

# Gègè

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# *Gege: Ogun Studies in English*

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# **Autobiography and National Experience: A Study of Wole Soyinka's Selected Writings**

**Doyin Aguru**

## **Introduction**

This paper seeks to portray the national experiences of the Nigerian nation through the autobiographical genre. The autobiography is a literary form that narrates the events in an environment, the history of a people and the prevailing conditions that motivate a people, through the life of an individual. The study therefore examines through the autobiographies of Wole Soyinka various stages of social change, philosophical ideology, and cultural and political occurrences that have shaped the current form of the Nigerian State.

Literature is a reflection of life. Several critical works have identified the functional relevance of literature to society. Literature thus continues to occupy itself with the experiences and nations. The autobiographical form is a sub-genre of the biography. It has become popular because of its direct impact on literature and the society. It delineates historical, political and cultural ideologies of the generation within which it is written through a narration of real events and happenings of the time. This is what gives the autobiographical genre its validity and authenticity.

This form of literary writing is in three types: the fictional, non-fictional and the factional. In fictional autobiography, the writer describes imaginary events and places in such a personal manner that the reader believes he/she is participating in the

author's life experiences. If the characters are built around national figures, the writer represents them with fictionalized personalities without exposing the names or events.

The nonfiction type gives a true but subjective account of one's life and experiences. Fiction, the more contemporary and controversial form of biographical writing has been described as 'a biographical story which is an imaginative interpretation or construction, call it improvisation of a story around some known facts...in life' (Bamikunle, 1999:1) Bamikunle's analyses of the autobiographical form, using Wole Soyinka's biographical style as an example. Furthermore, he relates Soyinka's autobiographical style to Northrop Frye's, positioning that the imaginative and the fictional. This, according to him is because the two types are both creative and they take on the form of a novel. Interestingly, autobiographical accounts have been used in, for measuring and defining the values and ideologies of nations, and the decisions and actions of leaders. Often it is in these narratives that attempts are made to comprehend their strategies and decisions that were of great importance.

Scholars like Robert F. Sayre in a bid to understand the making of America, celebrate the indispensability of biographical writings, especially the autobiography. He wonders why autobiographies and their writers are not acknowledged literarily. To him, the autobiography is 'something that is not currently interesting, but historically rich and culturally revealing' (1980:146).

Forms of autobiographies in America include early exploration narratives, tales of travellers transformed the new land. Therefore, Sayre is of the opinion that autobiographies have become better appreciated now because of the impact and significance of writers like Normal Mailer, Malcom X, and a host of others. To him, autobiographical writing in American started before the revolution and is still being written. He states that America and autobiography have been peculiarly linked:

In any case, autobiography in America is somehow both a part of our daily vernacular and our earliest heritage, reaching back to the puritan dairies and the seventeenth and eighteenth-century travel narratives, the Indian captivity narratives and the “biography” and “autobiography” of notable Indian chiefs, countless success stories of businessmen and celebrities, the protest stories of ex-slaves and victims, the tales of pioneering and the “Americanization” of immigrants, the deceitful apologies of scoundrels and rogues, the utterly artificial “True Confessions”... Autobiography in America is not only a genre with significant origins and distinguished classics, it is also an industry ... (Sayre, 1980:147 & 148)

American autobiographers in this perspective, apart from recording the foundation and cultural values of America, have ideologically contributed their own beliefs, aspirations, and faith to the ideology and concept, encapsulates that makes America what it is today. The American concept is not just a land and a people, but also a vision.

Considering the array of personalities and the faith of great leaders, the perceptions of autobiographers are inestimable. Sometimes ago, a collection of autobiographical accounts was dedicated to Vladimir Ilyich Lenin’s birth centenary. This compendium explicitly records the life, and times and the leadership of Lenin. Biographers were drawn from the entire social strata that existed during the life and times of V. I. Lenin. The observation and evaluation of these writers – about thirty of them – who were made up of peasants, non party peasants, politicians, commandants, comrades, generals and even

relatives, reveal quite a lot about Lenin and his political ideologies.

