

**Literature, Philosophy and African Intellectuals: Dinner with and in honour of
Prof. Wole Soyinka**

Speech by Prof. Mandla Makhanya

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Kgorong Building

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure today to celebrate with you and with the University of South Africa and the broader community, the presence of one of the esteemed African intellectuals of our time; a literary icon; an advocate for justice and a Nobel laureate, Prof. Oluwole Akinwande Soyinka. He is known affectionately to many of us as simply Prof. Wole Soyinka.

I would like to commend the Department of English Studies and the College of Human Sciences for having invited Prof. Soyinka to the University of South Africa under the auspices of Africa Speaks programme. I am delighted that as an institution we have an academic event at which the works of Professor Soyinka will feature prominently as the area for close interrogation, discussion, debate and analysis. This wonderful academic initiative will contribute immensely to the burgeoning corpus of African literature. As stated by some literary scholars:

“African literature manifests a very serious intellectual, cultural, literary activity. It has served African homes as a tool for the acculturation and socialisation of the young. It has been used always as a medium of instilling social awareness, creating national consciousness. Modern African literature is part of the collective struggle of the African intellectual of the second half of the twentieth century to restore the dignity of the Africa and provide a new

orientation for African people and all of people of African descent the world over.¹

A focus on studies of African literature and intellectuals of Soyinka's stature, is an important expression of our efforts in the university to entrench, in our curriculum, research and development, teaching and learning and innovation and community engagement, the importance of endogenous knowledge systems. We do so, though eminently mindful not to negate the dialogue with other knowledge systems.

A systematic focus on the works of Soyinka in the Africa Speaks Lecture Series, is a clear indication that his contribution to knowledge, specifically in literature, philosophy and politics, is enormous.

The immediacy and quality of his work, have, for instance, led the Professor of Literature at Harvard University, and the author of the celebrated book: *Politics, Poetics and Post-colonialism*² Biodun Jeyifo, to conclude that:

“all the book length studies, the monographs, and the innumerable essays on Wole Soyinka's writings and career take as their starting point his stupendous literary productivity; some thirty five titles since he began writing in the late 1950's, and a career in the theatre, popular culture and political activism matching his literary corpus in scope, originality and propensity for generating controversy. Soyinka had been writing for about five years when his first serious and mature works were published in 1963 and, in the words

¹ Refer to Manjula, V.N. A Song for the Road Wole Soyinka's imagery and Tradition in <http://www.languageinindia.com> 2012:7

² Jeyifo, Biodun 2004 Wole Soyinka Politics, Poetics and Post colonialism Cambridge: Cambridge University Press can also be accessed on <http://assets.cambridge.org> accessed on January 29th 2012

of Bernth Lindfors, he became instantly and forever, one of the most important writings in the English speaking world”.³

It has also led to the Indian literary scholars Reddy, Manjula and others to conclude that “He is a poet, playwright, novelist, essayist, critic, editor and translator, all rolled into one. He is undoubtedly the greatest of contemporary African playwrights. He has been hailed as one of the finest poetic playwrights who have ever written in English. Soyinka has to his credit fifteen plays in which he has made extensive use of Yoruba mythology. His plays helped to develop Nigerian theatre in which he presents the imposition of European civilisation on Africa as a threat to the African villager’s individuality”.⁴

Scholars in the continent and elsewhere acknowledge the place and role of Wole Soyinka in literature in Africa and in the world. Manjula for example, asserts that Soyinka “occupies a prominent role among African writers.”⁵

A cursory reading of Soyinka’s work suggests that he has published extensively in a variety of genres.

Some of his well-known works are:

- *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963),
- *A Dance of the Forests*, (1959),
- *Kongi’s Harvest* (1965),
- *The Strong Breed* (1976),
- *Opera Wonyosi* (1977) and

³ Jeyifo, Biodun 2004 *Wole Soyinka Politics, Poetics and Post colonialism* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press can also be accessed on <http://assets.cambridge.org> accessed on January 29th 2012 pg 4

⁴ Reddy, cited in Manjula pg 8

⁵ Refer to Manjula, V.N. *A Song for the Road Wole Soyinka’s imagery and Tradition* in <http://www.languageinindia.com> 2012:8

- *A Play of Giants* (1984).

His poetry include, inter alia, the following:

- *Idanre and Other Poems* (1967)
- *Ogun Abibiman* (1977).

His prison diary,

- *The Man Died* (1972); and

His poetry collection,

- *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1972) which experiences of political activism in Nigeria
- And a Collection of essays, *Myth, Literature and the African world* (1976), which depicts the interfaces of literature and philosophy.

Many critics acknowledge Soyinka's role as one of the distinguished Nigerian and African contemporary intellectuals. In his writings he covers, in his own inimitable way, for instance, the extent of human degradation and inhumanity. An enduring feature of his work is his penetrating social commentary and satire of the African condition. In *The Road* he focuses on the flotsam and jetsam of Nigeria's urban population.

