

1986 marks a deeply ambiguous watershed in our current cultural condition.

*Biodun Jeyifo*

'The best way a writer can serve a revolution is to write as well as he can.' That goes for the peaceful revolution of culture as well; in Wole Soyinka's fearless searching of human values, which are the deep integument of even our most lyrical poetry, prose and whatever modes of written-word-created expression we devise, he never takes the easy way, never shirks the lifetime commitment to write as well as he can.

*Nadine Gordimer*

The effect on African literary creativity of the Nobel Prize in Literature awarded to Wole Soyinka in 1986 has been generally positive.

*Tejumola Olaniyan*

Africans engaged in literary politics to reflect their perceptions of particular political times and in the forefront of literary politics in postcolonial Africa was Wole Soyinka.

*Macharia Munene*

**LITERARY DISCOURSE**

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Reflections on African Literature, Governance and Development

Gbemisola Adeoti  
Mabel Ewethnomo

AFTER THE NOBEL PRIZE

# Reflections on African Literature, Governance and Development

Edited by  
Gbemisola Adeoti



ASSOCIATION OF NIGERIAN AUTHORS

**After the Nobel Prize:  
Reflections on African Literature,  
Governance and Development**

*Edited by*

**Gbemisola Adeoti  
&  
Mabel Ewrierhoma**



ASSOCIATION OF NIGERIAN AUTHORS (ANA)

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## Preface

Twenty years is a long time in the history of any individual, association or nation. During this period of time, a lot is expected to have been accomplished in several areas of human endeavour. Apart from the removal of cultural and moral barriers, new innovations and frontiers could also be created.

It is in view of the above that the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) decided to organize a colloquium to mark in August 2006, the 20 years anniversary of the winning of the Nobel Prize in Literature by Professor Wole Soyinka. Our intention was not just to celebrate the literary icon, but to also discuss the progress made in the fields of Literature, Governance and Development on the continent during this period. It was our hope that through the colloquium, we would be able to reflect upon and learn from the happenings and consequently devise signposts for the future of Africa. In pursuing this objective, we selected an array of scholars both in Africa and the Diaspora, cutting across all age groups to brainstorm on the theme of the colloquium.

Judging from the quality of the presentations and debates that emanated from the discourse, we are glad to observe that the objective of the colloquium has been met and even surpassed. With the publication of this book, it is believed that the debate and discourse will continue.

I wish to thank the contributors, editors as well as the publisher for rising up to the occasion even within a very short period of time. I also wish to commend the ANA executive council, our sponsors as well as all the participants at the colloquium for a remarkable achievement.

**Wale Okediran**

President, Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA)

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## Introduction: African Politics and Letters after Soyinka's Nobel Prize

As it has been well acknowledged across the globe, Wole Soyinka is a leading figure when it comes to assessing Africa's contribution to world literature in contemporary times. He is, no doubt, a committed writer whose literary oeuvre blends in laudable measure, political engagement with artistic virtuosity. Here is a writer who is also a political activist, social crusader, cultural philosopher, literary theorist, mythopoeist, dramatist, director, actor, film producer, essayist, critic and translator among other designations. Soyinka's works well exemplify the interventionist role of the African writer in politics, not only because the literature itself is born in the labour room of politics, but also because of the historical role of midwife constantly placed on the shoulders of statesmen, philosophers and intellectuals (among whom writers are) in the birth of a liberated and truly developing continent. Hence, his arts and politics leap beyond the text into the bewildering realm of everyday reality confronting absurdities on **the streets as well as in the State House**. Soyinka's adroit exploration of the indigenous African and Western artistic resources, written and oral, in this regard, has been well accounted for in literature. This much was not lost on the judges of the Nobel Prize when he was awarded that of Literature in 1986.

