

# The voice of conscience

For decades he was the scourge of successive Nigerian despots. Now aged 72, Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka tells Maya Jaggi how 'repetitions of history' - most recently the atrocities in Darfur - continue to haunt his life and work

When the Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka visited the Hay Cartagena festival in Colombia earlier this year, in a walled Spanish colonial town on the Caribbean coast, children in the streets instantly thought they recognised the black man with leonine grey hair. But they couldn't decide whether he was Kofi Annan or Don King. They might not have identified the great Nigerian writer, but they were certainly on to something: Soyinka is surely both pugilist and peacemaker.

Soyinka, who is 72 and won the Nobel literature prize in 1986 - the first African so honoured - has for several decades been an abrasive conscience for his country of Nigeria, and for a continent. Obsessed with the "oppressive boot and the irrelevance of the colour of the foot that wears it", he has charted the lethal gulf between legitimate authority and the "power that any goon can seize". A scourge of successive Nigerian despots and kleptocrats, he was jailed without trial for 28 months in 1967, most of it spent alone in a tomb-like cell, for trying to head off civil war with breakaway Biafra. The ordeal gave rise to his classic prison memoir written on toilet paper, *The Man Died* (1972), and drove him to self-imposed exile. Thirty years on, he was sentenced to death in absentia for treason under the even more brutal military rule of General Sani Abacha, whose crimes included the hanging of the writer Ken Saro-Wiwa.

We meet in a London pub on his way to give a lecture at the Guardian Hay festival at the weekend; and his subject is international culpability over what's happening in Darfur. Soyinka presided as chief judge at a mock trial last November when Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir was found guilty in absentia of crimes against humanity in Darfur. For the playwright, poet and novelist, who is also an actor-director, the symbolic court was "play-acting, but of a very serious kind". During the tribunal set up by Genocide Watch, Soyinka heard searing testimony, he says, from "witnesses flown out from southern Sudan, people whose families had been killed, or who had been raped or seen relatives raped or maimed - some broke down. They testified to the war crimes of the Janjaweed [the government's proxy militia], saying they raided villages and killed Nuba at any time."

Tracing the abuses to a vestigial legacy of the Arab slave trade that pre-dated transatlantic slavery, and likening the Darfur cause to anti-apartheid, when "non-Africans felt aggrieved by the assault heaped on humanity", Soyinka says: "This can't go on. Over 2 million refugees, and still raids by Janjaweed, backed by the Sudanese government military, with the war spilling into neighbouring countries." Instead of public indictments and sanctions with teeth, "people make token resolutions. It's yet another failure. I don't understand how this can be happening in the 21st century."

He says that all "hidden atrocities" are revealed eventually, even if many years later. "It all comes to light in the end. So why don't these would-be Stalins and Hitlers take a leaf from history instead of burdening us with exposing their crimes? Why does it have to happen again and again?"

The repetitions of history, whether as tragedy or farce, have haunted Soyinka's life and work. I first met him in 1994, when he warned despairingly of impending civil war in Nigeria, after the 1993 elections were annulled, the victorious Moshood Abiola jailed, and power seized by Abacha, the "butcher of Abuja". In his third volume of memoirs, *Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years* (1994), Soyinka reminded fellow citizens of an earlier "electoral robbery" in 1965, when he was arrested for

holding up a radio station at gunpoint and broadcasting a pirate protest - but acquitted on a technicality. Within months of our meeting, Soyinka's passport was seized by Abacha's regime, and he made a perilous escape on a 12-hour motorbike ride across the Benin border.

Punctuated by Nigeria's political upheavals, our talks have resumed in varied locations, from his literary compatriot Chinua Achebe's 70th birthday celebrations by New York's Hudson river, to a cous-cous joint in Paris, where he ironically toasted an end to exile after Abacha's unexpected death in 1998. Abiola died mysteriously in prison a month later. While the actor's resonant voice now seems fainter, his convictions remain just as firm.