His call to Africans to liberate themselves from political, economic and spiritual bondage have been repeated by many other writers. He knows what suffering means since he endured the pain and misery of imprisonment and exile. He also turned his attention to the twin evils of greed and corruption in contemporary Africa. In this way he asked his readers to "take a realistic look at the uglier aspects of African life".

Jeyifo argues that most of Soyinka's critics have generally viewed him as

Protean and multifaceted as an artist, but they also see a fundamentally unified sensibility at work in all his writings and activities. For such scholars, the fact that Soyinka has written in virtually all the literary genres, and the fact that he has sustained over the course of more than thirty years, a prodigious output of some eighteen works of drama, six works of translation, three works

of critical prose and innumerable pieces of cultural journalism and political polemics, all these facts do not in the least perturb the perception of a unified, integrated sensibility of Soyinka as an artist.⁶

Kola Ogung Besan further waxes lyrically about Soyinka's role as one of Africa's literary icons. Novelists and dramatists deserve to be taken seriously. Soyinka's clarion call for African writers to demonstrate that they have a vision has reverberated across the world. He says that, this is an aspect which "shows that he [Soyinka] sees the literary artist as a redeemer."⁷ He adds that it is the writer's "duty to guide his society toward a beautiful future."⁸ It is evident from many studies on his work, by many scholars that he has contributed immensely to knowledge production in Africa and for the world.

Professor Soyinka's presence amongst us today is a blessing. It is a blessing because literature, in its full glory, enriches life. It also expands people's horizons of meaning and making meaning or sense about life. It also allows people to bring into text, their ideas, images, symbols and thoughts. African literature in particular, is important for "its vigour, vitality and freshness of global literatures."⁹

Readings and writings on Wole Soyinka and his works

As stated earlier ladies and gentlemen,

Jeyifo argues that we should be interested in the works of Soyinka for a number of reasons:

⁶ Jeyifo, Biodun 2004 Wole Soyinka Politics, Poetics and Post colonialism. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press can also be accessed on <http://assets.cambridge.org> accessed on January 29th 2012 pg18

⁷ Reddy, cited in Manjula pg 8

⁸ Kola Ogung Besan pg 7-8 cited in Manjula pg 8

⁹ Refer to Manjula, V.N. A Song for the Road Wole Soyinka's imagery and Tradition in <http://www.languageinindia.com> 2012:7

- Soyinka “was unquestionably the most talented entrant to the field of modern African literature in the 1960’s, that first decade of the post-independence period in Africa. He is unmistakably a towering figure of the generation of literary scholars whose craft was shaped by post-colonial/ independent African literature:
- During the post-colonial period “Soyinka quickly emerged as the enfant terrible of the then ‘new’ postcolonial African literature. He also turned out to be African literature’s most vigorous literary duelists, his targets and adversaries including not only corrupt officials and politicians, but other writers and critics.”¹⁰

Our affirmation of Soyinka’s contribution tonight, should not be understood to preclude the contributions of many other African literary scholars and intellectuals who emerged during the pre- or post independence era.

It is our aim to foreground, in future meetings, the works of other writers from the African continent and the diaspora. These include, inter alia, Ousmane Sembene, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Chinua Achebe, Eskia Mphahlele, Kofi Awoonor, Mongo Beti, Abioseh Nichok, Efu Sutherland, Ama Ata Aidoo, Aiyi Kwei Armah, Dennis Brutus, Wally Mongane Serote, Keorapetse Kgositsile, Zakes Mda, Peter Abrahams and others.

Promoting African literature, Knowledge and African intellectuals work, is a constructive process of consolidation, conservation and promotion of African intellectuals and their works. It is a process, I believe, which speaks to our mandate and aspiration of being “*the African University in the service of humanity*”. It also speaks to the objective of the Principal and Vice Chancellor’s Projects, through the *African Intellectuals, Knowledge Systems and Africa’s Futures*, to be “the home of the African Project.”

¹⁰ Jeyifo, Biodun 2004 Wole Soyinka Politics, Poetics and Post colonialism Cambridge: Cambridge University Press can also be accessed on <http://assets.cambridge.org> accessed on January 29th 2012 pg 5

Conclusion

I would like to conclude my brief remarks by thanking Prof Soyinka for the breadth of his vision and systematic contribution to Africa. The tremendous power and vitality of the language in Prof Soyinka's writings allows you into the hallowed intellectual space of an African giant. He is a master at fusing, in his writings, "reality and fantasy, the literal and the allegorical, the modern and the classical". Do yourselves a favour and go to the Library for a peek at the cornucopia of Soyinka's literary fruits.

I want the young academic and emerging scholars in our midst to draw their inspiration from his genius and his tenacity as an African scholar and a universal man of letters.

You are all urged:

- To ensure that you are engaged or organic intellectuals in our society who apply your minds to the developmental questions of our society and the continent:
- That you rigorously raise important questions that help advance the course of South African and African peoples;
- Ensure that the voices of the marginalised and the excluded are heard; and that intellectual and academic research and knowledge production thrive.

Thank you and enjoy your dinner.