A comrade noted his hard work and spirit of dedication, how he would sneak up at night when he was expected to be resting to think up policies that would eventually benefit the proletarians. Bruyevich's account of his work pattern was his famous decree on land that kicked off the agrarian revolution. (Bruyevich, 1970:23).

In the creation of the Soviet State emblem, there was a controversy on the vision and the symbol of the emblem, which was intended to be radically different from the coat of arms used by capitalist states. Lenin, on setting his eyes on the artist's draft, displayed his much celebrated quick reasoning and visionary perspective,

We are struggling, we're fighting and we shall go on fighting until the dictatorship of the proletariat is consolidated and until we drive out the White Guards and interventionist from our soil but it doesn't mean that war, fighting, military effort will ever be the main thing for us, we need no conquests. A policy of conquest is totally alien to us. We do not attack, we defend ourselves against external and internal enemies. Our war is defensive and the sword is not our emblem... socialism will triumph in all countries, of that there can be no doubt. The brotherhood of peoples will be proclaimed and implemented all over the world, and we need no sword, it is not our emblem. (Bruyevich, 1970:33).

His closest doctor, a surgeon, wrote on his encounters with Lenin until his (Lenin's) demise. He commended his spirit and

resistance after an assassination attempt by the opposing party. Lenin made light of his severe and complicated injuries by such sayings: it's nothing, every revolutionary must be ready for such a thing' (Rozanovs 1970:86,87). He also resisted the doctors paying him so much attention when he was sure there were other patients to be taken care of. The doctor consistently described his body as a strong one, perhaps attributing this to the kind of mind and spirit at work in him. 'Vladimir Ilyich's powerful constitution was doing a good battle with the hemorrhage' (87), he said.

An autobiographer who was impressed by Lenin's attitude wrote of his meeting with him as a non-party peasant. He concludes his narrative with these statements.

But Vladimir Ilyich wasn't like many others, he wasn't tied down by theory, he grasped life, events, and the revolution and directed it. He carried out the will of the masses as an elder; he is the soul of the masses, in all its wealth of aspects. That is why the loss of Vladimir Ilyich is such a great loss for the people. That's why not only party members, but we non-party people sorrow bitterly for that loss. But his wisdom and experience are not lost. We shall carry out his behest of collective work, without the enslavement of man by man. (Chernov, 1970:82)

Lenin's life and personality can be studied through this autobiographical collection. His impact and influence during the Bolshevik revolution remains outstanding in the minds of a people who feel and express tremendous loves through their writing, for their leader. The writings on the life and the times of Lenin further symbolize the relevance of the autobiography.

Starobinsky in his study describes an autobiography as ‘ a biography of a person written by himself’. (Starobinsky, 1980:73). It is also described as ‘a form of biographical literature’ (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1984:1009) W.L. Howarth, however, creates a new angle in his analogy by stating that ‘an autobiography is a self portrait’ (Howarth, 1980:85). In spite of the several, diverse definitions given to the autobiography, there are specific features in the writing of this form that makes it universal, irrespective of the background and the age within which the autobiographer lives. Strategic elements like character, which depicts the personality and image the book presents, portray the various factors that make up the character, around whom the story is woven, ‘his sense of self, of place, of history, of his motives for writing’ (Howarth, 1980:87).

In autobiography, the writer/author is different from the characters he/she portrays. They may bear the same names but might not share the same time and space. The author plays two demanding roles, first as a narrator, second as a protagonist taking the form of an artist in a self-portrait. In writing, the narrator maintains a credible level of suspense by feigning ignorance on most of the issues that he or she knows much about.

Technique is another element that connotes style, structure and imagery. This is what gives autobiography its credibility in the literary perspective.

Style is seen as resulting from the margin of liberty offered to the “author” after he has satisfied the requirements of language and literary convention and of the use he has put them to (Starobinsky, 1980: 74).

Style in autobiography is also varied. For instance, when it is used in a narrative it becomes *self-revelatory*. It establishes a relationship between the autobiographer and his past

experiences, and it also facilitates a meeting point between the author and his or her target audience.

