CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The Dawn out of the Dark

Colonialism made its advent in Africa somewhat late, after other regions of the world were colonized, because of various historical and economic reasons. In historical terms Africa did not present itself as an attractive colonial destination because in the western imagination Africa was a dark continent inhabited by primitive tribes, constantly fighting one another and given to atavistic practices and ungovernable tempers. The western colonial powers did not see Africa as presenting a cultural contrast or a reference point to their own mode of living or philosophical outlook. From their point of view Africa was a human quarry from where enslaved young men and women should be transported to Europe and America, and sold on in the markets there. They did not think Africa was a place to stay comfortably at and its people fit to be governed with a sense of pride.

But, when the race for colonial occupation of Africa started in the latter half of the 19th century, it did not take long before the entire continent came under colonial rule. The European colonial powers used a combination of tactics to subdue the African natives some of whom were fiercely independent stateless peoples. The colonial masters firmly dealt with them because of the advantage they had in terms of weapons. To deal with others they employed other tactics. They would secure the occupation of lands and loyalty of the people by a mafia-like offer of protection to the local rulers. In the final analysis the so called ‘tools of empire’ – medicines, steamships, railways,
telegraphs and well-tested organizational capabilities of the western industrial powers – completely swept aside the African resistance by breaking the will of the people.

Britain, like everywhere else in the world, held in Africa vast and heavily populated areas such as Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda and Ghana. Britain followed, irrespective of the geographical, cultural and historical context of Africa, essentially the same policies it followed and perfected in the other colonies it had held up until that time. Given its backwardness on almost every front Africa did not present a military or cultural challenge, the way India did, to Britain. British colonial policies, especially on the political and cultural fronts, met with stiff resistance in India because India has a glorious civilizational past including a literary tradition dating back to many centuries B.C. Africa could not boast of a similar past and so it was an infinitely easy task for the British colonial mission to completely overwhelm its African territories and put in place colonial systems and practices -- Christian religion and western cultural mores, political and military institutions -- and get them accepted by the local tribal populations with remarkable ease. In the process the age-old faiths and belief systems of Africa, which were obviously primitive and unacceptable from the western point of view, got twisted out of shape. In most cases its cultural institutions, such as they were, got dismantled and its life style changed beyond recognition. However opinion varies on the impact of colonialism on the peoples of Africa. John Parker and Richard Rathbone give a nuanced account of this impact in their book *African History: A Very Short Introduction*:

> European rule, underpinned throughout the continent by coercion and racism, was often violent, exploitative, and traumatic. But its
impact varied enormously: across time, from region to region and colony to colony, between men and women and young and old, and according to a multitude of social, political, and economic factors that were often shaped as much by Africans themselves as by their colonial masters. For some Africans, colonial rule represented a threat; for others, an opportunity. For many, it was probably both. Reconstructing these complex patterns is one of the greatest challenges facing historians of Africa today. (91-92)

Considering these remarkable colonial successes in Africa, it has to be admitted that, the colonial conquest of Africa was more complete than in the other British colonies where there were already well established political, social and cultural institutions. The African mind, being fresh and not already harbouring competing ideologies, got fully colonized. While in the former British colonies such as India decolonisation of the mind was never a big challenge in African, as emphasised by the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o in his book Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature (1986), it was a stupendous task and is still incomplete. The British colonial administration in Africa, unlike the other colonial powers ruling the continent, concentrated on cultural transformation rather than economic exploitation alone. It was more patronizing and condescending in Africa than it was elsewhere. In just about half a century of colonial rule Africa went through complete cultural transformation so that the vast majority of the tribal population got Christianised, took to looking upon their own previous cultural institutions and religious practices with derision and regret. This
transformation also resulted in an unqualified admiration of things western in general and things British in particular.

British colonial enterprise in Africa was a short lived phenomenon. Although Britain started decolonizing Africa more than a decade after it did in Asia it was with no great regret because Britain left behind its colonial legacy there including the Christianity, English language, Westminster system of administration and cultural practices of various kinds. However, the colonial political legacy of democracy did not last long in Africa. Most African nations went through a wave of military coups in the first couple of decades after decolonization. Democratically elected governments were replaced by dictatorships, monarchies and various other kinds of totalitarian regimes. African societies found themselves in an unenviable situation having to deal with the colonial cultural legacy on the one hand, unfriendly and anti-people political regimes on the other. There was real identity crisis being experienced by the societies across Africa because they lost their historical moorings during the colonial era and they were not allowed to embrace the western democratic traditions by the local rulers now.

The phenomenon of local rulers of Africa needs to be understood in some detail. Although the European imperialists invaded Africa claiming that the Africans were incapable of governing themselves they soon realized that they could not rule the continent without the support of local allies and intermediaries. In most cases these allies happened to be the local rulers -- kings and chiefs -- who eagerly embraced the colonial order and turned it to their advantage. Especially the British colonial states of Africa who flowed the policy of ‘indirect rule,’ like elsewhere in the world, were inclined to enlist the support of the existing rulers, such as the Sokoto Caliphate of
northern Nigeria who were notorious aristocratic authoritarians, because it was easy to do business with them. It also made sound economic sense to rule indirectly because colonial rule in Africa was done on the cheap. It had to be, because the exaggerated hopes of finding untapped wealth quickly faded and replaced by a struggle on the part of the colonial bureaucracies to maintain law and order, collect taxes and mobilize labour. The local rulers made this task infinitely easier and for their services and loyalty they were richly rewarded by the colonial masters. Indirect rule also created several ‘decentralized despotisms’ – illegitimate power structures – that survived all through the colonial rule and continued into the postcolonial period. This in part explains the despotism and political authoritarianism of contemporary Africa.

