

Wole Soyinka: The Cognitive Dimension of his Poetics

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Literature has a cognitive dimension and this is often forgotten in the analysis of literature from Africa. The enormous body of work coming from Wole Soyinka seems to defy analysis. It is my contention to focus on two basic political and philosophical principles underlying his works, allowing us to understand some of the problems of present day Africa. We find a theory of power in his writings and especially an antitotalitarian theory of unitary power (be it political, economic, sexual). This theory is strongly based in the satirical tradition of Yoruba theater. This critique of the unity of power goes along with a strong advocacy for a division between spiritual and temporal power, the separation of church and state, or of religion and politics. These principles are grounded in a creative interpretation of Yoruba culture and illustrate its adaptative and reinterpreted power. They are a very constructive and forward-looking engagement with contemporary Africa as well as with the rest of the world. I will focus on Soyinka's work, from The Lion and the Jewel to his last autobiographical volume, You must set forth at Dawn.