers. Writers of his own stature and self-confidence, Soyinka asserted, were completely immune to our brand of extremism, but not the young, budding literary talents of the country.

With one or two notable exceptions, most of those who have written comments on these battles and controversies have been unaware of the fact that even with the staking of positions and views which seemed – and are – far apart in these battles of words and ideas, there continued to be important collaboration between us and Soyinka in furtherance of what continued to be, ultimately, common goals and objectives. One example of such collaborations happened when, in 1983, I adapted Bertolt Brecht’s *Herr Puntilla and his Man Matti* for the Nigerian stage. Soyinka

not only accepted the script of my play titled *Haba Director!* for staging by the company of the Dramatic Arts Department which he then headed, he in fact made suggestions about incorporating some topical issues into the play, suggestions which were willingly accepted because of the satiric bite which they gave to the production.

I have made the foregoing “declaration” because, inevitably, the experience that it narrates does provide a point of departure for this study. For me, and I daresay for other members of that now sadly moribund Ibadan-Ife Group, perhaps the most important aspect of Soyinka’s works and activities, the thing that made him so vital to the prospects we then felt for real meaningful social and economic transformations in Nigeria and Africa, was a dimension of art, literature and culture that we did not pay much heed to in those battles with Soyinka, this being what can roughly be called the *subjective* dimensions of artistic creativity and cultural politics. Soyinka’s proud assertion in the heat of those quarrels that *he* was personally beyond “coercion” and intimidation by us and our invocation of the “objective,” “determinate” forces of history speaks to the heart of this matter. Let us recall again the profile I have drawn above of Soyinka in the editorial offices of *Transition* in Accra in 1975 which shows the writer-activist engaged in those herculean tasks of mobilizing continental and worldwide opposition to the murderous violence of the regime of Idi Amin, putting in place the machinery for the smooth and effective functioning of the then newly formed Union of Writers of the African Peoples, all the while continuing to write in all genres of literature.

These issues constitute the conceptual foundations of this study and shaped the methodological choices I have made in organizing the contents of the book. As a deliberate departure from the common trend in Soyinka criticism of taking his exceptionally strong personality for granted, I have made it a focal point for exploring his literary corpus in its own right. Moreover, I have deployed this focus on “subjectivity” to explore the deep imbrication of Soyinka’s writings in the cultural patterns and dominant ideological discourses and representations of what I call the postcolonial national-masculine “sublime” which, in my view, decisively shaped Soyinka’s own personality and the collective identity of his generation of artists, writers and critics and indeed an entire period of postcolonial history in Africa and the rest of the developing world. For it is no accident of history or circumstance that Soyinka belongs to a generation of the Nigerian literary intelligentsia whose leading members like Chinua Achebe, J.P. Clark, Christopher Okigbo and Soyinka himself

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have been called “titans.” Neither is it of no consequence to the social ramifications of the works of the most prominent writers in this generational cohort that the political life of Africa, from the late colonial period to the first few decades of the post-independence era, was completely dominated by great, larger-than-life figures in the historic projects of nation-building, social reconstruction and collective self-definitions after the formal end of colonialism.

One definitely has to have this broad pattern in mind when one considers the significant fact that in the international arena of the then newly emergent nonaligned movement and the anti-imperialist front, figures like Nehru, Sukarno, Nasser and Nkrumah projected or exuded much vaster power and *presence* than was warranted by the weak state structures and precarious polities which they inherited from the departing colonial powers. Thus, in Nigeria during the first decade of independence, Soyinka’s generation of “titans” in literature and the arts confronted an unceasingly crisis-torn lifeworld dominated by the towering, larger-than-life personality of an Azikiwe, an Awolowo and a Sardauna of Sokoto and many others beside these three potentates. Indeed, we now know that in the postcolonial project of fashioning collective identities to displace the erstwhile identities of “natives” and “subject peoples” brought to life in the high tide of colonial rule in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, the figure of the *male* patriarchal leader of legendary renown was deemed to represent the will to freedom of the colonized nation, putatively holding society together around the charisma and mystique of his person. This broad socio-historical process and its representational inscription around the figure of a strong male leader included conservative bourgeois nationalists as it did left-wing revolutionary socialists; and it embraced authoritarian, elitist military putschists as well as leaders of grassroots populist movements. There are many famous names and personalities here: Jawaharlal Nehru, Ho Chi Minh, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, Mohammed Zia-ul-Haq, Kwame Nkrumah, Eric Williams, Jomo Kenyatta and Leopold Sedar Senghor. These and many more are the scions of a highly gendered postcolonial national-masculine tradition which provided the pivotal signposts of identity formation and collective self-fashioning in the period of struggle against foreign domination in the former colonies and in the first few decades of the post-independence era. It is a tradition that is clearly in deep, sustained and perhaps terminal crisis. Among other factors, it is in a terminal crisis because of the historically inevitable unraveling of the idealistic or coercive unification it once imposed on the diverse

