

The Nobel Laureates in Literature of the African Diaspora

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Introduction

This paper will discuss the similarities in insights and observations of the Nobel Laureates in Literature of the English-speaking African Diaspora who were conferred the prize in the last two decades of the twentieth century. The material for this examination is taken from the Nobel Lectures (of each conferee) which are summative texts of their life's work. An analysis of these substantive lectures, as texts, reveals their unique contributions individually, as well as collectively, to the formation of a canon of twentieth century Diasporic texts.

The Nobel Prize is well known for conferring one of the highest honors in the world. Throughout its 111 year history, the Nobel Prize has signaled trends in twentieth century thought and innovation in the disciplines of Chemistry, Economics, Literature, Medicine, Peace, and Physics. Consistent with the intent of Alfred Nobel's will, the prize in each category is awarded "to those who, during the preceding year, shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind" ("Full text of Alfred Nobel's Will"). In Nobel's Will, the phrase "the preceding year" is significant in that it guarantees, for perpetuity, that the awards will be bestowed upon persons whose works are current, state-of-the art, and representative of excellence in the respective disciplines. Were it not for this provision, the writers of the African Diaspora who emerged in the late eighties may never have been considered, given the Eurocentric mindset of 1906, when the prize was first established.

Very little is known about the mechanics and process of the awards or about the complex administrative operations (headquartered in Sweden and Norway) designed to fulfill

the intent of inventor Alfred Nobel. While all the prizes share the terms of *conferring the greatest benefit on mankind*, the Nobel Committees in each respective discipline have been given a special charge to fulfill. Regarding the Nobel Prize in Literature, for example, the will specifies that this *greatest benefit on mankind* must be given *to the person who shall have produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work in an ideal direction* ("Full text of Alfred Nobel's Will"). Therefore, the Swedish Academy for the Nobel Prize in Literature has been forced to grapple with the interpretation of the phrase *ideal direction*, and the Academy's policies regarding the semantics of this criterion have changed through the ages. For example, in the first decade of the literature prize, *ideal direction* connoted literary works that promoted *lofty idealism* as exemplified in the works of the first Literature Laureate, Sully Prudhomme, or in the similarly idealistic work of Rudyard Kipling. Later, after World War II, the interpretations focused more on the semantics of *idealism* as it related to pioneering language aesthetics and ideology as expressed by writers like Samuel Beckett and T. S. Eliot. By the late 80s – the focus of this paper -- the term of *idealism* centered more on the importance of works that promoted awareness of lesser known languages, dialects, and works that concerned themselves with the human condition (Espmark).

The Nobel Prize in Literature of 1986 to Wole Soyinka of Nigeria and to Naguib Mahfouz of Egypt in 1988, marked a definitive shift in the Eurocentric perspective of the Swedish Academy. Obviously, the vision of Alfred Nobel's will prompted the Nobel Committee to shift the *ideal direction* of its gaze so as to include the continent of Africa and its migrations. Subsequently, the prize has been conferred on several English-speaking authors throughout the African Diaspora—a fact that, given the Nobel Committee's track record, is of no little

significance. I am referring here, of course, to Nobel Laureates Wole Soyinka of Nigeria (1986), Nadine Gordimer of South Africa (1991), Derek Walcott of St. Lucia (1992), Toni Morrison of the United States (1993), and V. S. Naipaul of Trinidad (2001), all of whom write in English, and reside in countries whose population is predominantly of African descent.

In addition to the financial award, each Laureate receives a medal and a diploma with a citation that is painstakingly crafted to represent the Laureate's body of work. These citations yield important clues that unite these authors who write in the context of modern Africa or African-derived cultures in the Caribbean and the United States. Wole Soyinka's Nobel Citation reads, *"who in a wide cultural perspective and with poetic overtones fashions the drama of existence."* This description aptly summarizes Soyinka's contributions in dramatizing the trauma of contemporary African society in a manner that allows readers to appreciate the African trauma as inseparably a part of the human trauma. Nadine Gordimer's citation is even more direct in its reference to Nobel's will: the citation designating her as someone *"who through her magnificent epic writing has - in the words of Alfred Nobel - been of very great benefit to humanity [in that she] reflects her portrayal of inhumane conditions in South Africa."* This commendation reflects Gordimer's accomplishment as a white South African in portraying the victims of apartheid. Derek Walcott, whose artistry encapsulates a Caribbean identity, was conferred the Nobel Prize, *"for a poetic oeuvre of great luminosity, sustained by a historical vision, the outcome of a multicultural commitment."* Toni Morrison, the best-selling storyteller of African-American life, is cited as someone *"who in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality."* Perhaps the most unique among the Diaspora's writers is V. S. Naipaul whose Asian identity as a writer of the West Indies

is expressed in the citation, *"for having united perceptive narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories."*