The third factor is the thematic preoccupation of an autobiography. This includes issues, ideas and beliefs woven around a particular storyline. 'The theme may arise from the author's general philosophy, religious faith, or political or cultural attitudes' (Howarth, 1980:87). Themes are therefore 'personal ... also representative of an era, just as other literary works may illustrate the history of ideas (87).

One may want to attribute archetypal features to thematic issues. This is because of the inclusiveness of themes in literary works. Writers therefore build their work around issues that appeal to the reading public like death, births, love, incest, hate, wars, etc.

The concepts and ideologies that an autobiographer is preoccupied with in his/her writings are reflections of his/her experiences, whether real or imagined. Soyinka's observation of the experiences, the structures and ideologies of his people is the preoccupation of his biographical collection. We shall be analysing three forms of these in the study. *Ake* and *Ibadan* are autobiographical, while *Isara*, the third in this selection, is a biography of his father within which some references were made to Soyinka as a child.

Style (as earlier defined), in all its varieties is creatively adapted these narratives. Employing the first person narrative form, Wole Soyinka describes the first eleven years of his childhood. His characters are limited to the people around his neighborhood, his immediate and extended family members, the social and especially the political structure of his hometown Ake.

The 'Autobiography of Childhood' stylistic device plays a major part Soyinka's childhood account in *Ake*. This growing

up theme is viewed as suitable for autobiographical narratives because since the innermost development and growth of the child is significantly affected by the child's absorption in and judgement of external events.

Most autobiographers succeed better with their childhood than their later life, even youth. This success must be ascribed partly to the strength of an established literary tradition. However different children and their circumstances may be, their mode of apprehension and growth is much more similar than in later life, so that all 'childhoods' can profit by traditional treatment (Pascal, 1960:84).

If the child in this state does an intrinsic examination, his understanding and awareness of self will be through the assessment of others, especially the older citizens of his society. 'The process of growth therefore takes a lively concrete form, through observed things and people ... The choice of events is decided in the main by memory – usually there is no other authority – and what remains in memory is still alive and vivid' (1960:85).

*Isara, A Voyage Around Essay* was written a few years after *Ake*. Soyinka in the author's note states that 'The completion of that childhood biography, rather than assuage a curiosity about a vanishing period of one's existence only fuelled it' (Soyinka 1989: vii) Soyinka agrees that the completion of *Ake* inspired the writing of *Isara*. Images of what he described as 'incomplete memory' returned to haunt him in the persons of the protagonists of the 1930s and 1940s.

Apart from borrowing the sub-title from John Mortimer's play, Soyinka claims that *Isara* is a creation of those moments when

one gets into a kind of creative groove. It's not constant, you go and come back to that groove. Having written *Ake*, and running into those letters of my father, after my father died, there occurred the same kind of evocation of time past, it took place as I had in *Ake*... (Aguoru 1994, unpublished interview).

*Isara*, though a biography of his father, is not without reference to Soyinka's existence as a child. The authorial comments of the omniscient narrator in *Isara* include him amongst the characters, a grand son of Josiah in particular, although he is not referred to as Wole in *Isara*, as he is in *Ake*.

*Ibadan, The Penkelemes Years* is a memoir that covers the period 1946 – 1965. Soyinka's first statement in this work is absolute,

Ibadan does not pretend to be anything but fiction, that much abused genre which attempts to fictionalize facts and events, the proportion of fact to fiction being totally at the discretion of the author. (Soyinka, 1994: 14).

He, in this work, clearly separates himself – the author- from his character who is still 'himself'. He uses a number of fictitious names to describe his character in the memoir though he maintains a number of real names of other people. Relying on the second person narrative as well as the omniscient narrative style, he disassociates himself from the characters while claiming an interpretive knowledge of their thoughts and actions.

Soyinka in a chat on his biographical writings mentioned that he writes to fulfill various needs; one of which was to celebrate personalities that he believes had meaningfully contributed to a

particular life style, ideology and forms of existence. One sees a dominant representation of this point of view in the selection and portraiture of his characters.

