

Soyinka's Linguistic Legacy: A Comprehensive Review of "Soyinka's Language"

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Wole Soyinka, the pioneering African Nobel Prize laureate in Literature, occupies a vital role in the field of African Literature. In recognition of his paramount influence, Obioma Ofoego penned the book "Soyinka's Language", which focuses on Soyinka's distinctive linguistic prowess and explores his ideological choice to write in English. Positioned against the backdrop of extensive postcolonial research on Wole Soyinka, "Soyinka's Language" distinguishes itself through its comprehensive exploration of language as a central pillar of Soyinka's literary oeuvre. This monograph provides readers with an in-depth understanding of how Soyinka's ideological choice to write in English has shaped not only his own works but also the broader tapestry of African literature and postcolonial discourse.

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Introduction

Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka (1934-) is the most creative and influential English playwright in contemporary Africa, who has been hailed as one of the finest poetic playwrights. Based on academic resources gathered, the depth and volume of research pertaining to language remain comparatively scarce. From the 1970s to the 2000s, scholars such as Nwoga (1978) and Elimimian (2013) laid the groundwork for understanding Soyinka's language in poetic art, while Bardolph (1989) and Harding (1991) demonstrated a pronounced inclination towards exploring the intricacies of language art within Soyinka's dramatic oeuvre—*A Dance of the Forests and Madmen and Specialists*. However, the current landscape of language studies pertaining to Soyinka's dramatic works and his other literary genres, such as autobiography and literary theory work, appears to be inadequate, suggesting a significant gap in the scholarly exploration of his linguistic mastery and its multifaceted manifestations within the broader realm of literary arts.

Obioma Ofoego's book, "Soyinka's Language", published by Kwara State University Press, serves to bridge this gap. In the book, Obioma reserves his critical attention for Soyinka's nine plays, one autobiography and one literary theory work, and arrives at the significant conclusion that Soyinka's adept use of diverse linguistic and rhetorical devices and strategies endows his poetic art with a unique voice.

Layout of the Book

The book consists of five chapters, predominantly structured in a chronological sequence, ranging from *The Lion and the Jewel* to *Death and the King's Horseman*. However, a notable exception lies in chapter four and five, which deviate from this linear narrative, adopting a non-chronological organization. Through this deliberate juxtaposition, Obioma intends to encourage readers to engage in a nuanced exploration, where they actively weigh the thematic and conceptual depths of each chapter against the parallel investigations undertaken throughout the study, fostering a progressive and thought-provoking reading experience.

Chapter One "The Issue of Language, or Words' Consequence Lessons in Seduction and Conversion" takes *The Lion and the Jewel* and the *Jero* plays as research object, analyzes how the power of language could impinge upon the real world, and the way we live. In *The Lion and the Jewel*, the speech could reflect their individual characteristics. For instance, Lakunle speaks with a wagging tongue, embodying the foreign colonizer's personality. Conversely, Sidi's youthful utterances resonate with a sense of callowness, capturing the innocence and naivety of youth. In the *Jero* plays, language serves as a tool to influence the way people live. Brother Jero adopts a guise of a professional prophet, weaving together spiritual and political language to create a compelling narrative. His linguistic tactics serve as a tool for cheating, oppression, and manipulation, enabling him to exert control over others and satisfy his own needs. This comprehensive analysis not only proves that words have a way of penetrating us, but also underscores Soyinka's status as a writer who indulges in intricate linguistic exercises.

In chapter two "The Passing of Worlds, and the Language of Teaching", the author examines *The Road* and *Madmen and Specialists* as his focal point, exploring the complexity of language. Language is not static but fluid, that is, what was once coherent and familiar to our perception could become strange and unfamiliar as time passes and contexts shift. In the *Road*, the protagonist Professor utilizes a present tense narrative. However, beneath this surface-level immediacy lies a subtle ambiguity that blurs the line between recurrent and singular occurrences, as well as the distinction between enduring truths and momentary events. This ambiguity leads to a certain level of obscurity or uncertainty in interpreting, leaving readers to question whether the actions described are habitual or isolated, and it also reflects Professor's inner confusion. In *Madmen and Specialists*, the climactic cannibalistic ritual scene is subtly foreshadowed through the use of language. Specifically, the playful manipulation of words gradually erodes the crucial moral boundary that separates theatrical performance from real life, as well as the line between fiction and reality, ultimately leading to dire outcomes. Here, What Obioma tries to contend is whether we use language or whether language uses us.

Chapter Three titled "The Blind Spot of justice, or What Does The Onlooker Say?" places emphasis on Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*, *A Dance of the Forests* and *The Bacchae of Euripides* to illustrate the isolated onlookers' language. The isolate onlookers refers to those who show skeptical attitude towards the mechanisms of justice, such as Eman, Obaneji/Forest Head, Tiresias and the Old Slave. In the eyes of Obioma, the discourse used by these onlookers exhibits a dual nature: on the one hand, it conveys their empathy and compassion, while on the other hand, it inherently bears the limitations and biases embedded within their respective viewpoints.