As a part of the week-long award ceremonies, each Laureate is asked to prepare an Acceptance Speech, and to present a Nobel Lecture at a symposium. The Nobel Lectures, as texts, form the basis for an analysis of their messages (to a global audience) regarding their specific motivations and collective authorial mandates. These texts also reflect the writers' representation as models of Alfred Nobel's vision of an ideal direction in literature. In the Nobel Lecture these newly minted Laureates in Literature speak from their cultural vantage points about their craft and commitment. All of them explore in detail their creative tasks as writers with two definite, creative, and risk-taking mandates: 1) to retrieve their ancestral culture, language, and heritage; and (2) to respond to the conditions of society through political activism, healing and reconciliation.

Historical Re-Enactment in the Diaspora

A close reading of these Nobel Lectures, as texts, provides insight into the Laureates' work in addressing the historical dimensions of their societies that have emerged from slavery and colonialism into independence and empowerment. These authors feel compelled to acknowledge cultural traditions and myths of the ancient world from which populations were forcibly dispersed to other countries or continents or subjugated within their own. This literature of the African Diaspora excavates the writers' ancestral heritage and establishes that their cultural origins remain fundamental to the fabric of society, in spite of modernity. Walcott describes the work of cultural preservation through ritual re-enactment—"the effort, the

labour of the Antillean imagination, rebuilding its gods from bamboo frames, phrase by phrase” (“Derek Walcott -Nobel Lecture”).

Soyinka’s Nobel Lecture, *This Past Must Address Its Present*, is perhaps the most bold (as is he) of these Laureates of the Diaspora in confronting the painful history of Africa. He opens his lecture by describing the improvisational stage re-enactment, in a British theatre, of the Hola Camp Massacre in Kenya and the disruption that is caused by the refusal of one of the actors to play the role of a murderous prison guard. As Soyinka reveals that he was that stubborn actor who refused to play the role of the oppressor, we understand the purpose of this anecdote: it functions as a meta-narrative of the complex psycho-cultural challenge to an African author, and by extension, to all who must face painful historical events and take responsibility for its re-telling and for changing the outcome.

V. S. Naipaul’s Nobel citation suggests to us the “presence of suppressed histories” that Soyinka describes. Naipaul’s lecture further explores this concept by describing the quest early in his career to recreate the erased memories of the Native Trinidadian people, the Chaguanas, and the erased memories of his own East Indian heritage. He says that, though this knowledge was suppressed, it was a presence of darkness around him that he felt compelled to write about. Naipaul’s discussion echoes the thesis of Soyinka’s Lecture, that “the past enacts its presence” (“Wole Soyinka- Nobel Lecture”).

Naipaul’s Nobel Lecture demonstrates that the past – the apparent genocide of the Amerindians of Trinidad – informed his creative process to such an extent that the genocide becomes a present-day reality. Similarly, his ancestral connection to India remained intact despite the fact that he was born and raised as a descendent of indentured servants in Trinidad.

Naipaul explains that there were not many cultural references to India in his daily life. Yet, it was the missing elements of his culture that weighed most heavily upon his creative yearnings.

Derek Walcott, though a St. Lucian, opens his Nobel Lecture, *The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory*, to recreate the Asian presence in Trinidad that Naipaul discusses. Walcott speaks of the East Indian's annual ceremonial re-enactment of the *Ramleela*, a ritual from the Indian epic, *The Ramayana*. He concurs with Naipaul's observation that the Indian descendants had long forgotten the purpose or texts of those rituals, and that what remained represent mere fragments of the great epic story of Indian people. Yet, he does not feel that the grandeur of India is lost or reduced, for he finds more positive forces at work. In a similar fashion, the actors of the *Ramleela* have tapped into something of a conviction that resembles the reluctant actor in Soyinka's scenario. Walcott concludes,

But they were not actors. They had been chosen; or they themselves had chosen their roles in this sacred story that would go on for nine afternoons over a two-hour period till the sun set. They were not amateurs but believers. There was no theatrical term to define them. ("Derek Walcott - Nobel Lecture")

This ritualistic fragment of a larger epic is analogous to the fragmentation of a dominant language, a "mother tongue," to dialect. Walcott celebrates the fragment of dialect, not as a "distortion" or diminished product of history, but as a powerful act of self-reclamation.

