

Creative Writing, Nationalism and Development: A Case Study of Wole Soyinka's Writings

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Abstract

This paper is an examination of the intercourse between creative writing, nationalism and development. It discusses creative writing in Nigeria and Nigerian nationalism in the works of Wole Soyinka, a powerful defender of black African cultural heritage. He is also a relentless critic of Negritude, the literary – cum – philosophical movement that affirms the integrity of black identity and the authenticity of black cultural values. Working definitions of creative writing, nation and nationalism and identities are also attempted. The paper equally discusses the author's technical strategies and thematic preoccupations which are considered to be vectors of nationalism. The paper argues that, whereas all that Soyinka has written from the time of Nigeria's political independence in 1960 to the present, exudes the aroma of cultural nationalism and represents the African Yoruba world – view, it nevertheless puts him in the category of “enemies” of Nigeria who expose its governments, one after another, before the international community as corrupt, criminal and incompetent, who incite masses of Nigerian people against the perfidious state and satirize the westernized elite as vacuous agents of social change. A few representative texts are selected from the author's works for illustration and a partly hermeneutical and partly historical perspective is adopted.

Keywords: *Creative writing, Development, Nationalism, African cultural heritage*

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Background to the Study

Creative writing is having the power to create an imaginary, original literary production or composition. In other words, while the audience and particular occasion of presentation are known to a speech writer, a creative writer has no idea and control over his audience who are largely readers. That is, creative writing is any composition that is in no way quilt of plagiarism. It is a more contemporary and process-oriented name for what has been traditionally called literature including the variety of its genres: Works which fall into this category include short story, novella, novel, epic, poetry, screen writing, plays/ dramatic writing etc.

Soyinka's conception of literature eschews a sterile, literal reproduction of social reality and favours a profoundly imaginative, symbolic and multilayered representation that engages the intellect and increases consciousness. On the one hand, he uses literature as a weapon of political struggle against all forces that negate life, imprison thought, and hinder or oppress creators of culture and, on the other, he frowns upon any attempt to reduce literature to cheap political programme and divest of its power to criticize all that is perceived as injurious to freedom. What is written, for him, is as important as how it is written. At other times, the Nigerian writer attempts to translate the indigenous culture itself into the English language in order to reach a wider audience and teach the world what it does not know about Africa.

What is nation? A nation, like most political and social concepts, is difficult to define; and the difficulty derives from the fact that elements that constitute a nation, such as culture, language, people and religion, do not appear in equal proportions in all the nations of the world.

Given the divergent social current and centrifugal pulls acting on the Nigerian polity, it is obvious that there is no stable national psyche. Multicultural and multi-religious, Nigeria also fails to count as a nation with a community of cultures. It is a conglomeration of diverse cultures and tribes yoked together by fiat of the British colonial authorities. If, ideally, a nation is a homogeneous entity or state, culturally, linguistically, and religiously, then, Nigeria is not one, for it is constituted of many nations or nationalities.

“Nation making from top” which is what the Nigeria project from the beginning to the present really is in Soyinka's view, “never does, however, appear to have much staying power. Plebiscites genuine plebiscites, without consent, or the freedom to choose to be a citizen, or to opt out of a polity, the notion of a nation becomes a tyrannical imposition, as is currently the case in Nigeria. However, it must be admitted that it has been difficult to make nations of most post-independence African countries, where ethnicity is a powerful force. Among the causes identified by Connor for the failure of African government to forge national unity are the following; the colonial divide-and-rule policy and its legacy of uneven development which also sowed the seed of disunity. African countries that have experienced civil war include Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Congo (Kinshasa), Ethiopia, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania (Zanzibar), Uganda and Zambia.

What is nationalism? There are multiple theories of nationalism, a sentiment-laden concept which, like religion, excites so strong a feeling in people that sometimes they are ready to sacrifice their lives for whatever arouses the intense sentiment in them. Nationalism is severally defined on the basis of culture, education, ethnicity, language, passion, race, religion, and tribe. It is thus possible to speak in terms of nationalism, linguistic nationalism, economic nationalism, ethnic nationalism, literary nationalism, political nationalism.