Soyinka confesses that the personality of Rev. I.O. Kuti, a man whom he holds in high esteem, contributed significantly to the creative contents of *Ake*:

I tell you the background of Ake... it was not Ake' I wanted to write. I wanted to write a biography on my uncle Rev I.O Ransome Kuti, a very remarkable person as you may have gathered from Ake. Very remarkable individual and the period when he lived I found very interesting and fascinating. I wanted to write about that period using him as a myth (Aguoru, 1994, unpublished interview).

The second need was a desire to document and preserve part of those things, which he thought had validity and had contributed immensely to an individual, group or nation's quality of life. These were landmarks, images and transformations that needed to be embossed boldly in literary writing. Therefore the political experiences, formation and actions of pressure groups, geographical and cultural factors become the thematic pre-occupation of his writings. These emphasize and depict the root, base of the experiences that have made the Nigerian people. The towns of Ake, Isara and Ibadan hold, to Soyinka, significant strategic positions in the political history of Nigeria.

The third reason Soyinka gives for his interest in this genre is a consciousness of a sense of responsibility to his people. Political statements found in *Ake* are in relation to the nationalist struggle and the Abeokuta Women's Union. In *Isara*, Soyinka defines his goal in the representative history of the patriarchs,

...Its significance for me is that it represents the period when a pattern of their lives was set – for better or worse – under the compelling impact of the major events in their times, both local and global, the uneasy love – hate relationship with the colonial presence and its own ambiguous attitudes to Western educated elite of the Nigerian Protectorate (Soyinka, 1987: vii).

The characters in *Isara* lived extraordinarily fulfilled lives but their existence was marked by an 'intense quest for a place in the new order' (vii) this target was of great importance to their generation in comparison to the attitudes of their offspring. This focus and faith in themselves as a people is perhaps what makes them Soyinka's heroes.

In *Ibadan*, Soyinka explores one of the moral duties of a writer to his society: to mirror the society and to be a spokesperson for the society against an unjust government. He describes his reason for choosing to write *Ibadan* as being triggered off by

...the politics, the unfinished business, of that political entity, Nigeria, into which I happen to have been born, its sociology, and political pathology... The immediate, triggering event was the Nigerian 1993 democratic venture and its aftermath. Underlying it all is also *the agonising, truly lamentable brief memory span that appears to bedevil my society*. Well, perhaps it is not so much a matter of mental retention as the seeming in ability to extend meaningfully the affective span of memory. (Soyinka, 1994: ix, x). (emphasis mine).

After his supposed romance with General Ibrahim Babangida, the Nigerian former military President, Soyinka puts up a pose of indifference until the 1993 experience when out of a sense of duty he warned Nigerians once again by reminding them of the past experiences that led to the Nigerian civil war.

I felt I had an obligation to explain why it seemed in not so much an attempt to explain the past, but an attempt to – from my own point of view, peg down why one constantly appears or seem to be at war with one's environment. I feel I have a duty to call Nigerian's attention to the fact that they were about to make very unrewarding moves. We have not really moved from where we were a couple of decades ago, so people are playing the same game as they played before but their colours have changed. Everything seems to be that replay which I warned about initially taking place now in almost every form (Aguoru, 1994).

In the autobiographical field, a man is best qualified to write about his life. It is inevitable that memory maybe distorted, and there is a tendency for individuals to remember pleasant events and repress or gloss over the unappreciable ones. However, the story of a man's life is symbolic and largely representative. For instance, Olaudah Equiano could not have mentioned the plight of each slave he came across in his narrative nor Wole Soyinka his daily experience of the first eleven years of his life. Soyinka, however, does make a number of clarifications in his last two autobiographical works. In *Ibadan*, he states,

I had indeed resisted all their efforts to provoke me into any autobiographical

account beyond the age of eleven – The innocence for most...any testament after ‘the age of innocence ’ is a lie, or half – truth, doctored truth, selective truth or annotated truth, or in simple diction – a confection of sorts (Soyinka, 1994:4).

In *Ibadan*, Soyinka emphasizes his factional style by appealing to the old boys of Government College Ibadan to ‘excuse any lapses in memory in my account’. He adds, ‘to illustrate that aspect of faction that I have tended mostly to employ the deliberate dislocation of some actual names and events from their physical moorings, and occasionally, actual time (ixv).