In the postcolonial era the local rulers were in most cases propped and supported by the former colonial powers as part of furthering their neo-colonialist agenda. Local ruling elite, dictators and kings played themselves into the hands of these neo-colonialist forces that woke up to the reality of economic prospects in Africa, especially its mineral wealth. In Nigeria, for example, dictatorial regimes and even elected governments have been traditionally patronized by the neo-colonial forces so that its oil wealth could be freely exploited by multinational corporations. Nigerian activists who opposed this exploitation were ruthlessly dealt with. The most famous example which springs to our mind in this context is the environmental activist Ken Sara-Wiwa who was executed by government for pleading for the rights of the people.

Africa today is at the cross roads, plagued as it is by innumerable problems. It is the poorest and most underdeveloped continent, stricken by deadly diseases such as HIV-AIDS, plagued by corrupt, inefficient and dictatorial governments which do not
hesitate to commit human rights violations, tribal strife, civil wars, international conflicts of various kinds and high levels of illiteracy, malnutrition and infant mortality. It is obvious that Africa needs help but this help is not easily forthcoming nor is it reaching the needy people. Africa needs to wait for a long while more to find its deliverance from the current imbroglio.

As we have already noted Africa did not have a written literary tradition worthy of note before colonialism took its roots. However, it was rich in oral literature which even to this day informs the cultural contexts of the written African literature. Modern forms of literature such as novels and short stories began to be written by African writers in the languages of their colonial masters only towards the end of the colonial rule in most African countries, most notably in Nigeria. Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and other African works dealt with the psychological struggle against colonization. In the postcolonial era Wole Soyinka’s novels namely *The Interpreters* and *Season of Anomy* faithfully captured the struggle, unrest and insecurity experienced by the Nigerians. Although these novelists have written in the English language their approach and attitude to Africa and its life has been one of understanding, appreciation and accommodation. In their writings they replaced the characteristic western individualism with inclusiveness and the individual’s identification with society.

Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ayi Kwei Armah and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o were among the first creative writers to wake up to the postcolonial realities of Africa and to protest against them. This naturally put them at odds with the successive ruling regimes and often obliged them to seek asylum in foreign countries. Most often African writers,
including Soyinka, also took to political activism and that further alienated them from the powers that be. They were also unhappy with the cultural mess and identity crisis that Africa landed itself in following the departure of the colonial rulers. They protested against the loss of identity by means of their writings which focused on the essentials of the African life and exposed the hollowness of the colonial legacy. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o went to the extent of setting aside the English language itself for literary purposes and took to writing in his native Gikuyu language. In the context of Nigeria Achebe and Soyinka have achieved remarkable success as the conscience keepers and providers of direction to their troubled society. These writers have always viewed themselves as an inalienable part of the Nigerian society and thus achieved complete identification with people. This helped them to reach out to the people and offer them intellectual, moral and cultural sustenance. In this article “Africa and her Writers,” later included in his book *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, Achebe declared that the novelist, more so the African novelist, should pay a decisive role in order to raise the consciousness of the people.

As African writers emerge onto the world stage they come under pressure to declare their stand. Now I am not one for opposing an idea or a proposition simply on the grounds that it is ‘un-African’ – a common enough ploy of obscurantist self-interest. (Then a modern leader anxious to continue unchallenged his business of transforming public wealth into a dynastic fortune will often tell you that socialism which, quite rightly scares the daylight out him is un-African. We are not talking about his concern for
Africanness). But there seems to me to be a genuine need for African writers to pause momentarily and consider whether anything in traditional African aesthetics will fit their contemporary condition. (618)

He then goes on to emphasize the duty and responsibility of African writers to their land of origin.

A writer is a human being with heightened sensitivity and therefore must be aware of the faintest nuances of injustice in human relations. The African writer cannot therefore be indifferent to or unaware of the monumental injustice which his people suffer. They are committed to a new society which will affirm their validity and accord them identity as Africans, as people; they are all working actively in this cause for which Christopher Okigbo died. I believe that our cause is right and just. And this is what literature in Africa should be about today – right and just causes. (80)

This is a principle faithfully followed by himself and his contemporaries including Soyinka. Behind Achebe’s definition of the role of a novelist as teacher lies the hoary tradition of African writer’s achievement of unconditional identity with his society and his awareness of inseparability of the man and writer within himself. It is thus that autobiographical and philosophical writings of the African writers assume great significance. Their life, activism and literary output cannot be viewed apart from
one another. They coalesce and form an intellectual whole. One is the continuation of the other and each is related to the other the way neutrons and protons are related to one another within an atom. The understanding and analysis of their writings will be imperfect unless and until their autobiographical and philosophical writings are taken into consideration and allowed to illuminate them. It is for this same reason that Wole Soyinka’s two novels are sought to be studied and analysed in this thesis in tandem with his memoirs.

Wole Soyinka was born on July 13, 1934 in Nigeria which is the most populous country in Africa and which has offered to the world the largest number of literary men and women in modern Africa. Soyinka is indubitably the most distinguished among them. His contribution to African drama, fiction, poetry and even to the polity has been unrivalled. It has been testified by the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to him in 1986. The Nobel committee, while awarding him the prize, cited his artistic commitment to render in literature his African culture in all its complexity. A literary critic of note Henry Louise Gates, Jr. reiterates Soyinka’s concern in the following words:

The universality of our experience he never claims, he assumes.
In his poetic representation of Yoruba beliefs, rituals, proverbs and history, Soyinka allows the African part to speak for the human whole. (421-24)

the former book he defines literature and in the latter he states that African literature should be judged on its own terms and not by western standards. He also further argues that no single African writer can represent all of the Africans. There are innumerable African voices that have been recreating African life in a variety of literary forms.