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communities and conflicting interests and practices making up the “nation.” One important expression of this crisis in the world of literature and the arts, at least in the West Africa region, is the fact that the generation of writers who came into prominence after Soyinka’s generation have virtually all made a break with the “big man” view of artistic creation. This generational cohort includes writers like Kole Omotoso, Femi Osofisan, Niyi Osundare, Kofi Ayindoho, Sonny Labou Tansi, Tanure Ojaide, Odia Ofeimun, Syl Cheney-Coker, Festus Iyayi, Atukwe Okai and Funso Aiyejina. They have made what could be described, following Antonio Gramsci, a national-popular ideal the basis of their collective identity, of their situation as engaged writers. And of course by far the most important institutional and ideological expression of the crisis of the national-masculine tradition in literature and critical discourse is the strong female presence of writers and critics in West Africa like Ama Ata Aidoo, Efua Sutherland, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Ba, Aminata Sow Fall, Calixthe Beyala, Tess Onwueme, Zeinab Alkali, Molara Ogundipe, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, Nana Wilson-Tagoe and Abena Busia. Elsewhere on the continent, the national-masculine tradition in the arts, literature and criticism is even more powerfully transcended by the works of women writers, scholars and critics like Micere Githae Mugo, Nadine Gordimer, Bessie Head, Assia Djebar, Nawal el Saadawi, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Yvonne Vera, Rose Mbowa, Brenda Cooper, Rosemary Jolly and many others.

This study locates Soyinka’s towering artistic personality in this broad socio-historical context. It does this on the basis of two premises. The first premise concerns the methodological assumption that underlies the analysis of texts in this study, the assumption that nearly all of Soyinka’s literary writings stand as remarkable works in their own right. From relatively minor works like *The Trials of Brother Jero* and *The Swamp Dwellers* to the great, ambitious titles like *A Dance of the Forests*, *The Road*, *Madmen and Specialists* and *Death and the King’s Horseman*, no work of Soyinka’s maturity as a writer is reducible to national or epochal allegories. On the basis of this premise, the study approaches all of Soyinka’s writings as distinctive works of literature, applying the framing ideas and themes of the study to these works, singly and collectively, very flexibly. In other words, the framing ideas and themes of this study, as indicated in its title, will be found hovering around and mostly merely inflecting the exegetical tasks and the sheer intellectual pleasure of tackling the rich, complex texture of Soyinka’s writings against the background of his tumultuous career and the critical reception of his works in the last four

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decades. Moreover, the tasks of textual exegesis and analysis in this study have been dialectically conditioned by four decades of scholarly and critical commentary on Soyinka's works. In the main, Soyinka criticism in these decades has focused intensively on the alleged "complexity" and "obscurity" of his most important writings, without paying systematic or even sustained attention to one important source of the alleged "complexity" and "obscurity." This is Soyinka's literary avant-gardism, his extensive and defining open and experimental approach to the diverse and contending traditions of formal and linguistic resources available to the postcolonial writer or indeed any writer in our contemporary global civilization. The study is thus conceived in part as a critical response to the influence of critical commentary on Soyinka's works in the last four decades, the purpose being to locate the "difficulty" and "complexity" of his writings in their appropriate linguistic and cultural sources, and to reorient the study of Soyinka as a writer towards a more systematic engagement of his connections to the historic avantgarde movements of the contemporary world.

Beyond this, and supplementary to matters of exegesis and analyses, the second premise of this study relates to issues of interpretation and explanation and pertains to the framing ideas and themes which, as I have remarked earlier, are brought to bear in a flexible manner on the analyses of texts. It is perhaps useful to give a brief elaboration of these ideas and themes.