Rousseau’s confession is perhaps the earliest accepted autobiography; his work was marked out by some critics as an ‘enlargement of truth’ (Hornstein 1984:64). Stephen Spender’s opinion about confessional autobiographies is quite fascinating: he believes the writer nurses a secret motive which he tucks away in his narrative pattern. Restif de la Bretonne’s *Monsieur Nicholas* and *Rousseau’s Confession* fall within the same category.

Restif’s autobiography claims to have been an entirely truthful account of more than sixty years of his life (Spender, 1980:117). The account of his sexual exploits and other vices is with the intention of portraying the exact truth about one’s human heart (119). He however displays his other motives unknowingly.

One is boasting; another is to make out that Restif was, under all his looseness, a pious moralist exhorting his readers to live virtuous married lives. Yet despite his nauseating hypocrisy, Restif’s plodding determination to describe the

life he has known... does give an amazing truthful picture of the Eighteenth Century French lower classes (Spender, 1980:119).

Restif pretends that the goal of his book is to teach a moral lesson but shrouds his secret immoral tendencies that have earned Rousseau similar criticism. After telling the stories of his life, he seems to pose the question: which among his fellow human beings can say he was a better person than him, especially in view of his description of the Day of Judgment.

In his analysis of Rousseau's work, Spender resents the author's narrative style which seems to justify wrongdoing because everyone is bad:

... Rousseau does not tell the truth. There is a lie concealed within his very method. For to say to oneself: 'if I tell the worst about myself I shall only reveal that I am no worse than other men' is dishonest. First some men are better than others. Second by the worst one means worst, and it is degrading to comfort oneself by attempting to prove that others are as bad as one own's worst.

Furthermore, Spender believes that some people only confess to some crimes because they feel that it flatters their sense of strength. No one confesses to 'meanness, cowardice, vanity, pettiness: not unless he is assured that his crime, instead of excluding him from humanity brings him back into the moral fold' (121). Hornstein agrees with Spender that the incidents Rousseau recorded and whatever embellishments he may have included, give a picture that portrays the time and age that he lived (Hornstein, 1984:464).

Historical records in newspaper houses, national, local and state archives have consistently proved to be a source of verification of historical events.

History in postmodern times has become a multifaceted discipline – the old priorities and crux of arguments of the economic, the political, and social are no more the major concern of historians:

Historians now study a staggering variety of subjects from love to hate, to smell and taste, from health and sickness, to madness and fear, from childhood to old age, from water to smoke, from crime and justice, to sex and pleasures, from tiny villages to great cities, from obscure individuals to huge collectivities, from seemingly irrational folk-beliefs to constructs of collective memory and forgetting (Evans, Encarta 2001).

This postmodernist attitude to the writing of history has brought about change in the perception of historian's approach, theories and methods of writing. Historical facts and historical fiction are contemporary features of historical writings. There are, however, constitutional laws against history being used as propaganda or falsification of historical facts.

An ugly incident was brought to limelight in the British High Court in 2000 over such manipulations. Deborah Lipsstadt, an American academic, brought a libel against David Irving, a British historian:

Irving was a Holocaust denier who falsified history. The defense was won precisely on the close examination of Irving's writings that demonstrated that he had inserted into quotes from documents words that were not in the

original, relied on sources he knew to be forged because they supported his point of views, suppressed passages in texts that were inconvenient for his argument and in general doctored the historical record in the interests of his political views which the judge affirmed to be racist and extremist (Evans, Encarta 2001).

With such occurrences, it becomes more difficult for biographical writings which are still treasured as historical pieces to be altered to suit the author's whims.

Soyinka's biographical collection can be read vis-à-vis Nigerian historical texts, especially biographies and autobiographies of men and women who participated in the events he has recorded. Justice Kayode Eso, the author of *The Mystery Gunman* does explain a lot of the issues raised in *Ibadan*.

The mystery gunman episode which Eso borrows as the title of his biography is perhaps the most daring encounter Soyinka had in his several brushes with the Nigerian government. Kayode Eso, who was Chief Judge that presided over the case, wrote of the judicial and political implications of his decisions and final judgment. This, apart from other numerous writings, confirms the historical events and issues intricately treated in Soyinka's collection.