Expectedly, the award generated different reactions in different quarters, from sharing of palm wine in calabashes among friends to shrugging of shoulders in either indifference or indignation among detractors. To some, it was a landmark achievement for the writer, African literature and polity. To some, (quite an insignificant lot though), it was a Western prize awarded by Westerners to another Westerner, but this time, from a different clime. Nonetheless, the award was celebrated across the globe. In one instance, the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) hosted an International Conference in 1988 in Abuja. Amidst the

the economic chances of conference-holding elites without any impact on the lives of the ordinary African woman who inhabits the fringe of rural and urban existence.

In the realm of literature, writers like Ben Okri, Niyi Osundare and Festus Iyayi as well as Amanda Adichie and Seffi Atta among others, have won international literary prizes. The post-Nobel years witnessed a burst of creative energy from young writers, male and female. However, in spite of increasing activities on the literary scene, the socioeconomic and political ambiance in which the writers operate cannot be said to be sufficiently auspicious. The reading culture is in acute jeopardy, threatened in the main by declining literacy rate, economic hardship and stern competition from other modes of cultural expressions like the film, video, satellite television and ICT with its discouragement of the paper text.

It is against the backdrop of the African reality constructed in the foregoing that the Association of Nigerian Authors organized another round of stock-taking. The occasion was the 20th anniversary of Soyinka's Nobel Prize which was marked with an international colloquium from the 25th to 26th of August, 2006 at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife. Scholars and writers drawn from within and outside Africa presented papers on the theme – "Twenty Years after the Nobel Prize: Literature, Governance and Development in Africa". This book is, therefore, a product of that gathering, presenting twelve out of the contributions.

As evident in their papers, the scholars engaged the theme of the conference from different ideological, disciplinary and generational perspectives. While some approached the issue broadly from Africa's literary experiences as conditioned by sociopolitical variables, some delved more specifically into the literary creations of Soyinka as a vista for reflecting on Africa's unending predicament. There seems to be a recurrent tune, however. Though there is a cause for celebration, "it is not yet uhuru", to adopt the phrase of the famous Kenyan opposition politician, Oginga Jaramogi Odinga. As the presenters variously argued, the sky is yet to be cleared of the odious vapour of colonialism and neocolonialism. Quite trenchantly canvassed is an engaged literature that would assist in charting a more positive

direction for the continent in the 21st century.

Biodun Jeyifo set the tone with his reflections on the travails of Africa since the Nobel, in the face of an alarming descent into another round of colonization in the guise of: "neoliberal globalization". He notes that contemporary African literature emerged in the wake of global decolonization, thus, explaining its inherent *politicality* on the one hand and its dependence on writers, critics and scholars located within and outside the continent for nourishment on the other. Interestingly, in the last two decades, the conditions of African writing and writers as well as the polity have altered considerably for the worse. The scholarship of literature on the continent is equally affected. Jeyifo captures the grim reality thus:

The material and psychological conditions that African writers, critics and scholars of the fourth and fifth generations have had to endure in the last two decades which correspond to the period of hegemonic neoliberal globalisation have been nothing short of nightmarish, compared with the situation of the writers and critics of the first, second and even third generations... young people in general, but especially those in our tertiary institutions, and with regard to virtually all aspects of life chances, face daunting odds, they face material, psychological and spiritual debilities that were simply unimaginable in my youth...

The situation sadly privileges institutions in Europe and Northern America over Africa (the immediate source and subject), in the production, teaching, criticism and theory of African literature. One damning feature of the African mess, according to Jeyifo, is the decline (or is it death) of language, the soul and essence of literature as manifested daily in different media of mass communication. The pertinent question to ask therefore is: "Does the breakdown of the written and spoken English language reflect in the failure of the political systems on the continent today?" The Diasporic manifestations in African letters may mean well for Africa, but how do the teachers and the taught at home benefit from the creative and critical output across the Atlantic? With the

neoliberal global concerns at work, what is on ground in several homelands across Africa may not serve contemporaneity or even posterity well enough. We jettison standards to our own peril, for good writing is of utmost importance. Any misuse of language only pushes African writing into the abyss of non-recognition.