Soyinka himself attempted his hand at a great variety of literary forms. As of now, Soyinka has to his credit seventeen plays, two novels, six collections of poetry, and eight non-fictional works including five memoirs. He is however chiefly known as a playwright. His basic training has been in the specialization of drama. During his years in England he worked for some time at the Royal Court Theatre in London. He was very active as a theatre personality back in Nigeria as well. He even started his own amateur theatre group called The 1960 Masks. The aim of this group was to forge a new Nigerian drama which would be in English but derive its inspiration from African performing arts. Soyinka headed the Department of Theatre Arts at the University of Ibadan for some time during 1967. Early in his career as a dramatist he demonstrated a rare ability to project traditional Nigerian themes in the English language rather than in his mother tongue Yoruba. Next to T.S. Eliot Soyinka is credited with reviving poetic drama in the 20th century. Very often he used the drama form to achieve some political and social aims in the interest of his motherland. For example, his play, Kongi’s *Harvest*, first performed in 1965 at the Dakar Festival of Negro Arts, faithfully reflects the degenerating political situation in Nigeria. In *The Swamp Dwellers* he satirizes and condemns greedy religious leaders who manipulated for their own selfish ends a community of poor farmers living in the swamps.
Soyinka’s personal ideology, philosophical outlook and his view of Nigeria’s past and present too often find an eloquent expression in his dramatic works. He was, for instance, impatient with people who romanticized Nigeria’s past. This view finds its proper expression in his play *A Dance of the Forests*. Through this play Soyinka cautioned his fellow countrymen against the danger of repeating the violence and atavism which were characteristic of their past and also against attempts at romanticizing their past ignoring the realities of the present.

Soyinka’s spectacular achievement as a dramatist often obscures his achievement as a novelist and poet. Soyinka has published only two novels to date – *The Interpreters* and *Season of Anomy* – but from the point of view of African fiction and Soyinka’s literary achievement they are as significant as the best of his play such as *The Road* and *A Dance of the Forests*. Dramas, which are obviously meant for performance on stage, suffer from limitations of space and time. It is not always possible for a dramatist to state the philosophy of life or articulate his ideology of life in sufficient detail within the covers of a drama. A fictional work suffers from no such limitations. Soyinka’s most faithful and eloquent commentary on postcolonial Nigeria, with all its hopes and beliefs, aspirations and disappointments, loyalties and betrayals, violence and upheavals, social unrest and political instability, find their proper artistic expression in his novels. Soyinka comes out as a fuller and more accomplished postcolonial African literary artist in his novels. He also states his philosophy of life and sets down his ideological prescription for Nigeria in these novels rather than anywhere else in his literary corpus.
Soyinka’s mind and outlook have been shaped by a variety of forces and influences since his early years. He recounts these experiences and his responses to them in a series of memoirs. Soyinka records in his first memoir *Aké: The Years of Childhood* the experiences of his first eleven years of his life. *Aké* serves as a valuable introduction to Soyinka’s literary output because it gives us a vivid picture of the childhood world that shaped his vision as an adult. Contradicting images of Christian saints and Yoruba spirits co-existed in Soyinka’s childhood imagination. His Mother a devote Christian dedicated him to Christ and his maternal grandfather initiated him into Yoruba manhood by means of a ritual sacrifice. However Soyinka was not troubled by these contradictory claims on him. He felt happy to be cared for by his extended family that included relatives as well as ancestral spirits. Soyinka also records in this memoir his growing perception of the fissures in his world, occasioned by the contradictory pulls of tradition and modernity. He turns to this theme quite often in his literary works.

Soyinka followed up *Aké: The Years of Childhood* in 1980 with a prequel titled *Isará: A Voyage Around “Essay”* the occasion for writing this memoir was the death of his father when Soyinka was away from home as a political exile. Soyinka chanced upon a collection of his father’s papers which were so interesting that he felt a desire to reconstruct the life of Nigerians belonging to his father’s generation. His father left his native village Isara in pursuit of education in a teacher training seminary. He and his mates found themselves pulled by the conflicting claims of western and African cultures. He made brave attempts to reconcile his western education with traditional African life. The experience of the cultural dilemma had profound implications to postcolonial Nigeria since, in the postcolonial period, Nigerian life is characterised by
cultural ambiguity. Soyinka satirizes the cultural uncertainty of the Nigerians and its consequences in his novel *The Interpreters*.

As it has been noted already, in Africa, writers frequently double as activists for social and political causes. Their activism in most cases also provides the inspiration and raw material for their literary works. It is for this reason that the African fiction tends to be firmly rooted in reality even if the reality is ugly. Soyinka and his works are no exception to this general rule. The postcolonial Nigerian situation disillusioned him no end and in his own way he protested against the forces that sought to enslave Nigeria in pursuit of the neo-colonialist agenda. Successive Nigerian political leaders betrayed the hopes of the people by playing themselves into the hands of the neo-colonialist and capitalist western forces. In his activist role Soyinka protested against rigging in election and was arrested and incarcerated for three months in 1965. His peace mission during the 1967 Nigerian civil war was misinterpreted and he was arrested a second time and imprisoned for about two years at Kaduna. At this prison facility he was kept in solitary confinement, denied medical attention, not allowed to read or write and subjected to other forms of harassment. Still Soyinka managed to write his prison diary called *The Man Died* and some poetry as well, admittedly on cigarette packets and toilet tissues. Soyinka’s second prison term had a profound impact on him in that his tone significantly darkened in the writings that followed. During the civil war Soyinka was a witness to the massacre of more than thirty thousand Igbos in North-East Nigeria. Their rebellion was brutally put down. Despite belonging to the Yoruba tribe, which supported the Federal Government, Soyinka lobbied for a ban on arms sale to both the parties to the conflict. For all his efforts to bring back peace to
Nigeria he was arrested, thrown into jail and subjected to inhuman treatment. He recorded his prison experiences in his memoir *The Man Died*. This book may not be a significant achievement as political commentary but it certainly serves as a faithful chronicle of Soyinka’s changing states of mind and his attempt to survive as a man in the face of denial, deprivation and brutality. Soyinka’s second novel *Season of Anomy*, which paints a rather bleak picture of the state of affairs and security situation in Nigeria many years into independence, proceeded from Soyinka’s experiences during the civil war in terms of detail and his prison experiences in terms of mood and state of mind.