### **The Tale of the Cities**

Soyinka's peculiar choice of titles for his biographical work is symbolic. Ake, Isara and Ibadan are cities that have been in existence and still exist today. The important feature of his choice can also be seen in the setting of these narratives. He deliberately relates the physical, psychological and social values of each of these towns to the theme of his work.

In *Ake*, for instance, he introduces us to the landscape and beauty of Ake, the Parsonage and its environs. In his account, he discovers the entire Abeokuta township in his tour with the police band when he was just four years old. Soyinka used this chapter to describe the city of Abeokuta as he knew it as a child, the buildings, the business centres, the market places, Mrs Mc Cutter's Maternity clinic, the sewing mistresses, food stalls, book stalls and the old women who sold herbs and concoctions for herbal preparation. He saw sign posts that read 'To Lafenwa, the other Igbein, Ibara' (Soyinka, 1988:41). This adventure continued to as far as Lantoro.

He records with nostalgia, the smells, sights and sounds of the town most of which are no longer in existence in Abeokuta. This actualizes the reality of his statement on the social changes in Abeokuta:

Writing about a certain stage of social development ... For instance, we have a problem in this nation, things vanish ... I used to lament it, it should be possible to go somewhere and see something at least an important fragment, not just any fragment, of something which has validity, which has contributed to one's own quality of life (Aguoru, 1994).

With this, he refuted the claim that *Ake* was a celebration of himself. According to him, 'I was merely generally interested in those things that were no longer there' (1994).

The effect of modernity on Abeokuta is also documented. There was the advent of electricity, the transformation from the use of gramophone to the re-diffusion box and the diverse news that was disseminated at certain hours. This medium of communication brought about the first stage of the globalization process in terms of communication. It gave details on the import and significance of the Second World War,

foreign fashion and happenings in the international community, which in turn further influenced the Abeokuta community.

Tunde Adeniran, a political scientist in his evaluation of Soyinka's politics observes that Abeokuta, the place of Wole Soyinka's birth, 'was a centre where different forces and influences clashed or intermingled' (Adeniran, 1994:13). Adeniran notes in his historical analysis that the Egba Native Authority was in operation by 1834, with Oba Ademola 11, the Alake reigning in splendour. By 1879, the Egba United Government had been established as a manifestation of the political consciousness in Abeokuta.

These facts have been found to correspond with the historical background the biographers of Mrs. Funmilayo Kuti presented. The people of Abeokuta are part of the Yoruba people who have 'inhabited the southwestern Nigeria for over a millennium' (Odim and Mba, 1997:1). The Egba, as they are known, are one of the subdivisions of the Yoruba who speak mutually intelligible dialects of the same language. The Egba eventually clustered into three provinces, Egba Alake, Egba Gbagura, and Egba Okeona. They have their political leadership where each province has a ruler. The Egba people were faced with series of war experiences before they finally resettled under a rock they called "Olumo" (last ditch) and the new home 'Abeokuta' under the rock (1987:4).

Soyinka's childhood years especially the first eleven, was spent in Abeokuta township where he lived in Ake with his parents. His father was a head teacher of a primary school and his mother a trader. The location and geographical setting in *Ake* remain within the township of Ake and the trips he made outside were to Isara during the holidays and to Ibadan where he went for an interview.

Isara is the home of Wole's paternal grand parents. Isara represents, from Soyinka's point of view, the base of political and economic ideology of the circle of friends of his father who were privileged to have been educated. The geographical setting of *Isara* is unique because the travel experiences of the exiles are relived through flashback techniques, such that Efuape's endeavours in Lagos and the prevailing circumstances in the centre of excellence become a part of it. Opeilu's experiences in Ibadan are also significant to the setting the writer creates. In describing the physical and geographical features of Isara, he hints at the perpetual fear of war in which his ancestors lived. He wonders why they settled on 'such inclement soil. Was it a need for safety in those earlier, uncertain times? Yet the town looked exposed to any determined incursion, the wooded valleys were perfect hiding places for an enemy...' (Soyinka, 1989:2).