Among the "titans" of his generation of Nigerian literary artists, Soyinka's career is the closest conscious approximation we have in African literature to the revolutionary or "sublime" expressions, as opposed to the conservative or repressive currents, of the long postcolonial tradition of the "big man" of politics, of trade unionism, of coup making, of popular culture and millenarian religious movements. Typically, this is the "big man," whether of the left or the right, whose claim to power or influence rests on the "sovereign" ability to gather around his person diverse areas of the life and times of the late modern postcolony. But this observation is of more than merely documentary interest, for we must bear in mind that the "big man" in literature in the colony and the postcolony has to enact his capacious subjectivity in, and through language, specifically in *written* texts published in the adopted "world" language of the colonizers. Moreover, even if the "turf" of the "big man" in politics, in trade unionism, in commerce or in military coup-making is not specifically based in language, all these figures who embody the "great man" theory of postcolonial history and politics necessarily

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must have a justificatory or celebratory discourse around them, a language which serves as a very important currency of their claims to status, power or influence. This makes language a privileged domain, and the “big man” in language and writing such as Soyinka a powerful prism through which to extricate the ontological and normative truth contents of this national-masculine tradition from its massive socio-economic and ideological overdeterminations. The normative “truth content” has to do with the fact that both in nature and in all forms and at all stages of society, extraordinary concentration of talents, energies and capacities are often lodged in exceptional individuals, taking many forms which, in sum, constitute a permanent source of enrichment to the human community. Moreover, in the nationalist struggles against colonialism and in contemporary struggles in the developing world against local and foreign bases of oppressive social power, exceptionally gifted and endowed individuals have distinguished and are distinguishing themselves as resolute and unwavering agents of progressive change. The “falsehood content” makes us attentive to the fact that because these talents, capacities and energies are “undemocratically” distributed and have often been assimilated to an essential maleness, they often take bizarre forms, forms in and through which individual, group, national or racial claims to exceptionalism or superiority produce unjust, oppressive and alienating social arrangements which, in their most extreme expressions, assume the false “sovereignty” of organized state terror. In the life of the African post-colony, this “falsehood content” has produced in countries like Somalia, Uganda, Liberia and especially Sierra Leone, the inexpressible and ineffable terror of warlords many of whom present themselves as revolutionaries and “saviors” of the nation and gather around themselves marauding boy-warriors of unspeakable barbarity.

Generally, I take the view that it is possible and necessary to identify and hold separate the “truth” and “falsehood” contents of this historic national-masculine tradition. This is made necessary by the fact that in this study I read the positive, heroic currents of the tradition and its negative and pervasive barbarous deformations as the outer limits of the highly gendered postcolonial project of collective and individual self-definition and self-constitution. But I do not ignore the fact that in its appearance as an image, as a representation of the will to human emancipation and the ideal of freedom, the “truth” and “falsehood” contents of the tradition are often inextricably interfused and stir up powerful emotions of excitement, unease or terror incapable of being represented by conventionally pleasing or “beautiful” aesthetic expressions. Thus,

I explore tradition in this study in the figure of the *sublime*, the figure which confronts conventionally “beautiful” and pleasing affects and effects with their inadequacies and infelicities, the figure in short in which the claims of representation, *any* representation including the representation of the will to emancipation, confronts its limits. It is perhaps necessary for me to state that unlike most postmodernists on the concept of the sublime, for me its figuration of the constitutive aporias and limits of representation does not thereby imply an abyss at the (absent) core of representation; rather, it represents a need for representation to reflect back on its processes, means and ends the better to meet the great challenges of progressive cultural politics at the present time.

The highly gendered postcolonial national-masculine tradition of the patrimonial “big man” of national, continental or “racial” destiny is evidently in deep crisis and is indeed in decline, even as it continues to generate regimes and acts of great barbarity. Its inscription in Soyinka’s writings and career dialectically involves both positive celebration of the heroic, revolutionary currents of the tradition and at the same time very scathing, ironizing parodies of its pretensions and mystifications, especially in their yield of cycles of catastrophic violence and tyrannical misrule in Africa and many other parts of the developing world. This study engages this little explored but crucial dimension of Soyinka’s career not by making sociological allusions to it, but by placing considerable emphasis on the textual constructions of his “personality” by the Nigerian author. Most previous studies of Soyinka have taken this “personality” as simply existent, even when it is admitted that it is a complex personality compounded, like the personalities of many great artists, of heterogeneous and even somewhat contradictory attributes. As in nearly all previous studies of Soyinka’s writings and career, the personality of the Nigerian poet, playwright and activist looms large in this study. But while I have not sought to entirely suppress the perspectives of “Soyinka and his times” or “Soyinka’s unified sensibility and vision” which have been implicitly or explicitly dominant in Soyinka criticism, as a deliberate departure from this trend, I have emphasized the ideological pressures and ethical choices which have shaped the construction of that personality. In effect, this means that I have been very attentive to the postmodernist call to be wary of the metaphysics of “presence” and intentionalist subject-centeredness in all cultural criticism and literary studies, especially where this involves “strong” individuals. However, unlike the postmodernists, I have not reproduced in this study yet another instance of discourses of the “death of the subject,” of the “waning