Soyinka has always been a lonely crusader. He did not easily subscribe to populist ideologists such as Negritude. He questioned the relevance of the Negritude movement to modern Africa by saying that a tiger does not have to proclaim its tigritude; it pounces. John J. Su however has a slightly different take on Soyinka’s position on Negritude.

While Soyinka grants that this attitude represents a logical and even inevitable response to *ne´gritude* and other aesthetic and political movements that have exploited racial identity, he resists the conclusion that the solution to the “recurrent cycle of human stupidity” requires the wholesale repudiation of the past. Hence, despite his own affinities with the political Left, Soyinka characterizes such writings as presenting as much danger as the more politically conservative work of the *ne´gritude* movement.…. A “blanket iconoclasm” is no more dialectical than
ne´gritude because it assumes that the critique of existing cultural, social, and political institutions is the sole imperative for the writer. Put another way, iconoclastic writers still essentialize Africa, only in negative terms. Instead of critically engaging with the past, they simply repudiate it. (162)

John J. Su hasten to add that

While Soyinka is very explicit in his critiques of both the Right and Left in politics and ne´gritude and iconoclasm in art, he is less specific in his explanation of how to utilize the “progressive potential” of the past, or even what constitutes this potential. One thing that does become apparent in his more mature writings is that his critiques are motivated by a concern that a younger generation of politicians and artists has lost touch with the vision of Pan-African identity that motivated members of his own generation during the 1960s. This concern becomes particularly apparent in The Open Sore of a Continent, in which Soyinka laments the loss of a sense that the nation state was only part of a broader continental idea. (162)

It is precisely this concern for the younger generation which makes him populate his novels with young intellectuals who have a perspective on not only the present but also the past.

Soyinka also spiritedly resisted the temptation of official favours and instead constantly voiced is protest against injustice and abuse of power indulged in by military
regimes that ruled Nigeria for the most significant part of its independent history. His lonely fight against injustice frequently put him on the collision course with the ruling elite of Nigeria. His activist interventions in the political affairs of Nigeria took such dramatic forms as his barging into the Ibadan radio studio in 1965 and forcing the announcer at gun point to replace the tape of Prime Minister Akintola’s broadcast with a different voice commanding Akintola to get out. Soyinka was arrested but was acquitted after three months because of a technical error committed by the prosecution. This and other several interventions, including the peace mission during the Biafra War earned him the wrath of the Nigerian dictators who often contemplated extra judicial means to deal with him. Although the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986 was officially celebrated in Nigeria and in spite of his international visibility as an activist-writer Soyinka never ceased to run into trouble with the Nigerian official missionary. In 1990 Soyinka had to flee Nigeria in the most dramatic circumstances to evade persecution by General Sani Abacha who placed a reward on Soyinka’s head and ordered his elimination because he protested against the general’s brutal and dictatorial rule. Soyinka continued his campaign against Abacha till the dictator’s death.

Soyinka represents today the unfailing conscience of Nigeria as a postcolonial nation, albeit a nation beset by innumerable problems. He continuous to participate in the Nigerian affairs in spite of the heavy demands made on his time and his frequent and long academic assignments abroad. He is currently immersed in evolving a people’s constitution for his homeland. Soyinka’s political activism and social engagements have not blunted his appetite for writing. At regular intervals he comes up with plays, collections of poetry, prose tracts and other works of literary significance.
In fact, his activism and literary works stem from the same creative repertoire which Soyinka has in abundance. They both have the same aim and purpose too, which is to fight injustice in whatever forms it obtains in Nigeria. Soyinka finds in his country a lot to complain against, a lot to find fault with, a lot to be ashamed of, a lot to enquire into, and a lot to transform. He chose two methods – political activism and literary production – to make his statement on the Nigerian situation. As it has been stated earlier on his activism and literary output work in tandem. In most cases his activism provides the staple subject matter, the direction and the spiritual sustenance of his literary works. Being a lonely crusader his activism per se did not achieve its intended target but its value lies in the inspiration it provided and the basis it formed for his words. His international stature as a Nobel Laureate and the immense popularity of his works among the common readers as well as literary scholars have certainly helped popularize his activist ideology and foregrounded the issues that Nigeria is seized with. In either case Soyinka has achieved his purpose of raising the consciousness of the Nigerians themselves and in drawing the attention of the world to the postcolonial Nigerian situation characterised by political violence, exploitation of resources by the neo-colonialist, multinational corporations and the consequent disillusionment prevailing among the Nigerians.

In order to understand Soyinka’s literary works, especially his fiction, it thus becomes imperative to study his life and ideas as well. Quite helpfully for us, Soyinka himself has stated the facts of his life and his thoughts and ideas on the postcolonial Nigeria in a series of memoirs and non-fictional works. Of the five memoirs that he has authored so far *Ibadan: the ‘Penkelemes’ Years: A Memoir 1946-65* has the greatest
bearing on and relevance to the commentary and ideology contained in his two fictional works *The Interpreters* and *Season of Anomy*. In this thesis it is proposed to study this memoir in a separate chapter in view of its relevance to the novels in terms of providing the ideological basis and personal experiences on the part of Soyinka that were later shaped into themes of universal significance in his fictional works.