The loss of language signals disempowerment, loss of authority and inevitable recourse to violence, considering the primacy of the “word”, in human interactions. The sacredness of the “word” to writers and other practitioners of literature is well captured by Nadine Gordimer in her tribute to Soyinka. In her view, the experience of writing in Africa is ancient, yet modern. While acknowledging the peculiar conditions of African writers, she submits that their fate cannot be divorced from that of general humanity and for Africa to make meaningful progress in the 21st century, its politics must be right and its literature must find appropriate language to capture its soul. “We cannot speak of taking up the challenge of a new century for African literature unless we address the necessity to devise the means by which literature in African languages becomes the major component of the continent’s literature. Without this we cannot speak of an African literature”. This makes the writer an “agency of culture” engaged in politics. The reality of political engagement in Africa spans the pre-colonial and the postcolonial era. The sad development, however, is that despite this commitment, African writers are under siege, embattled and endangered.

Tejumola Olaniyan examines the developments on the African literary scene in the last two decades, focusing on Nigeria as a reference point for what obtains currently in the continent. To him, the literature is largely critical and topical, a reflection of the “hardly improving social conditions” that produce the writers. He notes that there is much to celebrate but the literary tradition is still menaced by the ogres of low literacy rate, harrowing experiences in publishing and poor readership, all connected to the travails of the political economy. These in turn he says manifest in the “homelessness” of African literature, whether at home or in the Diaspora.

From the general concern with broad themes, Bernth Lindfors approaches the specifics, revisiting the issue of the writer and artistic influences as manifested in the writing of Soyinka. Taking

off from the writer’s indebtedness to indigenous and foreign artistic sources, he examines the possible influences of Alan Paton’s “Discovery” on Soyinka’s play about apartheid South Africa – *The Invention*. The affinity between the two works is painstakingly drawn just as Soyinka’s creativity is duly acknowledged. The incidence of writers borrowing from the works of writers preceding theirs is common, not only in African literature, but in other writings of the world. Where it concerns Soyinka in terms of Lindfors’ claim is an aspect of cross-generational connectivity.

Soyinka’s dramaturgy since he won the Nobel Prize constitutes the hub of Gbemisola Adeoti’s paper. He identifies common currents in selected plays of the Soyinka. The first is a consistent concern of the dramatist with military dictatorship which he had to frontally attack along other forces in the civil society. The second is the choice and recurrent use of the dramatic aesthetic of satire. Textual analyses of *From Zia with Love*, *The Beatification of Area Boy* and *King Baabu* show that governance is still much hampered in Nigeria as well as other nations in Africa, by autocratic tendencies prevalent in 1986. Dictatorial regimes in military uniform or civilian regalia only pretend to have the interests of the masses at heart. The need for conscious activism to denigrate and eliminate such from power is underscored and the tool of satire makes the “down dressing” of such dictators affordable.

Edde Iji shares the concern of Lindfors with artistic influences, using adaptation as the focal point. Adaptation, he contends is a legitimate exercise in literature, facilitating the relocation, transfer, migration or transposition of a literary work from one sociocultural and temporal space to another. Soyinka is much at home with adaptation as evident in *Opera Wonyosi* (John Gay and Bertolt Brecht), *The Bacchae of Euripides* (Euripides) and *King Baabu* (William Shakespeare, Alfred Jarry and Eugene Ionesco). Iji’s analysis of *King Baabu* is marked with copious textual references and incisive commentaries. Iji’s contribution is an exercise across literary genres, periods, adaptative modes, with the liberties exercised by the writer adapting the texts made obvious.

Irene Salami, Mabel Ewvierhoma and Olu Obafemi reflect on the woman question in African literature, i.e. women as producers, consumers, critics, teachers, theorists and subject of literature. Irene Salami acknowledges the increase in writings of and about



women after the Nobel Prize. Some of the playwrights like Tess Onwueme, Stella Oyedepo, and Julie Okoh among others have created plays aimed at redressing gender imbalance within and outside the literary text. The Prize to her is a catalyst that ensures effective participation of women in contemporary African literature, both in its creative and critical dimensions. To buttress this, she examines how Soyinka's plays have served as influences to women writers.