After Nigeria's interim leader returned his passport "on a gold platter", Soyinka found his welcome "overwhelming. There was amazement at what it meant to others, although, within me, I'd never left Nigeria." Unlike his first exile, which entailed "an act of internal severance", he threw himself into opposition to Abacha's rule, in which his sons Olaokun and Ilemakin were also active. In *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*, a volume of memoirs published this month, Soyinka puts his lifelong belief that "justice is the first condition of humanity" down to an "over-acute, remedial sense of right and wrong".

He has a home in California, and affiliations at Harvard and Nevada universities. There is now a Wole Soyinka chair of drama at Leeds university, where he studied in the 1950s. Yet Soyinka has restored the house in his birthplace of Abeokuta, outside Lagos, built with the Nobel "windfall" only to be colonised by bats in his absence. It is the place, he says, "where I recover myself; it's me in every way". His sometimes melancholy new memoir pays tribute to the dead, from Soyinka's parents to his cousin, Afrobeat star Fela Kuti, and he says he intends to be buried in a cactus patch in the grounds of his house. He still yearns for the freedom to pursue savoured pastimes, from collecting African art and book browsing, to solitary hunting in the forests ("I 'take my gun for a walk' for whatever can be eaten, not for trophies").

"Each time I think I've created time for myself," Soyinka says, "along comes a throwback to disrupt my private space."

Tomorrow's inauguration of Nigeria's new president, Umaru Yar'Adua, is, for Soyinka, such a throwback. Along with international observers, he deems last month's presidential elections "no elections at all", so baldly were they rigged. "In some states there were no votes," he says. "We have videos of police commissioners carting off ballot boxes, and police looking on as thugs carted them off." Though the outgoing president, Olusegun Obasanjo, ended military rule in 1999, Soyinka sees his rule as "civilian dictatorship". He has now "made himself life chairman of the ruling party to dictate policies", he says.

In his memoir he blames Obasanjo - also from Abeokuta - for betraying him in the run-up to the civil war, landing him in jail. Yet far from holding a grudge, Soyinka now wonders if he bent too far backwards not to criticise Obasanjo, "for fear that it might be thought I was still angry. I'm friends with [Yakubu] Gowon [the former military ruler who jailed him]. I suspect there's a missionary streak in me as the inheritor of my parents." His schoolteacher father, "Essay", and the mother he called "Wild Christian" are depicted in his early memoirs, *Ake* (1981) and *Isara* (1989).

He initially saw Obasanjo as a "practical stopgap - a soldier who had been "civilianised" by prison and given a death sentence against which the nation rose on his behalf." Yet once in power, "he built a one-party dictatorship by force majeure". In his second term, after disputed elections in 2003, "he installed a reign of thugs; political assassinations reached a peak never witnessed before. There were crimes and killings. When they realised they had a monster on their hands, he tried to

manipulate the constitution to give himself a third term. The money to bribe legislators amounted to billions of naira." Yet for Soyinka, it was a defining moment when "the legislature refused to buckle. It provided a modicum of hope."

Any dictator, secular or theocratic, "merely implants the seeds of eventual rebellion," he believes. Soyinka belongs to Nigeria United For Democracy, a "temporary coalition". As recently as 2004 he was teargassed and arrested on a protest march against arbitrary police powers, though he was released within hours. "The police insist they have the authority to decide who walks the streets," he says. "How can they decide whether I can protest against government policy or not? It's unacceptable. If they say I need a police permit, I'll tear it up."