Ibadan, the name of a town, represents the bedrock of Nigerian politics. Historically, Ibadan was originally a war camp for a number of tribes who were defending themselves against invaders from the north in the inter-tribal wars of the nineteenth century (Benson, 2001:159).

Ibadan had a sizeable number of warriors who had regrouped to form formidable militia. Ibadan therefore recorded victories in many battles until the imperialistic power, Britain, took over the politics of the land. Ibadan was a strategic base for settler politicians. Obafemi Awolowo, among others, had his base in Ibadan. 'He was the first secretary-general of the Egbe Omo Oduduwa, leader of the Action Group and Premier of the west. Ibadan was a centre for both regional and national politics' (Benson, 2001:167).

The choice of the cities as locations and settings for these works implies that most of the events that took place in the maturing years of the author were witnessed by him. His entrance into Government College, Ibadan is documented in *Ibadan*. He mentioned the added advantage of being there: he became

conscious of the political structures as a student, and travelled all the way to listen to political rallies of politicians like Michael Imodu and Nnamdi Azikiwe.

Ibadan is also reputed to have housed two of the best educational institutions: 'Ibadan gained a staunch reputation as the cradle of learning in Nigeria. The Government College, Ibadan. The first university in Nigeria, The University College, Ibadan...' (Benson, 2001: 168). Soyinka was also privileged to have been a student of both institutions.

### **The Nation and the Movement**

Soyinka's exposure to the leadership of the Egba Women Union is perhaps the greatest political allusion that has been made to his later involvement in politics. Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, his aunt and Mrs. Eniola Soyinka his mother, were deeply involved in the women union.

Mrs. F.R. Kuti's biographical account is a detailed historical account of her life and her activities, which included responsibilities at the international level

Her life encapsulates much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century history of Nigeria while the records of her ancestry depict the evolution of Abeokuta in the 19th century (Odim and Mba, 1997:1).

Mrs. Kuti spent most of her lifetime in Abeokuta, her hometown, working on its progress and the progress of the women folk. This eventually propelled her entry into the public and political life of the nation. Irrespective of the level of the height she attained as a women union leader in Nigeria and a 'participant in national and international politics' (1) Abeokuta remained her base and her source of inspiration.

Soyinka in *Ake* portrays the Kutis' the reverend and his wife as highly respected members of the society. The society, the

students and teachers of the school where Rev. I. O. Kuti was principal held the couple in high esteem. He hilariously recounts the episode in *Ake* when some students stole a poultry bird from Mrs. Kuti's farm. The principal had caught the boys roasting the chicken and so he invited them for interrogation. The high point here is that the leader of the boys, Iku explained that while trying out a chemistry experiment on the phlogistic theory of combustion an extra-ordinary fowl came along,

Principal, it was a frisky cockerel. It was not one of those mangy, timid fowls which one meets in most houses. It was a spirited cockerel principal-how could it be otherwise when it was raised, reared and nurtured under the very hands of the principal and his wife, Beere? (Soyinka, 1988:174).

Soyinka describes the activities of the women's union which had been structured to include 'regular meetings apart from the general one' (1988:199). It was later decided that an hour was to be 'set aside for reading, writing and arithmetic, another for health questions' (199). It was evident that Mrs. Kuti was set to eradicate illiteracy from amongst Egba women. This trait was first displayed after her marriage and redeployment to her husband's working place. She had to resign her job at Abeokuta Girls Grammar School and relocate to Ijebu-Ode.

On her arrival at Ijebu-Ode, she set about assisting as unpaid 'help' at the school ... she established a nursery class known as Mrs. Kuti's class...one of the pioneering pre-school classes in Nigeria. She also organized a 'Young Ladies club' in Ijebu-Ode where she transferred many of the skills she acquired abroad (Odim and Mba, 1997:38).

