

**Review of *Wole Soyinka: Literature, Activism, and African Transformation* by
Bola Dauda and Toyin Falola¹**

Sola Adeyemi

University of East Anglia, UK

Introduction

Bola Dauda and Toyin Falola's *Wole Soyinka: Literature, Activism, and African Transformation* (2021) arrives at a moment when renewed attention is being paid to the intellectual genealogies of African political thought and the cultural labour of postcolonial writers. As the first African Nobel laureate in Literature, Soyinka has long been the subject of extensive biographical, literary, and political commentary. Yet Dauda and Falola's study distinguishes itself by offering a panoramic, historically grounded, and interpretively ambitious account of Soyinka's life and work, one that foregrounds the interplay between literature and activism as mutually constitutive forces. Their book, published as part of the *Black Literary and Cultural Expressions* series, positions Soyinka not merely as a writer who intervenes in politics, but as a figure whose artistic imagination is inseparable from his ethical commitments and civic engagements.

The authors' central claim is that Soyinka's oeuvre – spanning drama, poetry, memoir, fiction, and essays – cannot be understood outside the political crises, cultural transformations, and ideological struggles that have shaped modern Nigeria and Africa more broadly. This review assesses the book's structure, thematic emphases, methodological strengths, and limitations, and considers its contribution to Soyinka studies and African literary scholarship.

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Structure and Scope of the Book

Dauda and Falola organise their study chronologically and thematically, tracing Soyinka's development from his formative years in Abeokuta through his education in Ibadan and Leeds, his early theatrical experiments, his involvement in anti-authoritarian activism, and his later global stature as a public intellectual. The book's scope is expansive: it covers Soyinka's literary production, political interventions, philosophical positions, and institutional engagements. This breadth reflects the authors' ambition to produce not merely a biography but a cultural and intellectual history of Soyinka's world.

The opening chapters situate Soyinka within the Yoruba cultural matrix, emphasising the influence of oral traditions, ritual performance, and cosmological frameworks on his artistic sensibility. This grounding is crucial, for it allows the authors to demonstrate how Soyinka's dramaturgy and poetics draw upon Yoruba metaphysics, particularly the tragic vision embodied in Ogun, the deity of creativity and destruction. The book thus aligns with earlier scholarship that reads Soyinka's work through indigenous epistemologies, but it extends this by linking these cultural inheritances to his political radicalism.

Subsequent chapters examine Soyinka's activism during the Nigerian Civil War, his imprisonment, his critique of military dictatorship, and his broader interventions in African political discourse. The authors highlight Soyinka's insistence on ethical responsibility, his refusal of ideological dogmatism, and his commitment to human rights. They also explore his international engagements, including his lectures, essays, and global advocacy.

Literature and Activism: A Dialectical Relationship

One of the book's major strengths is its sustained argument that Soyinka's literature and activism form a dialectical relationship. Dauda and Falola reject the simplistic view that Soyinka is either a writer who occasionally engages in politics or an activist who happens to write. Instead, they argue that his creative and political identities are inseparable, each informing and reinforcing the other.

For example, the authors read *The Man Died* as both a memoir of incarceration and a philosophical treatise on moral courage. They interpret *Kongi's Harvest* and *A Dance of the Forests* as allegories of postcolonial disillusionment, while *Death and the King's Horseman* is framed as a meditation on cultural sovereignty and ethical agency. Soyinka's essays, particularly those collected in *The Open Sore of a*

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Continent, are analysed as interventions in the politics of memory, justice, and national identity.

This interpretive approach is persuasive, especially in its insistence that Soyinka's activism is not an external appendage to his literary career but an extension of his aesthetic and ethical worldview. The authors' interdisciplinary method – drawing on literary criticism, political theory, history, and cultural studies – enables them to illuminate the complex ways in which Soyinka navigates the boundaries between art and politics.

Historical and Political Contextualisation

Dauda and Falola excel in contextualising Soyinka within the turbulent history of Nigeria and Africa. They provide detailed accounts of the colonial legacy, the crises of independence, the Biafran War, the cycles of military rule, and the struggles for democratisation. These contexts are not presented as mere background but as constitutive forces that shape Soyinka's intellectual trajectory.

The authors' discussion of Soyinka's imprisonment during the Civil War is particularly compelling. They show how this experience crystallised his commitment to human rights and deepened his critique of authoritarianism. They also highlight the personal risks Soyinka has taken throughout his life, including exile, surveillance, and threats to his safety. This emphasis on personal sacrifice underscores the moral seriousness of Soyinka's activism.