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of affect” or of the impersonal regime of the “author effect.” In the study will be found a “subject” who is present in his writings and acts in an elaborate mythopoesis of the self and the social as a basis for both self-idealized and self-critical engagements of the often terrifying dilemmas of the life and times of the modern postcolony. What I can state as hopefully a distinctive aspect of the study is a considerable emphasis on the active relationship between Soyinka’s textual constructions of his “personality” and his permanent openness to possibilities that might expand the scope of political and cultural freedoms in Africa and the rest of our increasingly globalized world.

These underlying perspectives of this study that I have outlined here perhaps resume, in a *sublated* fashion, the old debates that we had with Soyinka in the 1970s and 1980s. However, in the present study I have tried to combine the values and methodologies of objective scholarship, especially in the exegeses of texts and the arduous tasks of social and historical interpretation, with the sort of passionate ideological partisanship of the experience narrated in the “declaration” through which I have tried to indicate the point of departure for this study. Thus, it will be found that for the first six chapters of the study, I have pretty much stayed within the methodology which I adopted when I collected and edited Soyinka’s essays for the book, *Art, Dialogue and Outrage*. This, in principle, was mostly to confine myself as much as possible to explicating objectively the most important ideas and themes of Soyinka’s critical thought and the contexts in which they were elaborated. Thus, what I have tried to accomplish in these first six chapters is an expostulation of the construction or “fashioning” of the self in Soyinka’s works. This I have done with regard to the fascinating, differential patterns of our author’s self-expressions and self-extensions in the genres of drama, prose and poetry. These are the patterns which in the study I have designated “homologies of the self and the social,” seeking to explicate them in the refracted light of Soyinka’s unique combination of aesthetic innovativeness and political radicalism. It is only in the seventh and last chapter of the study that I have expressed any sustained critique in a manner that may be vaguely reminiscent of those battles of yesteryears with Soyinka, but even in that chapter, I have not been exhaustive in this critique. That kind of critique, it is my belief, belongs in another work of the future which will expand the terms of the exploration of the issues beyond the works of Wole Soyinka. In this respect, the study is intended as a combination of limited ideology-critique and, more extensively, a prolegomenon to a systematic investigation of the intersection of artistic

avant-gardism and political radicalism in Africa and the developing world.

No work of course exists in a vacuum or starts *ex nihilo*. Indeed, far from this, this study, in every chapter of the work, is constructed on an assimilation, positively and in some cases by negative dialectics, of the vast body of existing scholarship and criticism on Soyinka's works. In fact the careful reader will very quickly find, by openly acknowledged intellectual debts, which scholars and critics have provided perspectives and ideas without which this study would simply have been impossible. To all such scholars and critics, my gratitude.

The completion of this book was delayed for at least six years by a grave illness that nearly proved terminal in 1994/95. This not only led to a rewriting of the entire earlier draft of the study when I was able at last to resume work on the project with the energy and focus of the years before the illness, it also made me permanently indebted to many friends, family and colleagues whose love or concern saw me through the critical period of the illness. They are too many to name in entirety here. So, if I leave out any names, I give assurance that I will make amends fully at the earliest opportunity. Thus, a great debt of gratitude which I can never hope to repay in full to: Sheila Walker, Okunola and Lekan; to Yemi and Sade Ogunbiyi; to Femi and Nike Osofisan; to John La Rose and Sarah White; to Seinde and Dunning Arigbede; to Eddie and Bene Madunagu; to Emmett and Charlotte Walker; to Ropo and Banke Sekoni; to Lai and Elaine Ogunbiyi; to Akwasi and Constance Osei; to John and Lily Ohiorhenuan; to Winthrop and Andrea Whetherbee; to Yomi and Deola Durotoye; to Chima and Bisi Anyadike; to Elaine Savory and Robert Jones; to Eileen Marie Julien, Anne Adams, Susan Andrade, Michelin Rice-Maximin and Rhonda Cobham-Sander; to Wole Ogundele, Teju and Moji Olanayan, Priyamvada Gopal, Catherine McKinley and Ken McClane.