Soyinka uses the term "distortion" in another way to insist that there be no distortions of history regarding oppression, as was the case with the official report of the Hola Camp Massacre. This intertextual analysis of the Nobel Laureates forces us to make the distinction between "distortions" of historical fact with the adaptive "distortions" of imposed language

and culture that Walcott speaks about. The adaptations that various minority groups in the Caribbean and the Americas have made to assimilate into the dominant culture for survival have resulted in an explosion of creativity that is now celebrated and commoditized in tourism and popular culture.

The distinct culture of the Caribbean is composed of such victorious multicultural distortions that Walcott and Naipaul feel comfortable in speaking and writing about traditions outside of their ethnic groups. Walcott finds richness in the literary and cultural products of the Caribbean. He privileges the colloquial difference of ritual re-enactment and dialect over the precision of ceremonies and language from the mother country. These cultural fragments serve to unify people of disparate cultures while restoring their belief in the sacredness and validity of their heritage.

Language in the Diaspora

The most beautiful and profound aspect of these Nobel Lectures is the commentary that each Laureate provides pertaining to the function of language in both its official and vernacular forms. Nadine Gordimer entitles her Nobel Lecture, *Writing and Being: In the Beginning Was the Word*, and references *Genesis*, the Biblical account of creation and the familiar words, "The word was with God." In this way she relates the role of the writer as a creator who actually breathes lives into her characters and shapes their world for the reader. Her remarks also trace the use of words from their organic function as human expression to their function as tools of power in what Soyinka refers to, "as language of unparalleled political flatulence" ("Wole Soyinka- Nobel Lecture"). Toni Morrison also makes a biblical reference by incorporating the story of the Tower of Babel to assert the problematic nature of intercultural discourse.

However, like Walcott, Morrison does not see any tragedy in the fact that different languages are being spoken throughout the world. She observes that the perfection that we seek from the use of a monolithic language could be better achieved by taking the time to learn each other's language in an attempt to understand one another.

Walcott uses a single word sentence to depict the role of language for people throughout the African Diaspora: survival. Words in this context have generative power as language is continually reborn in the mouths of individuals who experience alienation and displacement. This language thrives "...in defiance of an imperial concept of language, the language of Ozymandias, libraries and dictionaries, law courts and critics, and churches, universities, political dogma, the diction of institutions" ("Derek Walcott - Nobel Lecture").

Toni Morrison's entire lecture is woven around a well-known universal fable about an elderly blind woman who is taunted by a group of young people who ask if the bird in their hand is alive or dead. The bird is symbolic of language and the old blind woman is the writer. As the woman contemplates the fate of the bird she ruminates extensively on language as living or dead: "The vitality of language lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers." ("Morrison – Nobel Lecture"). She also speaks of how language can die and extends this consideration beyond the official realm of government and industry to the fundamental structure of society, the family. Morrison states that the adults who never tell the truth to their children or never use language to convey love to them are also responsible for the "tongue-suicide" that young people commit in their prolific use of curse words and profane and misogynistic lyrics. The woman concludes wisely that whether the bird is alive or dead that "it is in your hands" ("Toni Morrison - Nobel Lecture"). This meaning,

obvious though it may be, bears repeating: the vitality of language is the responsibility of all persons whether they are professional writers or daily users of this basic form of human expression.

The Literary Commitment of the Writer of the Diaspora

The similar roles of these Laureates assume even greater significance when we remember that each has been so selected for their excellence and commitment. Because of their Diasporic contexts, these authors have faced insurmountable odds in developing and sharing their craft. As the narrator and chronicler of a people whose history is marked by suffering and oppression, these writers share a commitment that goes beyond the creative task of developing art for arts' sake. The work of these literary artists displays a deep commitment to ethics and social change. Each writes about the challenges of writing ethically and with integrity. Soyinka has suffered imprisonment and sanctioning for his commitment to redress the wrongs of his nation, Nigeria. Yet, his Nobel Lecture provides a pan-African perspective and addresses the most cruel injustices throughout the continent of Africa: the massacres in Kenya and apartheid in South Africa. He challenges the artist in his Nobel Lecture when he asks the rhetorical and angry questions, "When is playacting rebuked by reality? When is fictionalizing presumptuous? What happens after playacting"? Rhetorical and angry though they are, these questions illustrate how the creative mind is endangered in the face of social and political injustice. The artist either freezes up or he abandons his writing, as he did in his refusal to play the role of the prison guard who bludgeoned the Kenyan political prisoners to death. Soyinka continues with an indictment of the European colonizers' indecent and inhumane affronts to

African people and demands that racism and apartheid not continue into the twenty-first century.