In the same spirit, Ewrierhoma notices a revisionist agenda, a greatly positive disposition toward women characters, in the post-Nobel works of Soyinka. She calls it "a woman-centred agenda" as exemplified in the portrayal of Mama Put in *The Beatification of Area Boy*. In this agenda, "women are the centerpiece of critical space". She calls for a kind of aesthetics in future works of Soyinka where women will be dominant, "not just visible". Her reach into the register of the media for the term "agenda setting" reveals the interdisciplinary nature of critical concerns in the dramatic and media arts.

Olu Obafemi reviews the feminist discourse and the variations produced by its contentious nature. He avows that the female perspective in Nigerian literature has come to stay. While recognizing the topicality of gender discourse in literary production, he argues that "there has been a strong bent in women's literature in Nigeria towards social advocacy as a concurrent, cognate engagement with the woman question". He examines the contributions of women writers since 1986, generally using literature as a veritable tool for the reconstruction of society and the evolution of a democratic social order. In his submission, the growth of Nigerian literature in terms of craft and concern cannot be divorced from the growth of women's writing. Although not a woman writer, the trans-generic exposition undertaken by Obafemi is certainly womanist in dimension and critical in undertone.

Kayode Soremekun calls attention to the unsavoury reality of the disappearance of sound educational foundation, offered ironically by the colonialist "public" schools which nurtured the creative talents and combative spirits of the likes of Soyinka, J.P. Clark, Achebe, Saro-Wiwa, Osofisan, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Okot p'Bitek, to mention only a few. His discourse shows the current state of education in many countries of Africa especially Nigeria as

being an arid, infertile soil, too stifling for the production of future Nobel laureates. The governing elites over the years have been actively collaborating with external imperial powers that are more contented with the perpetual underdevelopment of Africa, to bring about this state of affairs. Among such local elites, according to Soremekun, are military men, bureaucrats, academics, politicians and journalists. This crop of elites, have refused to "speak truth to power". This is the bane of the African continent today.

An incisive perspective of the dimension of the postcolonial crises of development in East Africa is offered by Macheria Munene in his paper. He highlights the contributions of intellectuals and statesmen from Kenya to Tanzania and Uganda. Munene offers a frank critique of African intellectuals as collaborators with the obnoxious status quo or as voices of vision for a progressive socio-political order. The works of Jomo Kenyatta, Mbiyu Koinange, Walter Rodney, Oginga Odinga, Ali Mazrui, Bethwell Ogot, John Mbiti, p'Bitek, Ngugi and Ndera Oruka are discussed in this regard.

In the last, but by no means the least, paper, Yinka Lawal-Solarin, a publisher of children books is quite concerned with the education in Nigeria which is the bedrock of any meaningful development in all spheres of life in modern societies. He reviews the amazingly absent-minded and boringly repetitive National Book Policies of the Government since 1990, noting that all have been plagued by unseriousness, misplaced priority and inconsistency on the part of the federal government that designed them and ought to ensure their implementation. In his words: "When I look closely at the National Book Policies of 1981, 1990, 1999, 2004 and 2006, I see exactly the same document with the preface and the foreword couched in different languages but reflecting exactly the same aspirations". He advocates an urgent rethinking on the part of the government if the country must get out of the current overt stasis.

On the whole, the picture is grippingly grim, but not without relief. For the African continent to rise above its present quandary, it must seriously and urgently tackle those factors inhibiting its development. This implies enhanced literacy rate in local and foreign languages, improved reading culture, reordered gender relations in favour of complementarity, genuine democratization of the polity, and a viably implemented book policy among other steps. There is no doubt that African literature has grown

tremendously since the Nobel Prize of 1986. It will, however, do better under a more equitable economic dispensation, a participatory democratic polity and conscious/committed writers in the mould of Soyinka who transcend the traditional boundaries of arts and politics.

**Gbemisola ADEOTI**  
**Mabel EVWIERHOMA**