
Although it is commonly acknowledged that it is Wole Soyinka’s exceptionally heightened use of language that animates all of his works in the various different genres (drama, prose fiction and translation as well as criticism), all too often Soyinka’s poetry is relegated to the obscure and impenetrable without any sustained effort being applied by reader or critic. Tanure Ojaide begins this study by noting the inadequate attention which critics have paid to Soyinka’s poetry relative to his work in the other genres; however, he attributes this neglect (mistakenly, in my view) to what he claims is the generally lowly status poetry occupies in African literature.

(Quite to the contrary, the singular accolade given such successful poetry volumes as the late Christopher Okigbo’s Labyrinths [1971] and Gabriel Okara’s The Fisherman’s Invocation [1978] – to say nothing of the positive response enjoyed by Niyi Osundare’s recent successes – should be sufficient to disprove any claim that critics of African literature hold poetry in low esteem, as well as providing a clear indication of, sad to say, what the real problem is: the fact that Africa has just not produced so very many good poets worthy of any painstaking critical attention.)

Ojaide is more to the point in remarking that the few exegetical essays devoted to Soyinka’s poetry have, in stressing his alleged obscurity, been boringly repetitive. As he proposes, the objective of his study is not only to “explicate the poems, but [to] do so with some unifying critical methods. I will discuss the voice and viewpoint of the poet in Soyinka’s poems with a view to establishing the poet’s persona” (3).

Though he acknowledges that “[a] writer’s poems create a personality for him, which may not necessarily be his personality in real life,” Ojaide places great faith in the approach to poetic analysis conducted via the figure of the speaker (the poet’s presumed fictive self), because, for him,
Critics who work on selected images or on selected themes deal with only the tip of the iceberg. But the critic who focuses upon the poet’s persona can provide a more comprehensive treatment of the poems. The persona unites all the poems the poet writes. The speakers of the poems express different aspects of the poet. Besides, psychologically, the many speakers emanate from the ego states of the poet. And he chooses his images according to the voice and viewpoint he wishes to project, for the poem is a literary arena in which he is a performer and his readers, his audience, listening to his voice and watching his gestures. Soyinka is a gifted writer who holds opinions that should be heard. He may be regarded as a maverick highbrow poet who is difficult and obscure. When examined from the standpoints of voice and viewpoint, however, I believe that his poetry is quite accessible. (3)

Regrettably, what Ojaide takes in his book to be a distinctly clear and accessible image or idea held by the persona of Soyinka’s poetry is not always made so obvious to the reader. Since the lack of clarity arises mainly from the tendency towards pedestrian explication, awkward phrasing, and at times just plain vagueness, the reader may not have the patience to follow the work to discover the striking case made in the better parts of the study.

These expository problems are in evidence right from the introductory chapter. For example, the main point pursued here appears to be that Soyinka draws from both his Yoruba background and his exposure to Europe (while the subsidiary argument – one that is equally sound – is that the devices of poetic composition borrowed from Yoruba ijala and oriki traditions, which account for the appeal of Soyinka’s poetry to many African readers, may be the very things that tend to stand in the way of efforts by Soyinka’s non-African readers to understand and enjoy his poetry).

But effective communication of these important ideas is hindered by such unpolished constructions as “The poet combines traditional African and Western influences so dexterously that he creates a personal authenticity” (5), “the Yoruba myths could prove obscure to the reader unfamiliar with the poet’s native world picture” (6), “the reader loses the profundity of the expressions” (7), “allusions and suggestions which are obvious to the reader knowledgeable in Yoruba myths but indiscernible to the non-Yoruba novice” (8), “The poet regards women as sources of sex and increase, and, consequently, he uses images of farming for sex” (9). Other irritating infelicities of this kind seriously weaken what would otherwise, at the very least, have been a lucid presentation, if not an entirely original contribution.

Similarly, in the next chapter, entitled “Early Poems,” an attempt is made to furnish a detailed explication of “The Immigrant,” “And the Other Immigrant,” “My Next-Door Neighbour,” and “Telephone Conversation,” which the author places among Soyinka’s early poems written between 1954 and 1959. But the discussion is riddled with misconstructions, such as “This was the period Soyinka studied at the University of Leeds and worked in England” (15), as well as vague and deadened expressions, like “The alliterative verse musically represents the sense of crushing”; “The satiric voice is established through many devices. The poem uses words with negative connotations to portray the lady”; “There is an abundance of descriptive epithets”; and “The voice and viewpoint are