In the foreword to *Ibadan: the ‘Penkelemes’ Years* itself Soyinka states that *Ibadan* does not pretend to be anything but fiction and then clearly indicates that he has fictionalised facts in this book. He even conceives the protagonist as a different person called Maran, obviously his alter-ego in contravention of the established practice of directly referring to himself in the first person. He later confessed in an interview given to the BBC that Maran is none other than himself. The reason for this innovative conception of the memoir, which for all practical purposes reads like a novel, is perhaps to allow himself the freedom and liberty to describe his experiences that shaped his writings and his ideology that runs as an undercurrent in his works, without feeling unduly conscious of or embarrassed about his own past or the way his mind was made.

At one level *Ibadan: the ‘Penkelemes’ Years* can also be read as a novel narrating the story of Soyinka’s life which has in any case enough material that any experienced writer would find interesting for fictional purposes. For this reason, apart from the other reasons that we have already considered, *Ibadan: the ‘Penkelemes’ Years* should be read and analysed in association with *The Interpreters* and *Season of Anomy* as it provides the theory and the novels prove to be the result of the application of the theory.
The years 1945-67 were crucial in Soyinka’s life as well as in the life of Nigeria as a nation. It was during this time that Soyinka had had most of the formative experiences of his life which eventually shaped his social, political and literary stance. It was during these years that Nigeria experienced the transition from a British colony to a sovereign independent nation. Independence raised, in its wake, many hopes in the Nigerians. They expected the new nation to shed its colonial baggage, embrace progressive ideology, social justice, democracy, religious harmony, economic development, constructive and cooperative relations with the nations within Africa and across the globe and above everything else to ensure equality, justice and dignity for all. However, in less than half a dozen years after independence, it became clear that this optimism was rather misplaced. None of the hopes that independence raised was fulfilled. Instead, Nigeria descended into political and social chaos. The prospect of progressive Nigeria began to look increasingly bleak. As a young Nigerian, an intellectual and literary artist at that, Soyinka was caught in this vortex and found himself pitted against formidable forces which were out to silence all voices of dissent.

By means of selecting and imaginatively reconstructing in *Ibadan: the ‘Penkelemes’ Years* the important episodes of his life, which also had profound implication to Nigeria as a young nation, Soyinka unveils for our understanding the extraordinary happenings that charted the future course of Nigerian history. It was a period, above everything else, of power mongering, racism, and political corruption; in other words, a period of *Penkelemes* or peculiar mess. On the personal front, it was a period during which Soyinka broke free from liberal Christianity that his parents practiced by putting his relocation to Ibadan to good use and shaped his own mind so that he would take on
official corruption, contest abuse of power by the political establishment and become a critic of the degeneration that crept into Nigerian public life. In *Ibadan: the ‘Penkelemes’ Years* therefore abuse of power and the use of language as a corrective are recurrent themes. In *Ibadan* the protagonist Maran-Soyinka frequently acts impulsively and alone against injustice, corruption, and abuse of power because the Nigerian situation was then, and to an extent even to this day, would exasperate any concerned individual. Acting impulsively as the situation dictated Maran does not build a movement involving like-minded people. This puts Maran at the risk of being treated as an arrogant young man who acts first and thinks later and whose anger often fails to produce the intended results. A deeper understanding of the character of Maran would show that he acts as the prototype of several of the six intellectual protagonists that people Soyinka’s first novel *The Interpreters* because these young men too are greatly dissatisfied with the state of affairs prevailing in Nigeria in the early years of its independence and often impulsively and thoughtlessly protest against the people who landed Nigeria in that unenviable situation. Maran also provides many clues to the shaping of Ofeyi the hero of Soyinka’s second novel *Season of Anomy*. During the first half of this novel Ofeyi bears indelible marks of a Maran-like fictional hero but in the second half he embraces community and comes to believe in collective action.

The importance of *Ibadan: the ‘Penkelemes’ Years* to the understanding of Soyinka’s two fictional works is thus indisputable. It has been often said that Soyinka’s writings – especially his fictional works – are incidental to his activist politics which has for its aim justice with a capital J. And *Ibadan: the ‘Penkelemes’ Years* brilliantly captures Soyinka’s battles for justice within himself and with the unfriendly Nigerian
regimes and in the process provides the basis for his two novels. It is our good fortune that Soyinka came up with the idea of writing the memoir *Ibadan: the ‘Penkelemes’* decades after his novels were published because otherwise we would have been left clueless about the influences and experiences that found an imaginative treatment in his novels and consequently our appreciation of the novels would have been highly qualified and incomplete.

*The Interpreters* has been adjudged a powerful critique of Nigeria as a postcolonial nation and as a novel that brilliantly portrayed the post-independence disillusionment widely prevailing among all sections of Nigerians. It has been for that reason further viewed that the novel constitutes Soyinka’s commentary on the Nigerian situation. The novel seeks to expose the contradictions inherent in the Nigerian nation. For example, independence from the colonial rule brought in its wake neither economic prosperity nor social stability. In continuation of the colonial traditions the unfriendly political and cultural institutions were strengthened rather than being replaced by institutions friendly to Nigeria and in line with its culture and history. The new political setup had hardly any inclination to alter the economic and social order put in place by the colonial masters. It all added up to Nigeria, as a postcolonial nation, becoming unfriendly to its own people and irrelevant on the world stage.

At the centre of the consciousness of this novel are five intellectual protagonists who have all been educated abroad and have freshly returned home with their hearts brimming with hope and eyes full of dreams. Their stay abroad has given them a fresh perspective on their own nation and kindled in them patriotism and zeal to make their best contribution to nation building. The optimism of those days was infectious.
Soyinka himself, who has been abroad like these intellectuals, had many dreams for Nigeria.

