

# SOYINKA'S *THE INTERPRETERS* AS AN EXAMPLE OF BLACK AFRICAN LITERATURE

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## Introduction

This paper is a result of an attempt by three teachers of literature in the UFJF to offer the students a non-eurocentric course in Portuguese, French and English literatures by planning a term of Black African Literature for the second term of 1994.

Both the teachers of French and English literature were stimulated to try this course because of a certain frustration caused by the constant reading of the canonical classics read with Brazilian students. Besides the language problem, which persists in the course of Black African literature (after all, real reading of foreign literature demands a near Proficiency level of language), there is also a type of incompatibility of temperament and reality. Hardy and Lawrence often leave the students cold, while Dickens, Thackeray and George Elliot seem remote. Short stories are normally more appreciated since their reality is more modern and demand an autonomy of language flight less ambitious. But at the end of the day, it is discouraging to see that your classics are considered inferior to third rate Brazilian literature because the students cannot get to the

essence of the literature due to the many barriers posed by language and culture.

It must be observed that the invention of the VHS video in 1975 by the Japan Victor Company (JVC) subsidiary of Matsushita Electric Industrial Company (replacing the Betamax system launched in early 1975 by Sony) and its popularisation in the NTSC form have helped us immensely. Films like *Much Ado about Nothing* do not even seem Shakespeare since "it is so light and entertaining," as one student observed. The visual loveliness of Forster films and now of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* bring the true greatness of the work into the sitting room (or language class) of the students. Even the long BBC versions of the classics are followed in episodes like true Brazilian soap operas. But then, after the entertainment comes the doubt: are we really doing justice to the written text? Is even the comparison of the written text and say Houston's *The Dead* really literary studies or are we moving into the Communications Department? But ignoring such doubts, we must agree that the video tape has come to help us and will continue to brighten up our classes until a new technological discovery takes such things off to the motherboards of home computers or something similar and robs us of our videos bought so carefully during trips abroad and guarded in our studies so as not to permit pirate copies.

But our attempt in Juiz de Fora to offer a literature course that was not eurocentric had other intentions beyond the element of reaching and entertaining the students. It was ideological.

## The African continent

The colonization of Africa took a different form than it had taken in other continents. While America was settled in order to offer religious liberty or commercial gains, and while Oceania be-

gan as a penal colony, Africa, because of its climate and difficulty of access, was first used merely as a base to support the trading that went around the Cape of Good Hope, and after, for the slave trade. In 1875, it is estimated that roughly only one tenth of Africa was under control of non-African powers. England and Portugal had bases in the south of Africa for their trade with India and the East, while the North continued under the dominion of the Spaniards and the Turks from a period of expansion well over by 1700. An informal meeting called by Leopold II, king of the Belgians, in 1876, sparked off the large scale occupation of Africa and the division between European countries. Germany, strong after the Franco-Prussian war, wanted to expand and find outlets for its growing industries. France wanted to find consolation for its humiliating defeat and Italy joined after its recent unification. Stanley's journey down the Congo together with the meeting of Leopold II stirred ambitions and the years between 1876 and the First World War saw the occupation of 240,000 square miles a year (a country the size of France) and in 1898 only 613,000 square miles remained independent with France dominating nearly 4 million square miles and Britain over 2 million. The end of the First World War saw the end of the ambitions of Germany and the end of the second World War, the beginning of the traumatic move towards independence and the period of terrible civil wars inspired by tribal hostilities and intensified by the weapons of mass extermination, supplied generously by dominating powers of the world.

This special type of colonisation left its linguistic mark on the continent. While the settlement system exterminated the languages of the original inhabitants in America (and often the inhabitants themselves), in Africa the native languages continued though the groupings into independent countries often did not respect the natural language divisions of the continent. Some native languages are found in three or four countries and this has been critical in the conflicts in the post colonial period. There are still over 1,000 lan-

guages spoken in Africa and 250 of these exist in Nigeria. Because of this fact, the original imperial languages (English, French and Portuguese) have lost their European connotation to a large extent and have become link languages for communication within the country. Nigeria has a population of 80 million, South Africa 30 million, Quenia 17 million, and Zambia 6 million and in these and another 7 African countries, English is the official link language. But since many people do not speak the language well, we find that besides the tribal languages and the link language English, there is also a form of English known as "pidgin" that is spoken by simpler people for commerce and trade. This fact is reflected in the writings of the countries. The literature is produced in English for internal consumption and not, as some think, directed to world markets in the first place.