In Abeokuta where she and her husband finally settled, her union set aside a period for attending to tax problems and it was at one of such meetings that the activities of the *Parakoyi*, the district officers and Alake Ademola's system of government, was rejected. The women marched to the Alake's palace and one of the officers Kemberi, spoke the minds of Egba women

Kabiyesi, the message which I bring to you today is a message of all the women who have left their stalls, their homes and children... they have come to say - Enough is Enough. The words which you heard from me are the words of Mrs. Kuti... She asked me to tell you... that the women of Egba have had Enough. They are starving, their children are starving ...they have no hope for a better future... Now, the women are saying Enough (Soyinka, 1988:207).

Alake, Oba Ademola the second, was a figure who was known to be head strong even among his subjects and chiefs. He was accused of being selfish by some of his close associates. The fabric he designed for the centenary of the Ebga throne became controversial:

Why print only the Alake's name, oriki (cognomen), picture and stamp on the cloth when he is not the only Oba of Egbaland? Selfishness and vainglory. (Akinwumi, 2002:194).

Akinwumi observes in his findings that Ademola used the two objects for his 'own aggrandizement' and surrounded himself with 'art objects with symbols of wealth and power and used them among others to glorify and elevate himself' creating for himself an 'awe-inspiring aura' (2002:201). He was seen as an

oppressor. He designed an inferior version of the fabric for his subjects to set himself apart from the ruled.

*Ibadan*, a memoir, traces the impact of the nationalist movement which heralded the independence of Nigeria and the political chaos that led to the civil wars in 1965 and the military incursion in 1966. Soyinka had become a national figure through his writings, especially his plays. Ojiako reports his arrest by the western government thus

Mr. Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian author and playwright was wanted by the police in connection with an incidence in which an armed man entered an Ibadan studio of the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, seized a recorded tape of a speech by the Western Nigerian Premier and substituted a tape... (Ojiako, 1981:218 & 219).

The impact of this event led to his arrest as a prime suspect of a case Justice Kayode Eso was to preside over. The background to this event was that the power brokers of the West had various interests which were clashing. The crisis in the Chief Obafemi Awolowo-led Action Group was as a result of a serious disagreement he had with Chief Samuel Akintola.

Soyinka in his account in *Ibadan* had watched with dismay Akintola's misrule in the West and indeed the entire political structure of Nigeria. Maren, as he chose to refer to himself in *Ibadan*, had travelled extensively in Nigeria, especially during the period of elections while working on his research. This brought him in personal contacts with 'all kinds of people, in all kinds of places, normal, natural contacts with no thoughts of political complications' (Soyinka, 1994:337).

He observed, however, that all the groups he met exhibited a shared distrust for their leaders. Akintola's NNDP had proved to be a reprobate organization... (337). After a meeting of the leadership of the Action Group, the leaders became worried. 'The governor of the West, Sir Odeleye Fadahunsi, was under pressure to swear in S.L.A. for another term as Premier' (Soyinka, 1994:340) because of his claim of overwhelming victory.

Maren, in a feast in his friend's house, was indifferent to the tit bits or scraps of information filtering in on what the Premier had to say at the evening broadcast. He knew the Premier and what he could do; he was going to inflict on his people

more threats, more arrogance of power, a desperate man's rhetoric to sanctify infamy by defiling the airwaves yet again with claims of victory. Every intelligence report that came through to them confirmed the party's resolve to cling to power (1994:357).

Justice Eso's account better captures the effect of the Premier's broadcast on the listening public. It was catastrophic. Eso states that only 'the first two stanzas had come in, before the dead silence followed. But the damage had been done. -Indeed, a great damage had been done to the body politic of the country' (Eso, 1996:3).

Eso, a disciplined judge acquitted Soyinka, the accused, for lack of evidence of his participation in the gunman episode. Soyinka came up in 1994, about thirty years later with *Ibadan* proving his involvement in the episode, a plan that started off the Western uprising.

### **Conclusion**

Literature, through the autobiographical genre, has affected in positive ways on the lives of people. People who have charted

the course of history and national life in Nigeria are deliberately celebrated in the hope that these will be emulators of these great personalities whose exemplary lives will teach a lot to the coming generation. Soyinka's autobiographical writings have contributed their own quota in this regard. It has also been proven that the historical experiences of a people can be documented, preserved and transferred through the autobiographical medium.

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