

James Gibbs, (ed.) **The Literary Half Yearly: Wole Soyinka Number** (Volume XXVIII, No2 July, 1987), 237 pages.

The Literacy Half Yearly have done a good job in not only celebrating with Africa the long overdue recognition of the continent's most versatile and committed writer Wole Soyinka, but in putting together what should go down as a memento for this occasion. They could have not picked on a better editor than James Gibbs to do the job. Coming fresh from a string of soul searching research projects spanning over 15 years resulting in two Soyinka study guides, lecturing on Soyinka, a Ph.D. thesis on Soyinka and editing of **Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka**, James Gibbs could pass for an authority on the Nobel Prize Winner.

This special edition of **The Literary Half Yearly** is a review of reactions to Wole Soyinka's election to the Nobel prize for Literature in 1987. It boasts of containing material hitherto unpublished. It opens with comments from Sweden, the hot bed of the Nobel prize itself. These reactions are immediate and they are interesting in how they reveal the biases that, not just Soyinka's, but all African literature has suffered at the hands of European critics. It is very fitting therefore that Soyinka himself should see the award as going to Africa and not just himself as an individual. Reactions to Soyinka's nomination prompted him to dispel any suggestions that his choice was an exotic one rather than a recognition of merit:

'I'm a member of the Royal Academy of Arts and Letters, Great Britain; I'm a member of the Academy of Letters of the German Democratic Republic; I'm a member of the American Academy of Letters; I have received prizes, citations, reviews, I have been invited to adapt plays for the National Theatre of Great Britain. ... I've won the AGIP Enrico Mattei Prize for humanities, the first ever, awarded this year long before Nobel...'

This is not so modest a reminder that Soyinka has not come of age through the Nobel prize as some Western observers might see it. Soyinka has been around for a long

time. In the same report Soyinka's consistent stance on the question of language for African Literature comes through:

I advocated and still advocate the use of Kiswahili as a common language for Black Africa ... I don't believe in going back and elevating a local language... I believe the solution to this language question is to have a common language, like Kiswahili for Africa ... To go back and say you will write only in your local language (like Ngugi wa Thiong'o) is, for me, very defeatist. I consider that as a dramatic gesture.

From 'language for African writing' we are given a glimpse into his views on world theatre as revealed by James Gibbs' transcription of an interview held at a Harare Workshop. This reveals Soyinka's persistent refusal to see the world in simplistic terms of the 'old' and the 'new' or the 'modern' and the 'traditional'. He clearly says he believes 'that society at all times is perpetually fluctuating'. This might explain his rebuke of those who have seen his plays like *The Lion and the Jewel* or *Death and the King's Horseman* in such a simplistic manner.

From presenting general issues of language and themes in his work, James Gibbs turns to Soyinka's major area of interest, theatre. Here we are given a vivid impression of the man not just as playwright, but dramaturg *par excellence*. He addresses himself to questions of what should inform the development of African theatre in the areas of playscript, acting, directing, designing and even management. The possible 'reservoir' for contemporary African theatre is found in the 'traditions and rituals of the continent'. What is required is to 'stretch' them 'in a theatrical direction' like the 'Folk Opera' of Nigeria has done. Beyond these issues are questions of what the African playwright's motive in writing should be 'money or commitment to ideas?'. Questions like: to what extent does the playwright commit himself and how much power does theatre have as a tool for 'social analysis and criticism'? From such questions Soyinka provides information on his own plays, background information important to an understanding of what are very often difficult plays. Who could have thought Charlie Chaplin's late marriage to a young lady could have prompted the writing of *The Lion and the Jewel*?

A good deal about the work of Soyinka is given in this collection. Ranging from more or less impromptu reactions to his nomination for the Nobel Prize for Literature to scholarly analyses of his nomination through his works by established middle of the road scholars like Eldred Durosimi Jones and Marxist critics like Biodun Jeyifo. What is missing is a full picture of the man himself. Lewis Nkosi's memory of a trip undertaken with Soyinka in 1963 is the only one that really gets us close to this. Perhaps it is none of our business to demand this, but then his **Ake** needs a biographical rejoinder if only to keep things in balance. More in line with this is the spice added to the collection by the poems of Steve Chimombo, Anthony Nazombe from Malawi and Michael Thorpe's. Perhaps we can look forward to a Biography of the man now. Of course with his permission!

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