I returned from my student days, like others of my generation, with grandiose ideas about the kind of nation I must assist in building…. There was an unstoppable mood of great excitement. We were going to rescue the country from its colonial past, recover its heritage, and establish a new renaissance. (05 Feb. 2012)

However this optimism soon degenerated into disillusionment. The people who were largely responsible for its loss of hope were the Nigerian political leaders who were concerned with stepping into the shoes of the colonial masters and enjoying power and privileges rather than with transforming and developing Nigeria. These politicians were the enemies of the Nigerian nation and far more difficult to deal with than the previous foreign rulers. The intellectuals of *The Interpreters* are inducted into the Nigerian society and are expected to toe the line – corrupt and anti-people – that the ruling class set for itself. They therefore find it very insulting and infuriating to be sucked into a cesspool of corruption, inefficiency and redtapism. Taken by surprise and unable to act with determination in the absence of an organized movement each of them expresses his resentment and impatience in his own idiosyncratic way. Critics have described this lack of action on the part of the intellectual protagonists as a shortcoming. However it has to be understood that this view of the novel is a result of an incomplete understanding of it in its historical context. There is in this novel an unmistakable quest for meaning in a chaotic world – an ardent desire to find a means of
imposing order on the chaos, make sense of the futility and anarchy that Nigeria was experiencing. Apart from that, the novel also tries to give a shape to the tension between the colonial past and the postcolonial present, the traditional mode of African life and the novelty occasioned by colonial rule, western education and the prevalence of the Christian faith and finally tribal loyalties and belief systems existing alongside ideologies of western orientation. The five intellectual protagonists of the novel try their best, each in his own way, to strike a balance and suggest a way out of the imbroglio. In most ways the behaviour of the intellectuals harks back to Soyinka’s own response to the tension and turmoil that Nigeria went through following independence and that further establishes the relevance of *Ibadan: the ‘Penkelemes’ Years*, wherein Soyinka recorded the shaping influences of his life, to the proper understanding of *The Interpreters*.

*Ibadan: the ‘Penkelemes’ Years* narrates events leading up to the Nigerian civil war of 1967-70 and the military coup that preceded it. The civil war has an interesting political backdrop. Since independence, especially after the declaration of the first Republic in October 1963, the Southern and the Northern regions of Nigeria experienced unequal and lopsided economic and educational development leading to ethnic and religious tensions in those regions. The Nigerian North was inhabited predominantly by the Christian Igbo tribe while the South was dominated by other ethnic groups such as the Yorubas and Hausas. Amidst these tensions a national election was conducted in 1965. The election was marred by fraud and vote rigging. There were widespread riots to denounce the election and they culminated in a coup in January 1966 by a group of Igbo army officers and the assassination of the Prime
Minister and other important political figures. Even the military government headed by General Aguiyi-Ironsi was not successful in relieving the ethnic tensions or to put in place a universally acceptable constitution. In July of the same year there was another military coup which brought the hard headed General Yakubu Gowon to power. Thousands of members of the Igbo tribe were massacred in the North. This forced the Igbos to return to the South-east in their millions and start a secessionist movement and demand full autonomy for their region. Under the leadership of their military Governor Lt. Col. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu they declared an independent state called the Republic of Biafra. Nigeria was thus embroiled in a full scale civil war for three years. The civil war caused at least one million deaths and resulted in the defeat of Biafra.

The Biafra civil war was in some sense a legacy of the colonial rule. According to John J. Su—

The Biafran War (1967–70), more than any other event, confirmed a sense that the “story” of postcolonial Nigeria only replays the history of colonial violence and exploitation. This struggle, which claimed an estimated two million lives, demonstrated the consequences of the ethnic and tribal tensions that the British encouraged during the colonial era as a means of forestalling any united opposition front. The secession of the eastern, Igbo-dominated provinces was a direct result of targeted ethnic violence in the northern region by the Hausa-Fulani and
the 1966 coup overthrowing the military government of Major-
General Ironsi, which was dominated by Igbo officers. (146)

During the Biafra war Soyinka made a determined effort, in his characteristic single handed way, to bring the two warring parties to the negotiating table so that the civil war could be ended. However, Soyinka was misunderstood by both the parties and he was promptly arrested and kept in solitary confinement for twenty one months. Soyinka recorded his pain, suffering, and outrage at the civil war and his illegal detention in his prison diary *The Man Died* (1973) more directly, and relived the experience indirectly in his second novel *Season of Anomy* (1974). Although *Season of Anomy* has an unmistakable autobiographical element in it, it should be regarded as a valuable commentary on life in Nigeria during the civil war years. It records Nigerian history from the point of view of the suffering masses, victims of violence and intellectuals and activists who are committed to the reconstruction of Nigeria and to ring in a new order upholding ethnic harmony, economic development, civil rights, democracy and fair play. The intellectual protagonists of *The Interpreters*, who had cherished very much the same ideals but were powerless to act for whatever reason, resurface in *Season of Anomy* in the characters of Henry Ofeyi, Pa Ahime, the Dentist and other votaries to the ideal social order called Aiye´ro´. The most important of them of course is Ofeyi, once an officer of the Cartel which is robbing Nigeria of its wealth, but has now taken to spreading the message of the Aiye´ro´ in the hope that it would deliver Nigeria from its current political and ethnic turmoil. During the course of the novel, as he searches for his beloved Iriyise who has been kidnapped by the Cartel in order to check him in the tracks, Ofeyi goes through literal hell that Nigeria has
become. His experiences give him a sense of direction and convince him of the need to organize and take on the enemy by employing violence if necessary. This enemy is within and is given to taking many shapes and forms such as mob fury against members of a different religion, atrocities committed by the military, corruption indulged in by the police, and indifference and inaction by the civil service officials.