Over the years, I have been the fortunate beneficiary of the unwavering support of friends and interlocutors whose contribution, in many intangible but invaluable ways, sustained me in the course of writing this book. For this reason, very special thanks are due to Reginald Selwyn Cudjoe, Odun Balogun, Sope Oyelaran, Niyi Osundare, Kole Omotoso, G.G. Darah, Folabo Soyinka-Ajayi, Odia Ofeimun, Macdonald Ovbiagele, Olu Ademulegun, Lanre Adebisi, Kayode Komolafe, Ike Okafor-Newsum, Dapo Adeniyi and John Onajide for their friendship and encouragement. This group of friends includes the "trio" in France, Christiane "Kenshiro" Fioupou, Etienne Galle and Alain Ricard whose

comradeship I shall always treasure and whose many conversations with me on the subject of Wole Soyinka brought an informal but rich “Francophone” dimension to preparatory work on this study. I note also, with deep appreciation, the solidarity of “Comrade Egbon” Molar Ogundipe, “Uncle D” Dapo Adelugba, Omafume Onoge and Tunji Oyelana. In the same vein, I wish to acknowledge here the inestimable comradeship of spirit and intellect of Segun Osoba and Dipo Fasina that began in my years in Ile-Ife and has deepened in the intervening years. And I give special, heartfelt thanks to Hudita Mustafa for her sustaining love and friendship.

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Of a very special kind of debt is what I owe Abiola Irele, the editor of the series of studies of African and Caribbean authors for which this study was written. His patience, solidarity and encouragement were unstinting. Indeed, but for his steadfast encouragement, this study would have finally been abandoned for other projects after the long hiatus between its earlier incarnations and what began, very slowly and fitfully, to crystallize after my convalescence from my illness. In the last fourteen or fifteen years, I have had intellectual discussions with “Egbon” Irele of a kind which I have had with no one else, with the possible exception of John La Rose and, of course, Femi Osofisan, on diverse subjects and topics touching on, ultimately, the dimensions of the crises and perplexities facing our country, Nigeria and the African continent. If only indirectly and subliminally, these discussions have shaped some of the perspectives which make this book what it is, though in exactly what ways I am unable to say.

The debts to “Kongi” are equally as great, even if they are infinitely more difficult to assess or express. I can only say that I hope the honesty and frankness of the analyses and evaluations of his work and legacy in this study constitute an adequate acknowledgment of these debts which I share with all who have found much profit and inspiration in his writings but which really began about thirty-four years ago when he taught my undergraduate dramatic criticism class and for a brief period acted as supervisor of my studies as a graduate student.

Finally and ultimately inexpressibly, my mother, of unforgettable memory. Pablo Neruda has declared: “There is no space that is wider than that of grief.” In bringing this project to completion not before I had experienced that grave illness and slowly regained my strengths, I learnt that great grief can be a psychically sustaining emotion, that it can powerfully bring to consciousness hitherto barely recognized or acknowledged dimensions of the self. But I made this discovery *only* when I was finally able to overcome the great folly of repressing my emotions and could then grieve, really grieve for your loss, Morounranti Aduke.

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- 1934 Born 13 July, at Abeokuta, western Nigeria, the second child of Samuel Ayodele and Grace Eniola Soyinka.
- 1944–45 Attends Abeokuta Grammar School.
- 1946–50 Attends Government College, elite high school where he begins writing and wins prizes for his poems.
- 1950–52 On graduating from high school works in Lagos as an inventory clerk at a government pharmaceutical store. Has stories read on national radio.
- 1952–54 Attends University College, Ibadan.
- 1954–59 Five-year sojourn in the UK. Attends the University of Leeds, obtaining the BA English Honours degree in 1957. Begins writing two plays, *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel*. Works for some time as playreader at The Royal Court Theatre in London. In 1958 directs the Nigeria Drama Group in *The Swamp Dwellers* and has an evening of his work comprising poems, songs and a play, *The Invention* performed at The Royal Court.
- 1957 March 6, independence of Ghana, inaugurating the post-colonial era in black Africa.
- 1959 Returns to Nigeria, on eve of the country's independence from Britain. Given a two-year Rockefeller research grant to study drama in West Africa.
- 1960 October 1, independence. Soyinka completes *Camwood on the Leaves*, a radio play, and *The Trials of Brother Jero*, a stage play. Forms a theatre group, The 1960 Masks, and produces *A Dance of the Forests* which raises questions about the country's future for Nigeria's independence celebrations.
- 1962 Appointed a lecturer in English at the University of Ife but resigns in protest when the authorities of the