In his 2004 Reith lectures, published as *Climate of Fear*, Soyinka quoted a Yoruba saying, "Sooner death than indignity", and he sees dignity as simply "another face of freedom". Probing the "psychopathology of the zealot" ("I am right, you are dead"), he says the "lunatic fringe", in both state power and resistance to it, must be watched. In his view, Bush, like Obasanjo, believes in a direct hotline to God. "He says, 'We don't care about recognition from the world if God approves.' It's an extreme fundamentalism of the most dangerous kind - and it has led to Iraq." As for Tony Blair: "It was Blair who spearheaded Nato's involvement in Kosovo on behalf of Muslims battered by the Serb government. Blair acted as a man of principle - to give credit where it's due. Unfortunately, he got carried away by the moral authority he had acquired, failing to recognise George Bush as a fundamentalist of a different kind."

Soyinka sees Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe as "the latest King Baabu of the African continent" - an allusion to his 2002 play, a satire about a fictional but recognisable tyrannical general called Basha Bash. On Darfur, he hopes that not only will Arab and African countries alike pull their weight, but China will reverse its support for Sudan's government as the Beijing Olympics approach.

"One's own self-worth is tied to the worth of the community to which one belongs, which is intimately connected to humanity in general," he says. "What happens in Darfur becomes an assault on my own community, and on me as an individual. That's what the human family is all about".

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[http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/may/28/hayfestival2007.hayfestival#article\\_continue](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/may/28/hayfestival2007.hayfestival#article_continue)

## Voices from the frontier

The Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, who once fled Nigeria, considers the plight of writers in exile

The theme of exile appears to hold great fascination for literary critics, artistic consumers, anthologists and festival directors of all artistic genres; and a week or two had hardly passed after my vanishing trick from my homeland before I began to be bombarded with enquiries about how exile was affecting my writing: "Are you still able to write?" "What does exile mean to your writing?" Ad infinitum. Invitations from literary journals were not slow to follow, then desperate summonses to conferences, seminars, etc, all in search of the elusive quarry - both process and product - that bears the invisible stigmata of literature in exile.

Indignant, I refused to cooperate: no, I had not gone into exile, I was merely away from home on a political sabbatical. That, plus a dozen other variants of the Great Evasion in which I lavishly indulged. Among those variants, it could be argued that the one that remained in its own zone of subjective impregnability was that of identity. I was not in exile because I did not feel that I was in exile: I feel, therefore I am; I do not, therefore I ain't. I had not remotely begun to sense the beginning of an exile identity. Even if, objectively, some obstinate critic would refer to me as having swelled the increasing stream of exiled Nigerian writers, professionals and intellectuals, he would be hard put to it, I insisted, to prove that my identity was thereby transformed and could now be described not as African, Nigerian or Yoruba, but as uniquely Exile. Of course I knew I had gone into exile. I had, however, closed my mind: I simply set up barriers against the acceptance of the condition of exile.

Going into exile was one thing, I argued, arriving there was another. Who was to tell me that I had arrived? That unique status of going into, but not having arrived at, was a luxury I could bestow on myself with the authority of lines from Lenrie Peters:

Earth has nowhere to go

You are at the starting point

Jumping across worlds

In condensed time

After the awkward fall

We are always at the starting point

Those lines are from his poem "Parachute Men"; and if ever there was an image that is appropriate and definitive on the liminal but dynamic condition of the exiled writer, the parachutist or free-fall glider is surely a front runner.

I began to ask myself the question: When is exile? Other tantalising variants follow: Where is exile? Is there a state of exile? For surely even an exile must exist in some space physical and mental. Even more optimistically, there is that strong temptation to describe exile as simply a state of mind. Over any state of mind, we may arm ourselves with the challenging power of the will and thus negate all debilitating tendencies that threaten the ego with the inescapable fact of exile.

But sometimes exile is indeed a place, and thus a new-found-land, to borrow the name of that desolate space, a wasteland that, for tropical blood like mine, must have been a naming ceremony of supreme self-consolation. And so, in both physical and other senses, one confronts the question: Is there a moment when you know intuitively and accept that you have now truly arrived in exile? If the nature of departure from homeland has been marked by total rejection, by the necessity for a near-total obliteration of memory, then an encounter with an environment that is a complete antithesis of the place of setting out - from topography to emotive and sensory properties - may find the wanderer breathing a sigh of relief. Finally, I have arrived. No more sounds, no more sights, textures or smells, no exhalation from any section of humanity that evokes the memory of home. The wanderer shakes the dust of erstwhile habitation off his feet.