Further, in Season of Anomy Soyinka projects his social and political vision for Nigeria. He did not subscribe to the Negritude Movement precisely because it would mean returning to an outmoded way of life that is discordant with the current scientific ethos. In the same breath he hated tribalism and the evils attendant on it. He wanted Nigeria to be modern in every respect but firmly rooted in tradition that has withstood the test of time. In Season of Anomy Soyinka’s vision is codified by the ideal community called Aiye’ro´. John J. Su explicates the idea further.

The idea that the writer can create out of traces of a violent history an image of solidarity is most fully articulated by Soyinka in Season of Anomy. The village of Aiye’ro´ as depicted in the novel represents perhaps the most utopian community in all Soyinka’s writings. It was founded by a group who rejected the flourishing Christian religion and its apparent justification of the slave trade; the new community sought instead to return to traditional African religions. Such a return is not cast as a regression or effort at isolationism, however, for all Aiye’ro´’s young men travel across the world to learn about the mores and values of other societies. The cultural conversations produced by
such travel actually promote the cultural integrity of the community because the young men always return from their travels to take up their lives again within the Aiyé’ró’ community, and during their travels they all send back a portion of their earnings to the village’s communal fund…. The novel does not endorse the idea that traditions should be arbitrarily mixed and matched, but insists that communities need to remain rooted within a cultural tradition even as they selectively appropriate the practices and ideas of other cultures. In this way, the cultural conversations the community members engage in do not threaten the foundational ethics of the society but rather enable them to refine their values. (168-69)

This ideal can be realised, according to Soyinka only by the committed efforts of intellectuals and activists and not by politicians, military or the civil service. This is suggested in the novel through the character of highly educated Ofeyi. Ofeyi’s experience of crimes committed with impunity all around, economic exploitation by corporations such as the Cartel and ethnic violence of various kinds and half-truths and untruths fed to the public by the government not only help him in extricating himself from the traps laid around him but by the Cartel also help him in regaining his humanity and urge him on the road to action to set things right.

As a literary artist Soyinka is firmly rooted in the history, culture and society of Africa in general and of Nigeria in particular. He derives his inspiration from and aims his literary works at Nigeria. He thinks that the universal always comes from the
particular. And it is a shortcoming of Western criticism that it feels it is worth noting a
dimension of the universal in any worthwhile work of art. (Dec. 1994)

Soyinka was responding to the general critical view, albeit condescending, of his work prevailing in the West that it is universal. He is surprised at the surprise of the western critics that African literature could mean anything to anybody outside Africa. Soyinka’s universality needs no emphasis. Since the award of the Nobel Prize in 1986 he has gone on to become a world writer. There is in his dramatic, poetic, and prose works much that is of relevance to the entire mankind like in the works of Shakespeare, Bernard Shaw and Tolstoy even when they wrote about life in their particular geographical and historical contexts. Soyinka’s universality, much acclaimed as it is, has earned him some adverse criticism. His detractors, notably the Nigerian critics Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike charged him with being iinauthentic and euro-assimilationist and with paying “imitative homage” to the western canon in his book *Toward the Decolonization of the African Literature* (1983).

Soyinka defended himself by publishing his exchanges with critics in a book titled, *Dialogue and Outrage: essays on literature and culture* (1988) and later by declaring that he does not wear his commitment on his sleeve but accepts “a general citizen’s commitment that only happens to express itself through art and words.” (423) A close attention to Soyinka’s works would reveal that he borrows themes and techniques, albeit eclectically, from both Africa and Europe and quite often successfully blends them. For instance, in *Season of Anomy* he uses the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice at the level of structure so that Ofeyi’s travels through the
modern hell called Nigeria assume a deeper significance and resonate with the feelings of the readers across the world.

Chinweizu and others have also often faulted Soyinka for being wilfully obscure. His play *A Dance of the Forests* has been accused of being obscure even to the Nigerians other than those belonging to the Yoruba tribe. This supposed obscurity of Soyinka perhaps stems from the enormous richness of his imagination, dense imagery and a conscious effort on his part to universalize the particular, the particular here standing for the Yoruba way of life. It must however be stated that the much talked about obscurity of Soyinka is confined to only his dramatic works. His fictional works suffer from no such limitations. They are written in the clearest possible English and they follow the established techniques of prose fiction. Even when Soyinka’s long practice as a playwright and poet compels him to introduce elements drawn from these genres into his novels they do not pose a serious hurdle to the understanding on the part of the readers. Instead, they enhance the artistic appeal of the novels and render their reading an aesthetically fulfilling experience.

Critics of the leftist orientation have criticised Soyinka for ignoring the class division of Nigerian society and for not upholding the principle of poetic justice in his works. It is true that Soyinka does not take the class divide into serious consideration but he cannot be faulted for that. His interest lies elsewhere. He is eager to depict the general degeneration that has set into Nigerian life than call upon the working classes and depressed sections to target and kill rich people as part of the class struggle. It is also true that the virtuous characters, who also most often represent the oppressed people, do not always emerge triumphant towards the end of his works. However his
two novels do not fit fully into this description. In *The Interpreters* Soyinka certainly
dramatizes the economic disparities that obtain in the Nigerian society with corrupt
judges, hypocritical university dons and unabashed social climbers standing in stark
contrast with office boys and other menials. Although the intellectual protagonists of
*The Interpreters* do not exactly succeed in their mission in the face of an
overwhelmingly powerful and hydra-headed enemy the chief figure of *Season of
Anomy*, Ofeyi, is certainly successful in his personal as well as social mission which
can only be described as the triumph of the virtuous side.