Within chapter four "The Language of Being and Non-Being", the author Obioma turns his attention to prose works—*The Man Died* and *Myth, Literature and the African World*, with the intent of provoking the audience to contemplate the implications of a philosophy rooted in affirmation and personal experiences when it collides with the harsh realities and disintegration of societal structures. Obioma posits that Soyinka's choice of the title "The Man Died" embodies a distinctive articulation of mortality within an era where death has been so prevalent and familiar. Compared with "death", "passing away" or "dying", "The Man Died" means those alive ones who keep silent in the face of tyranny, signifying a deeper commentary on the apathy and acquiescence of the living in the face of oppressive tyranny. In delving into Soyinka's *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Obioma found Soyinka made a response to Descartes' statement. As is known to all, "I think, therefore, I am" stands as a hallmark of European rationalism. Soyinka, however, subtly shifts the paradigm, positing "I feel, therefore, I am" as a testament to the richness and depth of the African narrative landscape, which offers a nuanced and critique that transcends traditional Eurocentric thinking framework.

The last chapter "*Death and the King's Horseman: Rhetoric and Insinuating Possibility*" explores Soyinka's poetic language. In this chapter, Obioma begins by dissecting the language employed by the colonial couple, the Pilkings, uncovering a deep-seated arrogance and ignorance that permeates their discourse. He then shifts his focus to the poetic metaphor embedded within the ritual scene featuring the King Horseman, emphasizing that the richness of language—both verbal and metaphorical—is not chiefly about the expansiveness of one's vocabulary but rather about the meticulous crafting of words through strategies such as control, limitation, and repetition. Following this, Obioma probes into the final part of the play, where Soyinka's portrayal of death transcends conventional notions of mortality and non-existence. That's to say, Soyinka's presentation of death is neither a definitive cessation nor a state of non-being; it is a complex exploration of the human experience and the profound implications of the passage from life to death.

At the end of book, Obioma posits that skepticism serves as an integral aspect of literature, asserting that scepticism in literature is a quality of the poetic intelligence. This form of intelligence allows writers to express what they want without limitation. Most importantly, such kind of scepticism is realized though the medium of language itself.

Contributions of the Book

The book distinguishes itself through an array of noteworthy attributes, three of which stand out as particularly prominent and worthy of emphasis.

Firstly, the book functions as a comprehensive guide for readers, critics, and theatregoers alike, providing a vast expanse of research texts that delve into various facets of the Soyinka's language. Through its inclusive coverage, it offers an insightful exploration of the importance of language and Soyinka's usage of language, inspiring the public to rethink language we use in everyday life and literary texts.

Secondly, the book jumps out the realm of post-colonial research, offering a fresh and thought-provoking perspective on language. As a postcolonial writer, Soyinka writes mainly in English, Yoruba language also included. Thus, a few researchers are inclined to interpret it from the perspective of decolonization. While, Obioma takes a different approach. He places emphasis on the intrinsic meaning and power of language itself, exploring its agency and the ways in which it shapes our understanding of the world.

Thirdly, the book's structure and conclusion are elaborately arranged. The structure is the blend of non-linear and linear elements so as to provide readers with possibilities of understanding Soyinka's language. Regarding the incomplete nature of the conclusion, Obioma's acknowledgement of this fact highlights the complexity and elusiveness of the specific sort of understanding that literature can offer. It suggests that the author recognizes that there may be no definitive or final answer to the questions raised by Soyinka's language, but rather that the journey of discovery and understanding is an ongoing and evolving process.

Potential Shortcomings of "Soyinka's Language"

Taking a comprehensive view of the entire book, potential shortcomings in "Soyinka's Language" may become apparent through its occasional opacity and inconsistency. These traits can impede readers' understanding, particularly for those unfamiliar with his idiomatic expressions and cultural references. Moreover, the erratic logic may lead to a sense of disorientation that hinders readers' ability to establish a logical relationship between its various parts.

Conclusion

In evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of "Soyinka's Language", it becomes evident that the book serves as an invaluable resource for both scholars and theater enthusiasts alike. It operates as a lens, providing profound insights into Soyinka's skillful use of language across diverse literary forms. Furthermore, it expands our understanding of language's function: it is not just a conduit for storytelling or plot development, but also a potent tool for imparting significance and exerting influence over others. Consequently, the way in which we harness language is critically important; the words we select and how we deploy them hold considerable power. Additionally, language possesses agency, suggesting that it can dominate or sway its users. This realization emphasizes that language is far from inert; it is an active agent that molds cognition, behavior, and social engagement.

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