

Cultural Conflict in Wole Soyinka's Play *The Lion and the Jewel*

Dr. P. Sreenivasulu Reddy

=====
Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 13:9 September 2013
=====

Abstract

Wole Soyinka is Africa's most distinguished playwright, winning the Nobel Prize for literature in 1986. Nigerian literature was born in earnest with the award of Nobel Prize in literature to Wole Soyinka. Soyinka, often referred to as the Bringer of Light to African Literatures, has put Nigerian literature on the world map, and since 1986, hundreds of Nigerians have proudly taken to studying Nigerian literature, as departments of Nigerian literature are being created in all the universities across the country. Writers of different genres have been published. Some have won prizes, while some are finalists in national and international contests, adding their voices to the identity, authenticity, aesthetics and glory of Nigerian literature. Written by Wole Soyinka the play *The Lion And The Jewel* has its setting in the village of Ilunjunle in Yoruba West Africa. It was published in 1963 by Oxford University Press.

This article is a modest attempt to bring out how his play *The Lion And The Jewel* is characterized by culture conflict, ribald comedy and love, where the old culture represented by the uneducated people in Ilunjunle, led by Baroka, Sidi and the rest, clashes with the new culture led by Lakunle, who is educated, school teacher by profession is influenced by the western ways.

Introduction

Wole Soyinka is Africa's most distinguished playwright, winning the Nobel Prize for literature in 1986. Nigerian literature was born in earnest with the award of Nobel Prize in literature to Wole Soyinka. Soyinka, often referred to as the Bringer of Light to African Literatures, has put Nigerian literature on the world map, and since 1986, hundreds of Nigerians have proudly taken to studying Nigerian literature, as departments of Nigerian literature are being created in all the universities across the country. Writers of different genres have been

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:9 September 2013

Dr. P. Sreenivasulu Reddy

Cultural Conflict in Wole Soyinka's Play *The Lion and the Jewel*

published. Some have won prizes, while some are finalists in national and international contests, adding their voices to the identity, authenticity, aesthetics and glory of Nigerian literature.

Written by Wole Soyinka, the play *The Lion and the Jewel* has its setting in the village of Ilunjunle in Yoruba West Africa. It was published in 1963 by Oxford University Press. The play *The Lion and the Jewel* is characterized by culture conflict, ribald comedy and love, where the old culture represented by the uneducated people in Ilunjunle, led by Baroka, Sidi and the rest, clashes with the new culture led by Lakunle, who is educated, a school teacher by profession, is influenced by the western ways.

So many discussions have been made regarding the conflict between tradition and modernity in this play wherein tradition wins over modernity through the final action of Sidi. Now, if the play reflects a conflict between old ways and new ways, then who is the winner? One cannot answer this very easily. If he says that Sidi is the prize, then we see that she has been won by Baroka. And thus victory may seem to go to the older ways of life and then older beliefs he represents.

Confronted with Complications

But still we are confronted with some complications; the first is that Lakunle is not a particular convincing representative of modern ideas. There is evidence that he misunderstands some of the books he reads and he believes to be true. For example, he is wrong in saying that women's brain is smaller than men's. Then he is much fascinated by the most superficial aspects of modern ways of life, such as, night clubs, ballroom, dance, etc. He is full of half-baked modern ideas which he exploits in denying to pay the bride price to Sidi.

Baroka, the sixty-two year village chief of Ilunjunle, on the other hand, opposes progress because he believes that it destroys the variety of ways in which people live and that he as well as Lakunle should learn things from one another. Baroka is anxious enough to make Sidi his wife and here comes the love-triangle of Sidi, Lakunle and Baroka wherein finally Sidi surrenders herself to Baroka. It is miraculous to know that a young man fails before an old man in the game of love and at the end Sidi willingly accepts Baroka, not Lakunle, as her husband.

Traditional Bride Price

When Lakunle, The school teacher is teaching a class the times table , Sidi walks past carrying a pail of water on her head. He is described as wearing a threadbare and rumpled clean English suit that is a little too small for him. He wears a tie that disappears beneath his waistcoat. His trousers are ridiculously oversized, and his shoes are Blanco-white. He comes out and retorts, saying that he told her not to carry loads on her head or her neck may be shortened. He also tells her not to expose so much of her cleavage with the cloth she wore around her breasts. She says that it was too inconvenient for her to do so. Sidi scolds him, saying that the village thinks him stupid, but Lakunle says that he isn't that easily cowed by taunts. Lakunle also insults her, saying that her brain is smaller than his. He claims that his books say so.

Lakunle deeply admires Western culture and seeks to emulate, often to comically inadequate effect. He is portrayed by Soyinka as clumsy in both actions and words. He is in love with Sidi, but he has not married her because she demands that he should pay the traditional bride price, something he refuses to do:

I have told you, and I say it again
I shall marry you today, next week
Or any day you name.
But my bride-price must first be paid....
But I tell you, Lakunle, I must have
The full bride-price. Will you make me
A laughing-stock? Well, do as you please
But Sidi will not make herself
A cheap bowl for the village spit....
They will say I was no virgin
That I was forced to sell my shame
And marry you without a price.

Sidi says that she doesn't care for his love. Eventually, we find out that Sidi doesn't want to marry him because Lakunle refuses to pay her bride-price because he thinks it a uncivilized, outrageous custom:

Ignorant girl, can you not understand?

To pay the price would be

To buy a heifer off the market stall.

