Rage Against that Good Night

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Between Defective Memory and the Public Lie: A Personal Odyssey in the Republic of Liars

by Wole Soyinka

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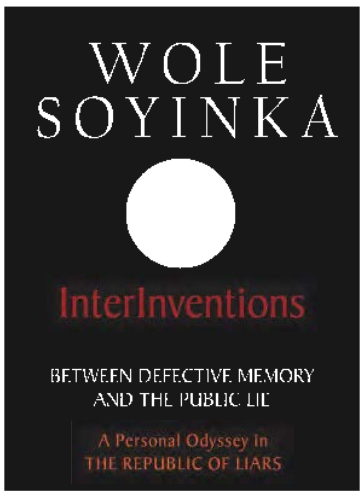
Wole Soyinka's book, *Between Defective Memory and the Public Lie: A Personal Odyssey in the Republic of Liars*, has elicited a lot of controversy and public ire in Nigeria. To many it would appear as a gratuitous piece of self-indulgence in that it addresses mainly his real or perceived detractors and critics. As a piece of edifying writing, where does it stand? One is forced to say quite low on the level of art. It does not seek to soothe frayed nerves or draw upon the finer emotions as expected from much of great writing. It is a book prompted and written in anger as he himself clearly revealed in press interviews. Even before the book's release, headlines screamed about Soyinka's intention to draw blood from those perceived to have wronged him. So what is there to gain in the literary outburst of a man we have grown accustomed to displaying public tantrums time and again? One would have to admit, not much.

As many other autobiographical offerings, Soyinka is the sole protagonist more or less in his own perennially interesting story. If he had chosen the path of Nobel respectability, a progressively empty and meaningless future might have been his and then he would gradually lose political relevance and probably become a less valued cultural icon; so rather let him be the recalcitrant thorn in the side of all; forever irreverent and ready to cause havoc like his Yoruba patron-god, Ogun, on rampage in cultured but perhaps unbearably sedate climes. Hearts might as well tremble upon sleeves until he returns again for the umpteenth eruption; let the will of Ogun serve to rend asunder and not placate us into that false state of sleep.

Soyinka is still raging in his final days with an attitude that says: 'I shall entertain you, I shall infuriate you, and by Jove, you shan't be bored!' It seems as if Soyinka is laughing to himself and isn't concerned with methodically demolishing the accusations of his critics while creating delightful but intermittent bursts of scribal efflorescence. One could vaguely picture him, a grand old man at eighty-one, gleefully giggling to himself saying: 'I'll get those bastards with yet another one of my poisoned darts'. But too much vitriol might become too much of a demonstration of excessive mean-spiritedness which trumps, or at least undermines, Soyinka's early espousals of supposedly basic, good-natured humanism.

It is not unusual that Soyinka would court such considerable antagonism and dispute. Soyinka revels in strutting his stuff in the public realm, which in Nigeria, as elsewhere in Africa, is a domain of amorality and impunity. He would have us believe that his interventions in that conflicted realm is informed by and good ethics. Now, how successful has he been in transforming that fractious sphere? Certainly not very successful judging from the list of persons who have managed to provoke his ire and the others who would end up doing so when they read his latest book.

Virtually no forensic evidence is presented to substantiate Soyinka's positions and views and it may well be that such evidence – even for reasons beyond his control – does not exist, and hence the question may be asked, why go through the trouble of branding people liars, especially if the bulk of them are unsavoury and are plainly attention-seekers? How edifying could this be and what are the literary merits involved?



As noted earlier, perhaps the greatest merit of Soyinka's book is the fiery refusal to sally forth into grey, old and bored respectability. Yes indeed old men should rage as much as possible against the dying of the light.

A couple or so of Soyinka's counter-accusations and denials are more juicy than others. For example, his treatment of former president of the Nigerian nation, Olusegun Obasanjo, although long on invective, is not as detailed and revelatory as that of Major R.O.A. Salawu, who was evidently a thorn in Soyinka's flesh as well as other well-intentioned Nigerians.

Soyinka's main grouse against Obasanjo, with whom he had previously maintained a suspect degree of cordiality, is that he had been judged an inept political analyst even though he might be a skilled hunter of wild game and a connoisseur of fine wines. Soyinka in turn described Obasanjo as 'economically illiterate' in press interviews preceding the release of *Between Defective Memory and the Public Lie*.