- University align the institution with the unpopular government of Samuel Ladoke Akintola. General social and political unrest in western Nigeria.
- 1964 General Strike of Nigeria's trade unions, effective countrywide. Soyinka very actively involved around the Lagos-Ibadan area. Produces *The Lion and the Jewel* in a season of plays in English and Yoruba. Forms a new theatre group, The Orisun Theatre Company.
- 1965 Produces satirical revue, *Before the Blackout* as political turmoil escalates in western Nigeria. Premieres a major new play, *Kongi's Harvest*, in August in Lagos. Later in the year in London for the Commonwealth Arts Festival in which another major play, *The Road*, is staged and Soyinka reads from his long poem, "Idanre." Appointed senior lecturer at the University of Lagos. Novel, *The Interpreters*, published. Turbulent election in western Nigeria and disputed victory of S.L. Akintola after widespread rigging of the elections. A gunman holds up the radio station of the Nigerian Broadcasting Service at Ibadan and forces the station to broadcast a recorded speech disputing Akintola's victory. Soyinka is later charged for the action, but is acquitted on a legal technicality.
- 1966 First military coup in Nigeria, January 15, topples the federal government of Tafawa Balewa. Second counter-coup in July after May pogroms against Igbos in Northern Nigeria. The country slides irreversibly to civil war.
- 1967–70 Nigerian civil war pitching federal forces against Biafran secessionists.
- 1967 *Kongi's Harvest* and *Idanre and Other Poems* published early 1967. With Tom Stoppard, receives the John Whiting Drama Award in London. Off-Broadway productions of *The Trials of Brother Jero* and *The Strong Breed* at Greenwich Mews Theater, New York. Appointed Head of the School of Drama, University of Ibadan but unable to take up the position because of arrest in August by the federal government for activities to stop the war. He is incarcerated without trial for most of the duration of the war and spends most of his time in prison in solitary confinement. Smuggles some protest poems out of prison; later writes

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- a book of his prison experience, *The Man Died*, published in 1972.
- 1968 Receives Jock Campbell-New Statesman Literary Award, London. Publication of *Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, Soyinka's translation of D.O. Fagunwa's classic Yoruba hunter's saga, *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale*. *Kongi's Harvest* produced by Negro Ensemble Company at St. Mark's Theater, New York.
- 1969 *Three Short Plays* (new edition of *Three Plays*) and *Poems from Prison* published. Released from detention in October and takes up post of head of Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan.
- 1970 Directs *Madmen and Specialists* at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, Waterford, Connecticut. Plays the role of Kongi, the dictator, in Calpenny Films production of his play, *Kongi's Harvest*. Inauguration of Orisun Acting Editions with Soyinka as literary editor.
- 1971–75 Years of self-imposed exile from Nigeria, traveling around the world and ultimately settling in Accra, Ghana, where in 1974 he assumes editorship of the journal, *Transition* which he re-names *Ch'Indaba*.
- 1971 *Before the Blackout*, first title in the Orisun Acting Editions, published. Directs *Madmen and Specialists* at Ibadan. The play published later in the year. Plays the role of Lumumba in Joan Littlewood's Paris production of *Murderous Angels*, Conor Cruise O'Brien's play on the Congo crisis.
- 1972 *A Shuttle in the Crypt* and *The Man Died* published. Resigns as head of the Department of Theatre Arts at the University of Ibadan. Directs extracts from *A Dance of the Forests* in Paris.
- 1973 Appointed Visiting Professor of English at University of Sheffield and overseas fellow at Churchill College, Cambridge University. Publication of *Collected Plays*, vol. 1, *Camwood on the Leaves*, and *The Bacchae of Euripides* which is given an unimaginative production by the National Theatre at Old Vic, London. Publication of second novel, *Season of Anomy*.
- 1974 *Collected Plays*, vol. 2, published. Teams up with the South African poet, Dennis Brutus, to form Union of Writers