Furthermore, the book situates Soyinka within broader African and global intellectual networks. Dauda and Falola trace his engagements with Pan-Africanism, anti-apartheid movements, and international human rights campaigns. They also explore his dialogues with other African writers and thinkers, including Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Léopold Sédar Senghor. This transnational framing enriches the study by showing how Soyinka's work resonates beyond Nigeria.

Methodological Strengths

Interdisciplinary Approach: The authors' interdisciplinary method is one of the book's greatest strengths. By combining literary analysis with political history and cultural theory, they offer a holistic portrait of Soyinka. This approach reflects the complexity of Soyinka's own intellectual practice, which resists disciplinary boundaries.

Use of Primary and Secondary Sources: Dauda and Falola draw on a wide range of sources, including Soyinka’s published works, interviews, archival materials, and existing scholarship. Their engagement with Soyinka’s own reflections—particularly his memoirs and essays—allows them to foreground his self-understanding while also subjecting it to critical scrutiny.

Clarity and Accessibility: Despite its scholarly depth, the book is written in a clear and accessible style. The authors avoid jargon and provide helpful explanations of Yoruba concepts, Nigerian political history, and literary references. This makes the book suitable for both specialists and general readers.

Critical Reflections and Limitations

While *Wole Soyinka: Literature, Activism, and African Transformation* is a significant contribution to Soyinka studies, it is not without limitations.

Limited Engagement with Critical Debates: Although the authors acknowledge existing scholarship, their engagement with critical debates is sometimes cursory. For instance, the longstanding debate between Soyinka and Ngũgĩ over the politics of language is mentioned but not explored in depth. Similarly, feminist critiques of Soyinka’s representations of gender receive limited attention. A more sustained engagement with these debates would have strengthened the book’s analytical rigour.

Hagiographic Tendencies: At times, the book veers towards hagiography. The authors’ admiration for Soyinka is evident, and while this is understandable given his stature, it occasionally leads to an uncritical celebration of his achievements. For example, Soyinka’s sometimes controversial political positions – such as his critiques of certain Pan-Africanist movements or his complex relationship with Nigerian political elites – are not always examined with sufficient critical distance.

Underdeveloped Analysis of Later Works: The book provides detailed readings of Soyinka’s early and mid-career works but offers less analysis of his more recent writings, including his return to the novel form after nearly five decades. Allowance however can be given for not including *Chronicles from the Land of the Happiest People on Earth*, as this was published in 2021, the same year this study came out. Nonetheless, given the significance of these later works, including the *Interventions* series, a fuller discussion would have been valuable.

Contribution to Soyinka Studies and African Literary Scholarship

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Despite these limitations, Dauda and Falola's book makes several important contributions.

Reframing Soyinka as a Transformative Figure: The authors successfully reframe Soyinka as a transformative figure whose influence extends beyond literature into politics, culture, and global human rights. This holistic framing challenges reductive readings that isolate his artistic achievements from his political commitments.

Bridging Biography and Intellectual History: The book bridges the gap between biography and intellectual history, offering a model for studying writers whose lives and works are deeply intertwined with national and continental histories.

Renewing Interest in Soyinka's Political Thought: By foregrounding Soyinka's political philosophy—particularly his ethics of responsibility, his critique of tyranny, and his defence of cultural autonomy—the authors renew interest in Soyinka as a political thinker, not merely a literary icon.

Expanding the Archive: The book draws attention to lesser-known aspects of Soyinka's life, including his institutional work, his international collaborations, and his engagements with diasporic communities. This expands the archive available to future scholars.

Conclusion

Wole Soyinka: Literature, Activism, and African Transformation is a richly textured and intellectually ambitious study that offers a comprehensive account of one of Africa's most influential writers and activists. Dauda and Falola succeed in demonstrating the inseparability of Soyinka's literary imagination and political commitments, situating him within the broader histories of Nigeria, Africa, and the world.

While the book could have engaged more critically with certain debates and offered deeper analysis of Soyinka's later works, its strengths far outweigh its limitations. It stands as a valuable contribution to African literary scholarship, intellectual history, and biographical studies. For scholars of Soyinka, postcolonial literature, and African political thought, this book provides both a foundational resource and a stimulus for further research.

References

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