What is development? Literally, development constitutes a new stage in a changing situation. However contextually, when this is used to refer to a country, it is about a sovereign state as it relates to quantity of life, economy, and advanced technological infrastructure relative to others. Common criteria for evaluation include; income per capital and gross domestic product. It is also about standards of living, income qualities etc.

Creative writing and nationalism in Soyinka's works

Literature is a veritable medium for propagating the ethos of nationalism, for mobilizing the masses for economic development, for teaching cultural and moral values, for inculcating in people principles of patriotism, for keeping the racial memory alive, and for awakening people to the task of nation-building. The introduction of Western education had a tremendous impact on the development of nationalism and literature in Nigeria. The University of Ibadan produced many Nigerian writers like: Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo, J. P. Clark and Soyinka among others.

A great Nigerian cultural nationalist, Mbonu Ojike used journalistic writing to advocate a return to authentic African names and wearing of native clothes. But it was the graduates who had studied literature as a discipline in the university who gave Nigeria its first fruit of high quality creative writing in English. *Black Orpheus*, an Arts and Culture magazine produced by Western Region Ministry of Information on the initiative of Ulli Beier, and Mbari, a literary club, both based in Ibadan, were instrumental in the literary development of the writer.

An examination of some of Soyinka's works is proper at this juncture in order to delineate his representation of trammels of nationalism in Nigeria. We shall begin with an investigation of *A dance of the Forests* (1973), the play he wrote to commemorate Nigeria's attainment of political independence in 1960, which was turned down by the Ceremonial Committee because its critical temper and gloomy atmosphere ran counter to the joyous mood of the occasion.

A profoundly prophetic and visionary work, the play is intended to serve as a warning to leaders of the new state of dangers that lie ahead, to sensitize them to impediments to nation-building, and to remind them of mistakes of the past that must be avoided if the country is to be united and strong and to make rapid progress. Among insinuations made in the play about the future of the country are corruption, violent crimes committed in pursuit of self-interest and survival, perfidy, waste of resources, economic adversity, civil war, and the possible disintegration of the young polity, which really is a patchwork and therefore needs to be handled with great care. A symbol of the new State, "*Half-Child*" cries out and ejaculates his fears:

*I who yet await a mother
Feel this dread
Feel this dread
I who flee from womb
To branded womb, cry it now
I'll be born dead
I'll be born dead. (Soyinka 1973c:64)*

Rather than paying attention to the premonition of the child, whose life hangs in the balance as he plays a game of Sesan with death, and to the frightful prophecies made by the Spirits of the elements concerning the fated future of the community, the people recall vain past glory and are lost in a giddy swirl of purple and velvet and the false euphoria of freedom, and thus allow the playwright's message to go to waste. As far as they are concerned, the era of greatness, the African Renaissance has come with Independence and it calls not for remonstrance but for celebration and jubilation.

To rid the celebrants of their illusions of their past glory and nobility, the playwright takes them back to pre-colonial times, precisely to the twelfth century, to behold the egregious acts of corruption and treachery in the court of Mata Kharibu, a tyrannical emperor who stole the wife of another ruler and wanted to go to war to retrieve her trousseau, which he unabashedly called her dowry which must be paid by her former husband before there could be peace. The promiscuous courtesan of a wife had a captain gelded and sold into slavery together with his pregnant wife and sixty soldiers who were under his command, because he refused to sleep with her. “*Half-child*” is the fruit of the seed in the pregnant woman, which indicates that the present that is being celebrated is a product of a horrendous past crime the sale by black Africans of their own brothers and sisters into slavery. Court Historian took a bribe of money and approved Slave. Dealer's galley which was unfit for human cargo. It is no surprise then that a council official takes a bribe in the “present” and changes the load capacity of a lorry from forty to seventy passengers. When the vehicle has an accident and catches fire while conveying school children to the independence celebrations, only five souls survive.