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- of the African Peoples and is elected its first Secretary-General.
- 1975 Yakubu Gowon overthrown in a military coup. General Murtala Mohammed becomes head of state. Soyinka returns to Nigeria and is given appointment of Professor of Comparative Literature by the University of Ife. *Death and the King's Horseman* published. Edits *Poems of Black Africa*.
- 1976 Murtala Muhammed assassinated, General Olusegun Obasanjo becomes head of state. *Myth, Literature and the African World* and *Ogun Abibiman* published. Governmental corruption and social inequality intensify in the wake of an oil-boom economy. Soyinka fiercely outspoken in his social criticism and faces intimidation by agents of the military regime. First stage production of *Death and the King's Horseman* at the University of Ife in December.
- 1977 Administrator of FESTAC (International Festival of Negro Arts and Culture), Lagos. Completes and directs *Opera Wonyosi*, a composite adaptation of John Gay's *Beggars' Opera* and Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* which savages several African military and civilian despots and the values they are entrenching across the borders of African countries. Soyinka is prevented from staging this play in Lagos and he forms a group called Guerrilla Theatre Unit out of the professional company of the University of Ife Theatre. Writes short, biting and highly popular skits attacking governmental hypocrisy, corruption and sadistic policies which are performed by the new group in open-air markets, streets, community centres and school playing fields.
- 1979 Joins the People's Redemption Party, a social-democratic party whose leadership is made up of the most prominent progressive politicians of the North and the South, and trade union and academic leftists. When the party fragments into conservative and radical factions, Soyinka goes with the latter and becomes its Deputy Director of Research. Directs *The Biko Inquest*, an edited version of the court proceedings of an inquest on the death of Steve Biko in police custody. In the fall he directs *Death and the King's Horseman* at the Goodman Theater, Chicago. Upon

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- successful run at the Goodman, production is transferred to the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC where it is also well received. Shehu Shagari wins federal elections and Nigeria returns to civilian rule.
- 1981 Appointed Visiting Professor, Yale University. *Opera Wonyosi* and *Aké*, the first part of Soyinka's autobiography, published. Produces satirical revue, "Rice Unlimited" with the Guerrilla Theatre Unit.
- 1982 *Aké* launched at Aké, Abeokuta in January. Soyinka uses the occasion to lambast the policies of the Shagari government and its "achievements": the plundering of the country's wealth; the massacre of unarmed farmers and peasants at Bakolori in the North; the subversion of the Kaduna and Kano state governments controlled by the People's Redemption Party (PRP); the destruction of the offices of *The Triumph* newspaper owned by the PRP; the storming of an elected legislature by the paramilitary detachment of the Nigerian Police Force controlled by Shagari's government; the deaths of students, athletes, members of the National Youth Corps and ordinary citizens at the hands of the police at the innumerable checkpoints set up by the government to intimidate and cover an increasingly restive populace. Late in the year *Die Still, Dr. Godspoke!*, a play on the influence of the quackery of parapsychologists, astrologers and 'metaphysicians' in Nigeria is broadcast on the African Service of the BBC World Service.
- 1983 Production of *Requiem for a Futurologist*, stage version of *Die Still, Dr. Godspoke!* Soyinka uses countrywide tour of the production to spread ideas contained in the "Priority Projects," a satirical revue attacking corruption, mismanagement and hypocrisy of the country's political rulers. On the eve of the national elections in August, Soyinka releases the songs from this revue in a record album titled *Unlimited Liability Company*; the album takes the country by storm and is a huge success. Shagari wins the elections which are marked by massive vote rigging, use of the armed services of the state to intimidate opposition parties and their supporters, and widespread outbreak of violent protests and demonstrations. Soyinka flies to London

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- and uses the BBC World Service and the international press to condemn the corruption of the just concluded elections. He predicts revolution or a coup. On the last day of the year, Shagari is overthrown in a coup that brings General Mohammadu Buhari to power.
- 1984 *Blues for a Prodigal*, Soyinka's film on the elections of 1983 released. In May an unsuccessful production of *The Road* opens at the Goodman Theater in Chicago and in December Yale Repertory Theatre produces *A Play of Giants*. *Six Plays* and *A Play of Giants* published.
- 1985 August 27, General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida overthrows the Buhari-Idiagbon junta.
- 1986 In June, Wole Soyinka, as President of the International Theatre Institute (ITI), is embroiled in an international press and media controversy following the decision of the ITI to drop a dramatization of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* by the National Theatre of Britain from the official program of the *Festival of Nations* in Baltimore, Maryland, USA. (The ITI decision is based on petition by the Soviet Union that the version of *Animal Farm* in the National Theatre of Britain entry is a veiled Cold War-inspired cultural assault on the Soviet state).
- In October, the Swedish Academy announces that Soyinka is the year's winner of the Nobel Prize for literature.
- 1987 *Death and the King's Horseman* produced at Lincoln Center, New York City.
- 1988 Publication of *Art, Dialogue and Outrage*, a major collection of Soyinka's essays on literature and culture. *Mandela's Earth* published.
- 1989 *Isara: A Voyage Around 'Essay'*, a fictional account of the author's father and his friends published.
- 1991 *A Scourge of Hyacinths*, a new radio play broadcast on BBC Radio 4.
- 1992 *From Zia, with Love*, a stage version of *A Scourge of Hyacinths*, is premiered in Sienna, Italy. The play uses a satirical and farcical exploration of the inner workings of the international traffic in drugs to expose the corruption and hypocrisy of the Nigerian military rulers.
- 1993 June 12, the victory of Moshood Kashimawo Abiola at the federal elections to return Nigeria to civilian