As a white woman, Nadine Gordimer took many risks to write about life in apartheid South Africa. Gordimer acknowledges in her Nobel Lecture the sacrifice of Soyinka and many other authors whose commitment exposed the atrocities levied upon the people of Africa. Some have faced imprisonment, exile, and bans against their works. These authors are also misunderstood by the persons whose plight they seek to illuminate. Gordimer describes their paradox: “In retaining this integrity, the writer sometimes must risk both the state's indictment of treason and the liberation forces' complaint of lack of blind commitment” (“Nadine Gordimer – Nobel Lecture”).

The task of writers of the Diaspora, though heavy laden, has its moments of joy. Morrison says that “word-work is sublime” (“Toni Morrison – Nobel Lecture”). Walcott expresses his joy: “There is a force of exultation, a celebration of luck, when a writer finds himself a witness to the early morning of a culture that is defining itself, branch by branch, leaf by leaf, in that self-defining dawn...” (“Derek Walcott – Nobel Lecture”). Naipaul shares in this regenerative task that Gordimer refers to as writing into being: “And I had to do the books I did because there were no books about those subjects to give me what I wanted. I had to clear up my world, elucidate it, for myself” (“V.S. Naipaul – Nobel Lecture”).

Thus Naipaul's explication of his two worlds served in the healing process of what he terms “colonial schizophrenia” (“V.S. Naipaul – Nobel Lecture”). Although Naipaul and Gordimer say that their writing is intuitive, natural, and without such motivations, they, along with the other Laureates of the Diaspora, write texts that heal and offer reconciliation. Soyinka

states that African people have a strong capacity for forgiveness and he cites the phenomenon of newly formed nations working alongside their oppressors towards a new society. Walcott does not couch his lecture in terms of actual healing and reconciliation, but he does speak of renewal. He says that the freshness of the new dialect out of the old language is a cleansing of past hurt. He uses the metaphor of the new dialect as fresh raindrops on the old marble statue of imperialism to signal a spirit of renewal. Toni Morrison offers a hopeful view of reconciliation between the blind, old wise lady and the children who came to taunt her. The children's lives have been adversely impacted by the unethical treatment of their ancestors and the current injustices that value economic growth over human development. Here the fracture is not racial; it is the generation gap that creates social divisions. Through dialogue and communication, the woman and the youth establish trust. Morrison's narrative concludes with reconciliation, as the wise woman emphasizes that what they have achieved through language and dialogue is unity and togetherness.

Conclusion

Alfred Nobel was a man of many talents and interests, and writing was one of his passions. He was a visionary with a unique global perspective who, through the efforts of Baroness Bertha von Suttner, embraced a vision of world peace. The establishment of the Nobel Prize in Literature, along with the other prizes, institutionalized a process in which the belles lettres of the world would be sought beyond the confines of Europe and evaluated for their literary and humanistic merits.

The works of authors whose topics concerned the lives of African people and their interactions with other cultures throughout the post-modern and post-colonial era of the

twentieth century are remarkable because the intrinsic value of their narrative was shocking and unforeseen. The Laureates' mastery of a narrative strategy to weave the complex geopolitical realities of the African Diaspora into meaningful literary works is prize worthy, for never before had the traditional literary forms been used by persons whose ancestry was not European and whose ancestral language was not English. Or, in the case of Nadine Gordimer, never had the English language sufficed to convey the pain of injustice endured by Africans in South Africa. The material of the Laureates' works contain a richness of endowment from the heritages of their protagonists who brought with them their memories, myths, religions, and cultural practices. The writer's task then was to unpack and unravel these layers of historical narratives to illustrate the beauty and humanity of the formerly enslaved and subjugated African, the formerly indentured Asian, and their inescapable involvement with the descendants of their European oppressors – none of whom fully understand their history, how they arrived in their respective nations, or what economic and political demands brought them there.

The power of the pen did as much as, if not more than, a deployment of armies to redress the wrongs of these societies. The writings of these Laureates, in fact, created much needed social change by exposing specific atrocities and their perpetrators. They also provided important insight into the malaise of the consciousness of both the victim and the victimizer. In this way, these authors duly fulfilled the humanitarian goals set forth by Alfred Nobel, as well as the literary excellence he envisioned.

Almost thirty years later, we are, understandably, still in the process of determining whether the accomplishments of these Laureates of the Diaspora extend beyond the vision of

social and political change for which they clamored. Each of these authors is still alive, vibrant, and still producing literary works that entertain and inform the public. Their earlier works remain viable and widely read for their relatable and universal probing of human dilemmas. As the vision of the Nobel Prize reaches into the second decade of the twenty-first century, we must wonder whether the new artists of the African Diaspora will continue the tradition—or find new ways—of addressing the challenges that continue to threaten the perpetuation of social and political justice throughout the world.

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