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BOOK REVIEW

Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism. Biodun Jeyifo. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 322 pp.

Just when one began to wonder if Soyinka criticism had exhausted itself and if anything new could be said about Africa's most complex and prodigious talents, comes a revisionist study from one of the members of the now moribund 'Ibadan Ife group' that offers a novel approach to reading Soyinka by examining the relationship between Soyinka's literary writings and his political activism. Filling up the hiatus since 1993, when some of the major studies on Soyinka had appeared, Biodun Jeyifo not only brings Soyinka criticism up to date by systematically integrating the different phases of Soyinka criticism, but also provides one of the most exhaustive and insightful analysis of Soyinka's fictional and non-fictional works constructing a post-colonial, even a postmodern Soyinka.

The tendency in Soyinka criticism is to view the activist writer's aesthetic and political radicalism in isolation or even to see them as oppositional. Jeyifo's correlation between the writer's proclivity for 'political risktaking' with 'artistic gambles' helps him to resolve one of the most troubling contradictions observed in Soyinka by his critics.⁽¹⁴⁾ He accomplishes this formidable task by making the Nigerian Nobel Laureate's titanic personality the focal point for examining his literary corpus, thus introducing 'subjectivity' not only to Soyinka and African studies but also into literary criticism. Yet Jeyifo's is not an exercise in sophisticated biographical criticism but a post-structural inquiry into the self-making process in relation to the maverick Nigerian writer's life and creative corpus. His emphasis on the textual construction of Soyinka's personality enables Jeyifo to eschew 'the metaphysics of presence' without having to pronounce 'the death of the subject' as he calls attention to the process of self-making through which Soyinka came to be central to the construction of the 'highly gendered postcolonial national masculinist tradition' in African writing, which is currently under a crisis.

After stating his central argument in the Preface, Jeyifo proceeds to examine Soyinka's works in different genres in separate chapters while showing, at the same time, the impossibility of maintaining generic divisions in a body of work that reveals an enormous amount of intertextuality and cross-referencing. The book is remarkable in its sustained intertextual reading that makes the discussion of any particular genre meaningful only in relation to the exploration of the same themes in other genres.

Jeyifo begins by looking at one of the neglected areas in Soyinka studies, namely Soyinka's three books and essays that have been highly influential in shaping African criticism. Splitting Soyinka's critical writings into the anti-negritudist, neo-negritudist, and neo-cosmopolitan phases, he shows that in place of a decisive rupture one should view Soyinka's critical works as 'a body of postcolonial discourse which neither avoids nor reifies the dichotomies of local and metropolitan'. Considering that 'the tragic mythopoesis', which Jeyifo places at the centre of Soyinka's aesthetic philosophy, has increasingly been interrogated by the post independence generation, the continuing relevance of Soyinkan aesthetics needs to be engaged more critically.

Drama being the genre Soyinka excels in is devoted two chapters, one exclusively to an unraveling of 'the ritual problematic' in 'the weightier plays'. Jeyifo subjects Soyinka's conversion of ritual formalism into a vigorous theatrical expression to a rigorous critical examination. By showing that Soyinka's use of the most autochthonous, pristine ritual form and idioms coexists with a view of ritual as emancipatory, Jeyifo attempts to balance Soyinka's strong faith in the interface between drama and ritual with 'what one may call 'anti-ritual', that is, his interrogation of the values of the rituals he himself employs in his plays. Emphasizing that Soyinka's drama must be understood first and foremost as theatre, Jeyifo extends the notion of 'the ritual problematic' from Soyinka to African dramaturgy and African aesthetics as a whole.

While considering prose as the most uneven of Soyinka's works, Jeyifo considers prose as singularly important in bringing closer Soyinka's writing and his activism. The reason he gives for this is that prose is a genre in which Soyinka places his greatest faith in his project of self-constitution as a

visionary artist and radical public intellectual. Lauding *The Interpreters* as a contribution to the genre of fiction, he dismisses *The Season of Anomy* as a dramatic failure for the simple reason that *The Man Died*, which deals with the same themes, offers one of the finest examples of testamentary writing, notwithstanding its flaws. But it is through his close analysis of the three autobiographical exercises, the bildungsroman *Ake*, the exile's book *Ibadan* and the tribute *Isara*, that he guides us through the self-making of one of the most fascinating figures in contemporary writing.

The Chapter on poetry offers Jeyifo a convenient point for steering the debate on Soyinka's alleged 'obscurity' and 'complexity' away from the routine polarized approach. He rejects the thesis as a criterion for evaluating Soyinka's achievement as a poet because, according to him, Soyinka's works take us beyond complexity to the 'complex evanescent experience of considerable lyrical forces'. Instead, he suggests that one should take as a point of departure the distinction between poetry and versification in the assessment of the nature of the poet's output. According to Jeyifo, Soyinka is both a poet and versifier but his critics are preoccupied with versification to the detriment of poetry. While Jeyifo commends the first two volumes for their articulation of personal and public pain with consistently exquisite and polished expression, he marks in the third volume Soyinka's returns race to the African discourse along with the notion of 'race men'. While agreeing that Soyinka creates the Promethean hero with great power, Jeyifo interrogates the negritudist strains of the totemic poet speaking for or on behalf of his people.

The concluding section neatly ties up the issues that Jeyifo set out to examine in the preceding chapters, the 'obscurity' charges, the burden of representation, the place of violence, the Ogunian archetype, Soyinka's literary avant-gardism and his political and ideological radicalism, and, finally, Soyinka's contribution to the constitution of an African and postcolonial discourse. Yet Jeyifo's voice, while pointing out the grand flaws in the big man, remains that of the celebrant. Coming from one who has been one of Soyinka's harshest critics, this is a tribute indeed.

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