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- rule canceled by the military dictatorship of Ibrahim Babangida. Massive protests in Lagos, Ibadan and other Nigerian cities, met with brutal force by the army. Attempt by Soyinka to organize a long protest march from the South to the nation's capital in Abuja in the North is aborted by the regime. The country is plunged into constitutional and political crisis as Babangida is forced from office and hands power over to a lame-duck civilian-led caretaker government headed by Ernest Shonekan, a crony of the generals. In August Shonekan is removed from office and General Sani Abacha replaces him as head of state. *The Beatification of Area Boy*, a new play on the revolt of the underclasses of the Lagos slums, is given its world premiere at the West Yorkshire Playhouse, Leeds and is published.
- 1994 Publication of *Ibadan: The 'Penkelemes' Years – A Memoir, 1945–1965*, the third part of the author's memoirs.
- 1996 Soyinka forced into exile in the face of threats to his life from the Abacha regime which escalates repression, intimidation and politically motivated assassination beyond anything previously seen in the country. Publication of *Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigeria Crisis*.
- 1997–2001 President of the International Parliament of Writers.
- 1997 Soyinka and eleven other pro-democracy members of the internal and external opposition to the Abacha regime are charged with treason and placed on trial *in absentia*. Meanwhile, in association with other members of the external opposition, Soyinka launches "Radio Kudirat" which transmits broadcasts to Nigeria in English and the country's main indigenous languages challenging the legitimacy of the Abacha regime and exposing its isolation in the international community.
- 1998 On June 8, Sani Abacha dies unexpectedly and is succeeded by General Abdulsalami Abubakar. Two weeks later, on the eve of his release from prison, Moshood K. Abiola dies mysteriously. In September, Soyinka returns to Nigeria, ending his four-year exile.
- 1999 In January, publication of *Outsiders*, a volume of poetry. In February, Olusegun Obasanjo wins federal presidential elections and becomes civilian head of state in

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- October. Publication of *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness*.
- 2000 June 19, meets Mumia Abu-Jamal, the prominent African American death row activist and thinker.
 September 5, addresses Roundtable on Dialogue Among Civilizations at the United Nations in New York.
- 2001 August 31–September 7, attends conference against racism in Durban, South Africa sponsored by the United Nations Commission for Human Rights.
 July–August, unpublished play *King Babu* premiered in Lagos and tours a few Nigerian cities.
 October 19–21, International Conference on Soyinka's theatre at the University of Toronto, Canada.
- 2002 In mid-March Soyinka and five other writers representing the International Parliament of Writers make goodwill visit to Palestine and Israel in furtherance of peace in the Middle East.
 October 12, reads old and new poems in the distinguished Readings in Contemporary Poetry of the DIA Center in Manhattan, New York.

Abbreviations

<i>ADO 1</i>	<i>Art, Dialogue and Outrage</i> , Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1988
<i>ADO 2</i>	<i>Art, Dialogue and Outrage</i> , New York: Pantheon, 1994
<i>CP 1</i>	<i>Collected Plays</i> , vol. 1
<i>CP 2</i>	<i>Collected Plays</i> , vol. 2
<i>DKH</i>	<i>Death and the King's Horseman</i>
<i>IOP</i>	<i>Idanre and Other Poems</i>
<i>ME</i>	<i>Mandela's Earth</i>
<i>MLAW</i>	<i>Myth, Literature and the African World</i>
<i>OA</i>	<i>Ogun Abibiman</i>
<i>SOA</i>	<i>Season of Anomy</i>
<i>TBE</i>	<i>The Bacchae of Euripides</i>
<i>TI</i>	<i>The Interpreters</i>
<i>TMD</i>	<i>The Man Died</i>