### **Black african writers in English**

Offering a mere one term course of independent English Literature from black Africa makes one limit by option the field, as it does indeed in our whole course of English Literature in any university in Brazil. While the strong African literature from South Africa is remarkable in the works of Abrahams and Mphahlele, it does not represent best what is typical of Africa because it reflects the speciality of the racial situation of the South Africa government for an all too long period of time. The works of Ngugi of Kenya, Armah of Ghana and p'Bitek of Uganda are very interesting but they do post date the important works of the Nigerian writers who first projected black African writing onto the world scene and who, while they wrote for their fellow countrymen, wrote in a style that also allowed the outsider to flavour the special imagery and verbal richness of English spoken in that continent.

But before entering the novels of Tutuola, Achebe and Soyinka,

it would seem interesting to offer the students an example of writing about Africa which is, despite the geographical situation, still eurocentric. Greene's "The burnt out case", Doris Lessing's "The grass is singing", and even Conrad's "The heart of darkness" are all set in Africa, but the Africans are peripheral and distinctly colonial. This reading permits a comparative view of Black African Literature because their literature changes the perspective and it is the Europeans who become peripheral and the central experience is black African. Since there was a certain difficulty in finding sufficient texts, it was decided to include Naipaul's "A bent in the river" and Cary's "Mister Johnson" and so show in a seminar how each book was eurocentric in a different way. But leaving aside the novels of Amos Tutuola and those of Achebe which were recommended for reading, because of lack of time and space, I would like to say something only about "The Interpreters" of Soyinka.

### **The novel "The Interpreters"**

The novel tells the story of five young Nigerian intellectuals trying to fit into the new Nigerian society to which they return after a period abroad or into which they have to fit going against the traditional role of their parents: Sekoni, Muslim, deep thinker, failed engineer turned carver; Kola, painter struggling with an enormous canvass with the Yoruba gods (a type of Nigerian Final Judgement); Egbo, a flippant atheist who works in the Foreign Office; Bandele Sagoe, the idealist journalist up against tradition and corruption in the newspaper world and his girl friend, a sophisticated city girl hunted by traditional relatives.

The novel shows the language situation of Nigerian society. The simpler people speak pidgin English as seen in the dialogues of Mattias and the taxi driver:

Oga, sometimes den go want me for other office. Messenger job for newspaper office no get siddon time...  
Oga, make a go drink my own for canteen. (page 69)

and the taxi driver:

Oga, na dese follish firms o. Na today I take this car commot for service, then rain begin and look my trouble. De ting no gree work... Enh, oga mi, you see wetin man dey suffer. Sixteen pound ten na in den charge me for service. Unless we Africans drive all dis foreign firm commor. (page 109)

The interpreters themselves speak good English but, on occasions, lapse into their tribal languages to express concepts that are special for the society in which they live such as *agbo*, a potion of bark and roots; *oriki*, a chant of family names, titles of antecedents; and *omo ole*, seemingly our equivalent to "son of a bitch." The narration is that of a third person implied author and here the English is at times magnificent, now written with crystal clarity:

The dome cracked above Sekoni's shortsighted head one messy night. Too late he saw the insanity of a lorry parked right in his path, a swerve turned into a skid and cruel arabesques of tyres. A futile heap of metal and Sekoni's body lay surprised across the open door, showers of laminated glass around him, his beard one fastness of blood and wet earth. (page 155)

now with an ironic precision:

The ambassador approached the Faseyis accompanied by a waiter bearing a trayload of champagne. Monica

shook her head and already Faseyie looked displeased. The ambassador was hospitably incredulous. "But you don't drink at all, Mrs Faseye?" "No, only the occasional palm wine when our steward feels kindly towards us". The ambassador laughed and gestured regretfully. "I am sorry, I really wish we had palm wine." (page 42)

now with pure poetry of language, as when Egbo has his first sexual experience:

A lone pod strode the baobab on the tapering thigh,  
leaf-shorn, and high mists swirl him, haze-splitting  
storms, but the stalk stayed him, when it lay flooded.  
There were tassels for the man, sweet roots for the child  
and above cloud curds waited for the chosen one of  
god, parting low mists in a dark canoe... in darkness  
let me lie, in darkness cry. (page 60)

An American critic hailed "The Interpreters" with the statement that it was the work of a new James Joyce. That is strong praise, but undoubtedly, the novel has in common with the writings of Joyce a surface of realism and an underlying profundity of epiphany and symbolism.

On the surface level, the novel shows us a realistic picture of experience of the five intellectuals in traditional Nigerian society, portraying their work, their leisure and their personal relationships, crisscrossing with the few foreigners, Joe Golder, the American lecturer at the university and Monica, married to a Nigerian lecturer at the Medical School. We see the difficulties of getting on with the family. The comment of the narrator about Dehinma's relationship with her family is slyly brilliant;

And Dehinma, steeling herself for the final act that must pronounce the break, was slowly being worn down from the midnight visitations of aunts and mothers, bearing love, and transparent intentions and manufactured anxieties, and quite simply, blood cruelty. (page 39)

The corruption of the society into which they have returned is shown at various moments, with the engineer Sekoni and above all with the journalist. He is told bluntly;

Well, he lets the other side know what he has got on them, If they decide they can weather it, they say go ahead. If not, they say, Well, as a matter of fact we have been collecting certain things about such and such a person on your side and they send a copy along. Well I have a pretty good idea what Sir Derin had go himself into, but anyhow, your copy came in the nick of time. They have done a swap of silences. (page 95)

There is also the incompetence of the state services;

Instead of heat, he obtained electric shocks; once as he touched the faucet of a bath with his toes, and another time through a finger as he dialled a number on the phone. When he told Mathias, he said "Na austerity measure, Government wan join three ministry together, Works, Electricity and Communication. (page 107)

And above all, the novel presents a society warm in friendship living together in closeness, one deeply involved in the welfare of the other, caring and sharing in leisure but above all in moments of



difficulty. The picture is colourful and presented with humour and we have a verbal incarnation of the Nigerian way of life. The result is the obtaining of what Achebe declared was his aim;

I would be quite satisfied if my novels did no more than teach my readers that their past with all its imperfections was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them.

This is surely a classic of Nigerian literature, forging the consciousness of the race as Joyce would have it.

But the novel has more than the realistic level of a portrait of a society with rich characteristics and a wealth of images in its idioms. The book has a deeper level and while there are no moments of epiphany such as we find in Joyce, there is a general showing forth of the reality of these intellectuals being initiated back into a society which is changing and which needs to change. There is the quest for meaning. There is an attempt to find a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history even in the emerging society of Nigeria. There is the continual tension between the past and the present, tradition and novelty, tribal belief and western ideology. This is seen clearly in the final scene of the novel;

Bandle looked at him then thoughtful, and he looked round the circle, calm, his body lax again. He was looking at them with pity, only his pity was more terrible than his hardness, inexorable. Bandle, old and immutable as the royal mothers of Benin throne, old and cruel as the ogboni in conclave pronouncing the word. "I hope you all live to bury your daughters". End of

interval; and the bell recalled them, distant and shrill like a leper's peal. But they stood unbelieving. By Sekoni's Wrestler Simi waited. Kola poised near her in confusion. Egbo watched her while she walked towards him, eyes ocean-clams with her peculiar sadness... like a choice of a man drowning he was saying... only like a choice of drowning. (page 251)

And the five characters try to find a balance in this field of tensions and point a way forward. This shows a maturity of mind working through a maturity of language calling for a response among all classes and conditions of men.

## Conclusion

This course of Black African Literature was very well received by the students and in many ways, they found the reality and the humour closer to themselves than they do with the classics of English and American Literature. The experience encourages the teachers in the field of English, French and Portuguese literatures to continue offering this type of optional course.