Virtually all the prophecies made in the drama have been fulfilled. Nigerians have been misled and civil war has been fought. The country's history has been a bloody record of bestiality, death on a massive scale, greed, lawlessness, lust, ruthlessness, and tyranny. “We asked for statement”, Old Man complains in the play, “and we were sent executioners” (Soyinka 1973:29). Soyinka's nationalism differs from that of most Negritude writers who idealize and romanticize pre-colonial African society. He looks critically at the past and the present and takes mental leaps that enable him to make correct prognostications about the future and how accurate have been his prophecies!

Nationalism, whether as a political ideology or as a sentiment, reached its peak in Nigeria during the struggle for independence. Racial insults, denial of equal rights to educated Nigerians who were sometimes more qualified than their British counterparts in the Colonial service, instances of struggle by conquered European people for liberation from their

conquerors, the defeat of Fascism and Nazism, the birth of socialism in the USSR, the realization that the British were neither infallible nor invincible and could be as wicked as their Nigerian subjects, the confusion of colonial policies, the dishonesty and high handedness of the colonial administration, as exemplified by the murder of twenty-one coal miners in Iva Valley and impositions of heavy taxation that led to women's riots in Aba and Egbaland, and the carnage and horrors of the First and the Second World War gave Nigerian nationalists enough confidence and justifications for beginning the agitation for sovereignty.

After the establishment of political sovereignty, Nigerian nationalism was overtaken by tribal loyalties and competition among political parties for the control of border, regional and federal government. Political dissension takes the form of ruthless contests between Eshuoro and Ogun for the lives of Demoke and *Half-Child* and between the human community and the forest dwellers in the drama. The parties themselves were formed along ethnic lines and had their origins in cultural and tribal associations and students' movements. The Northern People's Congress (NPC) controlled the North, the Action Group controlled the West, and the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroon controlled the East. The attainment of political independence did not automatically lead to the creation of a democracy or economic buoyancy. Soyinka foresaw the abortion of the politico-economic dream of Nigerians at the time of independence and thus concluded that it should not be a moment of feasting but, as depicted in the drama, a time for sober reflections, of exorcising the ghosts of past perfidy, unholy rivalries and spurious suspicion and of laying a solid foundation for national unity and economic prosperity.

The play is very rich in Yoruba folklore. It reads like Soyinka's translation of Yoruba cosmology and ontology into a living drama that works at several levels; national, regional, continental, and global. The living, the dead, and the unborn co-mingle; town dwellers and forest dwellers are locked in combat; and Forest Father (God) himself walks on earth and communes with mere mortals in an intimate manner, and not as a mechanistic device for plot resolution.

The intolerance of opposition by the central government, the penetration of ethnic politics, the boycott of 1964 federal elections, the south western election rigging crisis of 1965, the imposition by the Balewa-led federal government of a state of emergency on the region, and the plan to waste the west provoked the Nigerian Armed forces to using power in a bloody military coup on 15 January, 1966. The execution of the coup was rather lopsided and tainted with ethnic politics that it ironically set out to abolish. That taint led to greater ethnic conflicts that resulted in a pogrom against the Igbo, which in turn plunged the new state into Civil War (1967-1970). Reflecting on the deep wrench in the national psyche wrought by the war and its possible aftermath, Soyinka despaired for crude political nationalism and quoted lines of Platen in *The Man Died*:

And those who hate evil in the depth of their heart

*Will be driven from homeland, when evil Comes to be worshipped by a nation of slaves
Far wiser to renounce such a country than support the yoke of blind mob hatred
In the infantile aggression of a people. (Soyinka 1975, 183)*

Soyinka himself was a victim of the war, for he was not only incarcerated but was also kept in solitary confinement for almost two years, principally because he opposed the war. Although the federal authorities accused him of helping Biafra to purchase a war plane, there was no proof to substantiate the allegation. The writer was made to suffer for being patriotic. His cynicism about the war negated the nationalistic enthusiasm of both the federal government and the secessionists.