The opposite, of course, may come to pass. An exile may hanker for a sympathetic environment; one that trails an umbilical cord to abandoned roots, as if a handful of earth has been sneaked into

the baggage and delivered ahead of the wanderer at his destination. Mentally, the newcomer does the papal rite - kneels down and kisses the ground. There, indeed, a close duplicate of habitation is recognised and adopted, while the self is schooled in a few minor adaptations. Or else schooled to exist in a kind of paradox, a state of tension where the mind simultaneously embraces an anchor in alien territory yet ensures that it stays at one remove from that alien milieu. This requires erecting a creative barrier, sometimes half-hearted but sufficient to distance oneself. In such an instance, the writer reflects present reality, but deflects its seductiveness through literary strategies of a markedly different temper from those that define or dominate the space that has given him shelter.

Ben Okri springs to mind as being an embodiment of that temper, always bearing in mind, however, that his novel *The Famished Road*, so deeply embedded in mythic reconstructions from his homeland, did have its beginnings in earlier works - short stories - that were published while he was still in Nigeria. Living by choice in England, he peoples his habitation with beings of a world that is reminiscent of that abandoned terrain. Actually, this makes Ben Okri a prime candidate for that whimsical, half-serious definition that I once proposed for the true temperament of the writer or the artist tribe in general: a creature in a permanent state of exile, since his or her real vocation is the eradication of the barriers of reality (for reality, read intimacy, literal recognition). I was then giving voice to my growing suspicion that few creative terrains appear to be more congenial to the writer than such frontiers - the threshold of reality - and the immediate provocation of my reexamination of such a province was the predicament of Salman Rushdie. At that time, I wrote:

"This is what defines the breed: living the paradox that embraces, even interiorises the barrier, yet insisting that the barrier should not be there...And thus, charging at, manoeuvring past... simply insisting that the frontier be shattered, that the barricades be lifted, that human communication be not controlled, constricted or manipulated. For this activity takes place on all fronts - it is both elemental and social. Political. And this last results not infrequently in the writer himself finding the barricades sharply lifted at a critical moment of contest: the momentum carries him forward and, by the time he has regained balance, he finds himself across the frontier. He encounters the new language of the frontiers of exile, its joys and anguish, its challenges. This tension has proved, over the ages, a life-and-death recurrence. The conjunction of both the physical and the elemental frontiers has surely never been more dangerously expressed, at least in this century, than in the drama of Salman Rushdie and the satanic regime of fanaticism. For Rushdie, the physical frontier has contracted, while the elemental remains - within the imperatives of creativity - innately expansive."

Since I wrote that, Salman Rushdie has been joined by the Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasrin who, like Rushdie in his time, failed to recognise the definitive lowering of the barrier at the frontier of exile. What really took her home, I have wondered again and again? I understand that her mother was ill and dying, but I suspect that beneath such filial pull was also that periodic need of all creative people to re-cross the threshold of loss, to recharge the batteries of identity and thus engage in the ritual of the lifting of the creative frontier, an attempt yet again to wage war within the liminal zone, the writer's normal place of habitation that sometimes turns unbearably physical. Those creative frontiers, I cautioned, remain "territories of hazardous navigation for the voyager, the writer, who remains a suspect emigre in a refugee camp and whose status of semi-exile undergoes quite arbitrary forms of articulation."