Soyinka’s prose is said to be dense but verbose. Perhaps it is an offshoot of his
long practice as a playwright and poet. *The Interpreters* has been criticised for its lack
of a central plot, too many dramatic scenes and insufficiently integrated flashbacks and
reveries. *Season of Anomy* has been divided into sections the way a long poem is often
divided into several cantos and given titles that are basically poetic in tone and
presumably they present the reader some difficulty in understanding. But there have
been any number of enthusiastic defenders of Soyinka’s style who passed balanced
judgements on his fiction. Here is Biodun Jeyifo who comments on the style of *The
Interpreters*.

His first novel, *The Interpreters*, was hailed as a distinctive,
original contribution to modern African fiction. Critics praised its
rich verbal texture, its complexity of narrative technique and
unconventional mode of characterization, and its fresh and
invigorating use of language. But the very terms of the critical
praise for the novel negatively reinforced some of the prevailing
theoretical and ideological confusions regarding the alleged non-
African provenance of the novel and the presumed difficulties
African novelists have in mastering the intricacies of the form,
especially in its modernist, experimental mode. (169)

These are both strong points and weaknesses at the same time of Soyinka’s fiction. His novels would not have been as evocative as they are but for their dense prose and dramatic scenes that come in quick succession. The lyrical quality of the prose in these novels makes their reading a pleasurable experience by taking the theme and message straight to the heart of the reader. The readers of Soyinka’s fiction cannot but be impressed and influenced by it. They find themselves wiser, better informed and more sensitive people on reading Soyinka’s novels than they have been so far. Soyinka’s novels leave a deep impression on the readers and make them think for years about what they have read. Each one of his characters is neatly delineated and individuated so that he or she takes on a new life, lingers long in the memory of the readers and continues to command attention for years on the end. If Nigeria’s postcolonial political and social history is so well known, unlike for instance that of Algeria, it is because the novels of Soyinka, Achebe, and others have become so popular with the reading public across the world. People around the world would not have read them with such keen interest had they not been great works of art and universities everywhere in the world would not have included them in their courses on postcolonial literature had they not been among the best novels of the world. What emerges in the final analysis from Soyinka’s prose works, including *Ibadan: the ‘Penkelemes’ Years*, is a true, if somewhat disturbing, image of postcolonial Nigeria.
In this thesis therefore it is proposed to study and analyse Soyinka’s three prose works, namely *Ibadan: the ‘Penkelemes’ Years*, *The Interpreters* and *Season of Anomy* against the backdrop of Nigeria’s postcolonial history. A consideration of the critical response to Soyinka’s works, attempted above, reveals that Soyinka’s autobiographical writings and fictional works have not been studied in association with one another and in the context of the postcolonial history of Nigeria. Since Soyinka’s activism and literary output overlap each other and complement each other it is likely that much of great value in literary critical terms would emerge from viewing his memoir *Ibadan: the ‘Penkelemes’ Years* as providing the autobiographical, activist, and historical background and philosophical basis of Soyinka’s two novels *The Interpreters* and *Season of Anomy* and these novels as proceeding from an activist and prophetic imagination than as pure fiction meant to provide nothing more than aesthetic pleasure.

The thesis is divided into five chapters including, the introductory first chapter and the conclusion. Chapters two, three and four would each be devoted to the study of *Ibadan: the ‘Penkelemes’ Years*, *The Interpreters* and *Season of Anomy* respectively.

Chapter one explores the colonial and postcolonial history of Africa and relates it to its literary production, more specifically to the prose works of Soyinka. It also devotes considerable space to the study of Soyinka’s activist and literary politics and argues how the two could be profitably studied together. It further considers the salient critical opinions on Soyinka’s fictional works and that way establishes the need for the present study.
Chapter two focuses on Soyinka’s fictionalised autobiography *Ibadan: the ‘Penkelemes’ Years* and shows how it provides the ‘grist’ to Soyinka’s fiction ‘mill’; in other words, it demonstrates how *Ibadan: the ‘Penkelemes’ Years* acts as a helpful guide to the proper understanding of his novels.

Chapter three studies Soyinka’s first novel *The Interpreters* in the context of the optimism and disillusionment of the immediate first decade following Nigeria’s independence from the colonial yoke. It is argued in this chapter that *The Interpreters* presents an accurate and convincing picture of post-independence Nigeria which is burdened by the colonial legacy, political corruption and official apathy and above all the powerlessness of intellectuals and other concerned individuals to act and set things right.

Chapter four seeks to analyse *Season of Anomy* in close relation to the historical and political developments that preceded the Biafra civil war and the mindless violence it unleashed while intensely focussing on the travels, travails and transformation of the protagonist Ofeyi. It is also further argued that in this novel Soyinka suggests his solution to Nigeria’s many maladies by projecting the ideal social, political and religious order Aiye’ro’ which is modern in outlook but firmly rooted in African tradition.

The fifth and final chapter, which marks the conclusion of the thesis, summarizes the chief arguments presented in the previous three chapters and endeavours to establish that through his prose works Soyinka has achieved more in artistic, social and political terms than any literary artist of Africa, by drawing the
world’s attention to his nation and by obliging it to initiate steps to reform itself the most important of them being the country’s return to democracy in May 1999 ending sixteen years of military rule.

A significant part of this research has been library-based. In view of the paucity of critical materials on Soyinka’s prose works in the Indian libraries authentic web-based resources too have been profitably consulted and duly acknowledged when used. Further, in keeping with the spirit of the technology-enhanced modern times audio-video materials, especially speeches and interviews by Soyinka, have been referred to and quoted from at appropriate places in the thesis. It is hoped that this method of using electronic materials, and not just the conventional text/published materials, would lend greater authenticity to this research endeavour. Documentation, throughout, has been MLA compliant and the specifications of *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (7th edition) have been scrupulously adhered to so as to enhance the reference value of the thesis.
Works Cited


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