Perhaps, the most accurate prediction of all is that the military would repeat the mistake of civilian politicians, who plunged the country into chaos because they wanted to stay in power forever. As he puts it: "(Soyinka 1975: 171). Prolonged military rule has destroyed the moral and social fabric of the polity.

Soyinka has a sizeable collection of works that satirizes the military whose successive interventions in the politics of the country increasingly aggravate its condition. Yakubu Gowon, who is portrayed in *A Shuttle in the Crypt* as a tyrant, appears as an angel if compared with Ibrahim Babangida, who in turn looks like a saint if set beside Sani Abacha, during whose regime Nigeria became a pariah state in the comity of nations and its debacle reached its nadir. The cancellation by the Babangida government of the 1993 presidential election, which was globally adjudged the fairest and most peaceful ever conducted in the country, provoked a virulent resurgence of ethnic consciousness and almost led to the disintegration of the polity. In *The Open Sore of a Continent* Soyinka uses the metaphor of "a miracle birth" for the election because Nigerians, for once, jettisoned ethnic politics, tribal loyalties and religious differences and voted massively for M. K. O. Abiola. In *Ibadan, the Penkelemes Years*, Soyinka rightly accuses the colonial government of "sowing the seeds of discontent in revenue sharing and lopsided development, through its imposition of false census figures on the new nation". "It was the British", he avers, "who taught electoral rigging to Nigerians" (Soyinka 1994, 332).

In Soyinka's record album titled "Unlimited Liability Company", the song "*Eti ke Revo Wetin?*" makes a mockery of the Ethical Revolution of the Shehu Shagari government and exposes its hypocrisy and that of other phoney government projects, such as the National Housing Programme and the Green Revolution of the then ruling National Party of Nigeria, the Mass Mobilisation for Social Justice and Economics Recovery, the Better Life for Rural Women, and the National Orientation Programme of the Babangida era, and Operation Feed the Nation of the Obasanjo military regime. Most government programmes are veritable conduit pipes for diverting public funds into private pockets.

Opera Wonyosi excoriates all segments of the Nigerian society and pronounces all guilty; the armed forces who usurp the popular will and tyrannize, the light-fingered pickpockets, the corrupt business class, fashion crazy fops, voluptuous money-guzzling whores, bloodthirsty and merciless armed robbers who are in love with easy life, fibbing beggars, profiteering market women who take trade as war, lecturers who trade marks for sex, materialistic men who detest poverty and kill their wives in money rituals, obsequious toads who beg their way up, soldiers who beat civilians black and blue in crude demonstrations of power in the streets,

and the masses who find spectacles of firing squads exceedingly entertaining. Even false Christians and hypocritical Muslims are not left out of the farcical parade.

The discovery of oil in commercial quantities was a curse rather than a blessing on Nigeria. It fuels the fire of greed that destroys the people's traditional ethics. Discounting sports, the administration of which is vitiated by ethnic considerations, what unites Nigerians is the conspiracy of oil and corruption.

As Christianity teaches, death is the punishment for sin. The death of Nigeria is posted in the poem "Elegy for a Nation" in *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known*. Soyinka evaluates the economic, political and technological development of Nigeria forty-two years after independence and considers it nil. The country perambulates without progressing. He comes to the despairing conclusion that the nation is metaphorically dead:

*I thought the form I spied beneath the frosted glass of a fifty-carat catafalque
Was the face of our own dear land. (Soyinka 2002, 68)*

Kongi's Harvest depicts African-Nigerian nationalism as a struggle between the emergent intellectuals who replace the European colonialists and the traditional political authorities. If it appears that Soyinka's sympathies lie with the old order, the reason is that it is creative and self-sustaining, unlike the modern that is barren, imitative and parasitic. In *The Lion and the Jewel* Baroka demonstrates high acumen and sexual virility, despite his old age, and uses native intelligence to win Sidi's love, which is also desired by Lakunle, a village teacher, who thinks paying a dowry on a woman reduces her to a chattel. Although Lakunle is a modernist, yet he is secretly jealous of Baroka who represents tradition. Hear him: "Ah, I sometimes wish I led his kind of life / such luscious bosoms make his nightly pillows" (Soyinka 1974, 25).

