

INTRODUCTION: FOR BIODUN JEYIFO AT 60

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Biodun Jeyifo, Professor of English at Cornell University, was 60 years on Thursday January 5, 2006. Over the next week and half in different venues in Nigeria, friends, academic and other colleagues from the activist community, mentees, former students and a host of others whose lives he had touched in one way or the other over the years, gathered together to celebrate the life of a distinguished mind and a committed public intellectual. For someone who over the last three decades has been publicly identified with a critical ethical subculture not in the least given to self-promotion--in a larger sociocultural context in which garrulous self-promotion is valued cultural capital--the widespread celebrations both surprised the “celebrant” and provided a heartwarming nudging critical reflection on the social values of the subculture itself: that in the “heat of the struggle”--and god knows the struggle could always do with more heat!--it need now and then to stand back a bit in calm self-acknowledgement and toast to even “little” victories.

For about three decades now, Biodun Jeyifo has been one of Africa’s most discerning literary critics, and certainly its most influential critic of a radical Marxist orientation. Jeyifo is a pioneer in many regards. Beginning in the 1970s, his was one of the very first systematic and certainly the most profoundly rigorous attempts to constitute a Marxist critical approach to reading African literatures, and thereby re-orient the criticism of African literatures away from the then dominant New Critical practices. *Positive Review: A Review of Society and Culture in Black Africa*, a now-defunct journal which Jeyifo co-founded then, became one of the earliest institutional forms devoted to expressing the new critical consciousness and the new agenda. He also instituted curricular innovations at the then University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) to train new generations of critics more cosmopolitan in the wider array of critical approaches made

available to them. Jeyifo is more generally identified as a critic of drama and theatre, and indeed, I know no more engaging and illuminating post-colonial drama and theatre critic writing today. The essays in *The Truthful Lie: Essays in a Sociology of African Drama* (New Beacon, 1985) were already canonical pieces, many of them generating chains of scholarly reactions across Africa and abroad, before they appeared together in that now famous volume. *The Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre of Nigeria* (Nigeria Magazine, 1984), the classic study of the most extensive commercial popular theatre tradition in Africa with a recorded history going back to the 1590s, still remains the touchstone for any study of that tradition and for other indigenous popular theatre traditions across Africa. There has of recent been a renewed interest in this book, given the major transformations in the Yoruba theatre movement over the last decade and half: Nigeria's economic downturn, World Bank-inspired devaluation of the currency, increasingly unsafe nights, and the emergence of the digital video revolution, both killed the popular theatre movement and resuscitated it as a sprawling home-grown home video industry whose products are now widely popular across Africa.

Jeyifo's status as the leading and most authoritative critic of Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka is based on the unmatched brilliance he brings each time to the writers' works. Here are some samples anyway, authored or edited by him: *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics, Postcolonialism* (Cambridge UP, 2003), *Perspectives on Wole Soyinka: Freedom and Complexity* (University Press of Mississippi, 2001), and *Conversations with Wole Soyinka* (University Press of Mississippi, 2001), and scores of articles. His edited *Modern African Drama* (W.W. Norton, 2002) is currently the most widely available on the subject, as well as the most authoritative versions of the selected texts, given Jeyifo's extensive research work on verifying and annotating them. And I have not mentioned Jeyifo's equally extensive theoretical interventions in postcolonial discourse such as, to name just three, "The Nature of Things: Arrested Decolonization and Critical Theory," and "On Eurocentric Critical Theory: Some Paradigms from the Texts and Sub-Texts of Post-Colonial Writing," and "In the Wake of Colonialism and Modernity." Together they constitute one of the finest expressions of a postcolonial discursive accent that is as theoretically astute as it is robustly and discriminatingly sociologically anchored, two features you

don't find cohabiting in the writings of ninety-nine per cent of postcolonial scholars writing today.

I had the great fortune of being taught at some point by Jeyifo. You cannot be in Jeyifo's class for two days and not be convinced--on your own without obvious compulsion--that you need to read more. His on- and off-class interactions with students usually results in a composite effect of stimulating students and making it appear as if it were the students' own auto-stimulation. As a student, you soon quickly get over your orphan mentality of expecting all from the teacher and actually begin deriving satisfaction from self-directed research and discovery. For Jeyifo the teacher, there is always "more to do" and that more is "complex" and "difficult." This is thoroughly intimidating but in the end always productive. The sense of empowerment you feel before the semester is over could not be greater. You gain not just a scholarly but a life skill.

The tributes below are written specially for this forum or culled from Nigerian newspapers. My thanks to all the contributors. I also apologize to those who did not get my invitation on time. You can still send me your tributes, as I intend to update this forum once more.