The recognition of frontiers can be overwhelming, and the condition of exile is the daily knowledge - indeed the palpable experiencing - of such frontiers. Some writers are more susceptible to their debilitating effects and succumb: Arthur Nortje, the South African poet for example, or Rabearivello, the Madagascan poet, whose career is a forcible reminder that there is also a condition of internal exile. A mixed-up, identity-confused poet of potential genius, Rabearivello occupied a

creative habitation whose true indigenes were thousands of miles away in France. He applied again and again to be fully admitted and his frustration grew as the prospect became more and more remote. Rabearivello, a product of the movement that came to be known as "Negritude", occupied a very special creative space, unique to himself and untouched by many of the social concerns that relieved other poets from the danger of alienation and a total retreat into a solipsistic creative existence.

His true soulmates were Verlaine, Rimbaud and Baudelaire, with whom he shared, in the words of Ulli Beler, "a disgust of reality". I tend to express this differently: Rabearivello's world, the world within which he found his being as indigene and citizen, was simply the frontier zone of reality, that liminal territory to which we earlier referred. His craving, however, placed him among those writers who appear doomed to remain on the threshold of identity.

Rabearivello's anguish lay in that paradoxical sense of exile: the weight of a distant cultural longing. It overwhelmed him eventually, leading him to commit a very painful suicide. Arthur Nortje too killed himself with an overdose of drugs. Nortje's poetry is permeated with the visceral protest of a sensibility that tries hard, but cannot reconcile itself with a condition of forced exile. Like other victims of apartheid, the forces that controlled his existence effectively annulled his social being, crammed his self-awareness into a ghetto of internal exile and eventually flung him into a wider field of alienation. Coming to terms with the contradictions of this liberating vista, England, which spelt freedom and self-realisation but which, nevertheless, inserted a real territory of loss, of the dissipation of a once-cohered self - in short, exile - did not come easily to Nortje's poetic sensibilities.

The insistence on an exile persona that feeds on the community of the alienated is a characteristic of Syl Cheney-Coker of distant Sierra Leone, who actively sought kindred spirits from within the continent but also in literary careers from all over the world. This was strictly a younger, passing phrase for Cheney-Coker, but it retains its validity both for its time and for many others. What is significant about that phase is that this younger Cheney-Coker confesses a need to become an exile in order to find his creative persona:

Mother, I want to return to exile to be your poet

The mother is both his biological parent and the land with whom the poet has a tortured relationship, a tension of unrequited love and unfulfilled expectations; in short, the very embodiment of the poet's alienation which however he seeks to overcome with a willed passion of commitment:

my mother prevents my flight into myself

speaking to me through her silence through the beat of her heart

the sword fighting my days the lamp lighting my nights

when my heart sinks deep in the oasis

of its pain! she rejuvenates me calling back the me

that has died tracing the manchild to the poet

but finally, the lament:

without understanding the dictates of my soul

And yet, within the same poem, "The Road to Exile Thinking of Vallejo", is the avowal of both umbilical ties of the mother/motherland that nurtured that same poetic persona, and the ironic, separatist consequences. Nothing exceptional, and certainly not unique to this poet, who finds he must also separate himself from that source of inspiration that also translates as the zone of obligation in order to embrace it more fully and to serve it more faithfully. Nowhere, I believe, is the pathos of this paradox conveyed more effectively than in his "Letter to a Tormented Playwright":

remember Amadu how terrible I said it was

that you were in exile and working

in the Telephone Office in touch with all

the languages of the world but with no world

to call your own: how sad you looked that winter

drinking your LFE and reading poetry with me

in the damp chilly English coffee shops

It is truly evocative, a true liminal centre of receptivity that is, however, located on the threshold of desired reality, seeking but never truly grasping a world it can call its own.

• © Wole Soyinka. A longer version of this article is published in *Index on Censorship, Home and Away: Diaspora Voices* (July 24 £8.99). [www.indexoncensorship.org](http://www.indexoncensorship.org) It also appears in *Creating Spaces of Freedom* (Prince Claus Fund, Netherlands/Saqi Books).

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<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/jul/13/poetry.wolesoyinka?INTCMP=ILCNETTXT3487>