However, Soyinka's nationalism is moderated. He exposes Baroka's corrupt deed of offering a bribe to the white surveyor in order to get him to divert the railway far away from his domain. Baroka gives genuine reasons for not throwing his gates open to modernity. As he puts it: "I do not hate progress, only its nature / which makes all roofs and faces look the same" (Soyinka 1974, 47). Aiyero in *Season of Anomy* exemplifies his ideal of community, where people share things in common, life is integrated into the rhythmic whole of nature, and cosmic harmony is achieved. His political philosophy is some indeterminate version of socialism that gives adequate room for individual freedom and is rid of dogma and the rhetoric of violence. In *Death and the King's Horsemen* (Soyinka 1975), he not only gives ritual suicide a political interpretation but also excoriates Elesin, the representative of the traditional political authorities, for feeding greedily on the fat of the land, abdicating his responsibility, and betraying his people at the hour of need.

In *Camwood on the Leaves* (1988), one of Soyinka's early dramatic works that demonstrate his cultural nationalism, Isola, son of Reverend Erinjobi, rejects Christianity and embraces the indigenous religion. Disowned by his father, because he impregnates Morounke, participates in *egungun* (masquerade) dances and sings *egungun* songs, he goes into a bush and becomes a forest dweller who hunts snails for a living. Isola refuses to accept his father's Christian moral

judgment that impregnating his lover, to whom he is not yet married, is a sin. He names a boa in the bush that is fond of breaking the eggs on his familiar (a tortoise). Erinjobi, gives the tortoise the name of his mother Moji, and sarcastically calls his father “minister”, discountenancing the annoyance and remonstrance of his mother (Soyinka 1988b, 116).

He exposes religious charlatanism of false Christian prophets and dubious miracle-workers in *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1974), *The Interpreters* (1980) and *Requiem for a Futurologist* (1985) and satirizes the corrupt priesthood of African traditional religion in *The Strong Breed* (1973c) and in the poem “The Hunt of the Stone” in *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1972). He is never completely at home in either culture or earlier religion.

Isola, unlike Bero in *Madmen and Specialists* (Soyinka 1974), is not a power-possessed parricide. On the contrary, he simply removes the predator that destroys his joy and that of his beloved. The song *Mo j'awe gbegbe* (I pluck forget-me-not leaves) sums up the playwright's message that Nigerians, nay, Africans, must fight for freedom and help themselves to develop, if they were not to be left behind, forgotten by other races, and become the laughing-stock of the world. It is with the same wish that D.O. Fagunwa ends his Yoruba epic *Ogboju Ode ninu Igbo Irunmale*, translated by Soyinka into English under the title *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*: “your nation will wax in wisdom and in strength, and we black people will never again be left behind in the world” (Fagunwa 1982: 140). *Gbegbe* leaves metaphorize the antidote that neutralizes the power of the virus in the European culture that infects and threatens to kill the “Cremation of a Wormy Caryatid” (Soyinka 1988), which mourns the desecration of African cultures and looting of the people's artifacts by missionaries and European art connoisseurs.

“Obstacle Race” in *Before the Blackout* (Soyinka n.d.) prefigures *The Road* (Soyinka 1973) and evinces Soyinka's abiding concern for road safety in Nigeria, perhaps his most patriotic engagement in the country to date. In Nigeria, road signs are sometimes placed in wrong places and covered by bushes, drivers violate traffic regulations; vehicles are overloaded, not regularly serviced, and lack essential parts such as trafficators; police checkpoints are located right in the middle of the road and at sharp bends, and thus constitute dangers to motorists; and jolly happy drivers make music with their horns and honk endlessly. In the hilarious revue, which also functions as an indictment of colonial administrators and their civilizing mission that left the colonies still groping in the dark, Lady (Florence Nightingale) and Dr. Livingstone, two foreign visitors, are initiated into the madness that is displayed by drivers on Nigerian roads: Lady (*Waves suddenly*): Oh, what a nice man. Did you see him? He was waving to me