Soyinka is able to show how the pathologies of power in Nigeria attract and nurture unsavoury characters such as the aforementioned Salawu, Abiola Ogundokun and Godwin Daboh. These offensive characters surface each time there is a change of government, offering their services to anyone interested in their penchant for slander, blackmail and all kind of subversive activities usually committed on behalf of feckless public functionaries. Regarding such characters, Soyinka writes, 'the nation should however, for failing to strip such beings naked publicly, exposing, for civic edification, the infestation of its moral claims by liars in whom we encounter the approximation or even maximisation of Obasanjo's admittedly defective and deflective triad: Fraud, Rogue, Murder' (*sic,* p. 81). There is evidently something missing in the sentence cited above but this does not diminish Soyinka's thirst for blood as he would rather have moral renegades shamefully divested of their clothes and probably whipped in a market square as added retribution. This hunger for vengeance has always been a hallmark of Soyinka's career, especially when crossed by those he views as hustlers and opportunists.

Major Salawu is depicted as being thoroughly corrupt. Ogundokun built a professional career as a 'smut disseminator'. Obasanjo is called a 'seasoned predator' who seems to have a seemingly inexhaustible capacity for 'infantile mischief and for mind-boggling provocations', as described in a brief chapter cynically entitled 'The philosopher-king'. Not all of Soyinka's adversaries come from the political field. Chinweizu, an author of mixed Afrocentric credentials and a reputation for digging into Soyinka at every chance for his perceived Eurocentric orientation, least of all, winning the Nobel Prize for literature, is a target of brutal excoriation and is labelled a plagiarist to boot. He is also branded Chichidodo, whose major characteristic as a bird is 'a love of human excrement – but with a difference! As it dines on this human emission, it apparently makes a sound akin to *chichidodo* – to express how much the stuff disgusts it, thereafter resuming his feast with gusto' (p. 35). Peter Enahoro, aka Peter Pan, an author and journalist, courts Soyinka's vexatious mood by suggesting he was a common lackey of the Machiavellian General Ibrahim Babangida. And for that contravention, Soyinka refused to shake hands with him when they met in public.

Oftentimes, Soyinka's caustic attacks are not without wit, a lot of which is not really translatable. Soyinka continually straddles common Nigerian idiomatic expressions and standard English to create an impact and ambience that would be specific as well as rare for native users of the language. For instance, the former Governor of Ogun State, Gbenga Daniel, is bestowed the moniker Daani Elebo. Elebo is a pun for both party animal and fetish lover and can be employed interchangeably to devastating effect.

By all accounts, Soyinka has always been close to those in the corridors of power – or at least has often direct access to them – and, through his revelations, he has mostly been burnt by his close associations. It is often a wonder how he has remained productive in spite of the upheavals caused by his chosen public path. He readily admits to have had dealings with 'the poet Leopold Sedar Senghor (himself once a conscript and prisoner-of-war); traditional rulers like King Gbadebo II, Alake of Abeokuta, who would be chased off his throne by women; the revolutionary and fiery orator Fidel Castro, the urbane egg-head Bill Clinton; the reformist Paul Kagame; the take-no-prisoners Indira Ghandi; the universal avatar Nelson Mandela, the botanist Goodluck Jonathan or the donnish Yar'Adua, not forgetting the know-all Olusegun Obasanjo' (p. 23).

After all those years, Soyinka's passionate involvement with the Nigerian public sphere remains undimmed and it is indeed a boon that he hasn't suffered the fate of many gallant Nigerian public figures and intellectuals who exercised their obligations to intervene in the public domain and consequently suffered for it, sometimes at the cost of their lives. Christopher Okigbo, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Dele Giwa, Alfred Rewane, Kudirat Abiola and Bola Ige readily come to mind. It is difficult to imagine any other author in the world who has the clout to get away with many of the things Soyinka says and does. Such fame is very likely to centralise him, as it does, as the only public intellectual worthy of bother while deflecting attention from many of the interesting things unfolding around him.

In many quarters, Soyinka's book fanned apprehensions regarding the deteriorating quality of his work and considerable tarnishing of his reputation. In those circles, he appeared to be deliberately rubbishing the veneer of respectability his age and status ought to confer. But if respectability demands unnatural restraint and bourgeois complacency, then it definitely is not meant for him. And where other distinguished authors would rather fade into the mists of oblivion, Soyinka's rage and intractableness are what will continue to ensure that he is not forgotten.

In addition, some other critics have correctly observed that power is perhaps Soyinka's over-riding concern. Power features prominently in his public life and creative work. Soyinka was a formidable adversary of the General Sani Abacha's dictatorship but managed to maintain an unusually cozy relationship with the preceding regime of General Babangida. At face value, it is easy to separate both regimes, but, on closer examination, they are linked by the same dialectic of terror, chicanery and despotism. Abacha was Babangida's *de facto* number two strong man, even though he might have been officially number three on the hierarchy. When Babangida was forced from power in 1993, Abacha was selected to shield the preceding administration and to establish its continuity after its ostensible official termination. Babangida, more or less, remained untouched by Abacha, which further reinforces the line of continuity. Soyinka's treatment of both regimes would have us believe there was a rupture between them when they