Driver: He was not waving ma'am, she was signaling left turn (Soyinka n.d.:33)

Soyinka's nationalism recognizes the primacy of internationalism in certain areas of national life. Nationalism is expected to shun universal literary and critical criteria, standards, norms and practices and embrace a regional matrix of artistic principles, but he eschews such a narrow definition of literary nationalism. He defends the right to use knowledge acquired from other parts of the world if it is not injurious to the development of one's intellectual growth and

national development. Hence he employs Western artistic methods and techniques, alludes to Greco-Roman mythology, and borrows concepts from Oriental philosophy. A hard-core nationalist, he is also cosmopolitan in the field of literary production and consumption. His nationalism is a far cry from that of the Chinweizu group who sets for itself the task of decolonizing African literature but acknowledges neither universal dimensions nor dynamics of the indigenous culture to which the members desire to return nor elements it shares with other cultures.

Another area in which Soyinka's nationalism is made manifest is the rough-and-tumble world of political struggle. An account of his interventions in the sleazy politics of the First Republic (1960-1965), especially the famous radio hold-up in which he substituted his own short recorded speech for the planned broadcast of the Governor of the Western Region, whose party had just rigged an election, a hold-up for which he was tried and acquitted, is given in *Ibadan the Penkelemes Years* (Soyinka 1994). Rather than pledge his loyalty to the government of the Western Region headed by S.L. Akintola, whose credo was that the University of Ife, then based at Ibadan, must support the government of the day, he tendered his letter of resignation. He played a major role in the worldwide campaign against Abacha's despotic regime. Hinted of the dragnet spread by the State Security Service around him, he fled into exile. Yet Abacha sent his goons and hired assassins after him. It was a running battle between the dictator and Soyinka, who resorted to an underground radio station to sensitize the world to the barbarities of the Abacha regime.

Explorations of indigenous folklore and myths constitute a major plank in the frame of Soyinka's cultural and literary nationalism. He used the Ogun myth in "Idanre" to explicate the paradox of human creativeness and destructiveness and the duality of nature (1967). He demonstrated the significance of the will in the cultural reproduction of life. What is lacking in contemporary Nigerian society is a leader like Ogun, who sought and found knowledge and with it inaugurated an iron technology and procured a solution to the problem of separation of divinity from humanity. As depicted in his writings, Yoruba deities are metaphors for essences birth, death, chaos, order, division, unity, fertility, sterility, hate, love, peace, violence, war, and etcetera. The Nigerian political leadership, like Elesin in *Death and the King's Horseman* (Soyinka 1975), has demonstrated time and again its unwillingness to sacrifice itself for the people. Its main interest lies in spoils of office.

Conclusion

The true Nigerian nation that would arouse in its writers genuine feelings of nationalism and patriotism does not yet exist. But there is no cause for pessimism. If it took centuries to build Britain, France, Germany and the United States, then, it is illusory to expect the Nigerian nation to be constructed in one generation. Nevertheless, Nigeria might end up a manqué state, for a fool at sixty is a fool forever. All its institutions cultural, economic, educational, health, political, social, and technological are plagued by the *abiku* syndrome. Their services are erratic and unreliable. The country itself may as well continue to manage the symptoms of the incurable disease, the causative virus of which quarantines and paralyzes the much-desired but elusive virus of nationalism. Although Nigerian literature is rich in cultural nationalism, as

exemplified by the works of Soyinka discussed in this paper, it is largely void of vulgar political nationalism. Ethnicity is not always a negative quality and, like miscegenation, could be a source of strength. Its great potentials are yet to be tapped and realized in Nigeria. There are feeble attempts by Nigerian writers to write across cultures in the country. It is also a quest for national unity and economic development. The use of characters and cultural practices drawn from Nigerian ethnic groups other than the author's serves the purpose of the expected national integration.

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