You'd be my chattel, my mere property. (The Lion and the Jewel, 8)

Sidi tells him that if she did so, people will jeer at her, saying that she wasn't a virgin. Lakunle further professes how he wants to marry her and treat her 'just like the Lagos couples I have seen'. Sidi doesn't care. She also tells him that she finds the Western custom of kissing repulsive. She also tells him that not paying her bride price is mean and miserly.

Sidi is uneasy about Lakunle's ideas, especially the role of women and the duties of a wife. The language he uses, drawn from his "ragged books" (mainly the Bible and the dictionary) adds to this uneasiness. She feels uncomfortable by the scorn with which he is regarded by other villagers, even the children. She also hates his miserliness which she considers "A cheating way, mean and miserly."

Polygamy and Monogamy

There are many inconsistencies in Lakunle which also may irritate Sidi. Although he claims to detest Baroka's habits and powers, in fact he secretly envies them. In one speech he wishes if he had the Bale's privilege of marrying many wives. Now, polygamy is a familiar tradition in older, backward society whereas monogamy is a modern phenomenon. Lakunle is contradicting himself here by trying whole-heartedly to uphold modernity but ironically he cannot obviate his native identity and demands. Even he seems to forget his principles at the end of the play when he eagerly embraces the thought that since Sidi is no longer a virgin now, he cannot be asked to pay a bride price for her:

But I obey my books.

"Man takes the fallen woman by the hand."

And ever after they live happily.

Moreover, I will admit

It solves the problem of her bride-price too. (The Lion and the Jewel, 61)

It is not true that Sidi refuses Lakunle as if she was in love with Baroka from the very beginning. Sidi initially refuses Baroka's offer to marry him and this offer arrives when she is under the influence of the magazine brought to the village by the white photographer. We notice Sidi's excitement demonstrated by her reactions to this magazine and the photographs in it:

Have you seen these?

Have you seen these images of me

Wrought by the man from the capital city

Have you felt the gloss?

Smoother by far than the parrot's breast.

Assumed Self-Importance

The fact that her photograph covers three pages and the Bale's only the corner of a page seems to her to prove that she is far more important than he is. Her confusion in choosing between Baroka and Lakunle as her husband indicates the young generation's wavering to choose between the old values and the new allurements of Western culture.

Conflict between Tradition and Modernity

Baroka is the leader of the village holds to his Yoruba traditional beliefs, but his power is coming under threat from the Western influence. The issue that troubles him throughout the beginning of the play, we learn, is his apparent impotence, a secret he reveals to his head wife. We later learn, however, that this feigned impotence was only a clever stratagem in order to lure Sidi into coming to his palace.

In the course of the story, Baroka's qualities of cunning, discrimination and strength are shown to advantage; Lakunle is provided with a number of opportunities to display his talents but he fails recurrently. Finally Sidi's decision to marry Baroka reflects the playwright's opinion that in the context provided by the play, Baroka is the better man and his attitudes are the more substantial as well as worthy.

Winning Qualities

On Baroka's part, we see that certain qualities of slyness in him make him win Sidi which are not manifested in Lakunle. From the very beginning she cannot tolerate Lakunle and till the end she is consistent in expressing her hatred to this callous chap. On the other hand, when she is seduced by Baroka, she decides to choose one single man whom she would let herself touch in future and that single man should be Baroka who has already touched her enough. The Bale impresses her with his skill at wrestling; he pretends not to know about the offer of marriage and implies that Sadiku is always trying to make matches for him. Moreover, he cunningly appeals to her loyalty to the old village ways and he praises her depth and wisdom, too. He flatters her with his talk of having her portrait on the stamps and all the time he talks to Sidi in a soothing tone with the most flattering seriousness as well as stressing the responsibilities of the village head. Lakunle obviously lacks this foresightedness and therefore Sidi cannot get reliability as well as practicality in him.

Polygamous Society - A Prominent Feature of Traditional Life

In the play, Soyinka portrays the African polygamous society. The marrying of multiple wives is legal in Nigeria and it is a prominent feature of traditional life. Lofts and wives are the criteria of wealth of a person. It is accepted that the old man marrying the young girls. Polygamy is the function of the family as an economic unit of production. Especially for those in agrarian production, a large family provides the labour necessary for the maintenance and growth of the business. The tradition allows widow inheritance, in which a man marries the widow of a deceased brother. This practice ensures that the woman and her children remain under the economic and social care of the family. Sometimes the successor of dead Bale or chief of the area marries the last and favourite wife of the dead Bale, as his first wife. According to the custom, the first wife of the Bale becomes the senior and receives all honours in the family.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:9 September 2013

Dr. P. Sreenivasulu Reddy

Cultural Conflict in Wole Soyinka's Play *The Lion and the Jewel*

According to the tradition, a Bale can have as many as wives as he can, but he has to follow some conditions like treating all equally, distributing resources equally to all wives and children, avoid discrimination among wives and children. Baroka, the Bale of the village, has many wives. His harem is already full with his number of wives from Sadiku to latest favourite wife, Ailatu. The desire for more girls has not left him even at the age of sixty two. The play is a Nigerian bedroom farce, for its convention of polygamy. After seeing Sidi's beautiful pictures in a glossy magazine, he desires to have her on that night and he expresses his wish to his first wife Sadiku to woo that young girl for him. It is the custom of the village that the first wife has to persuade and makes the girls to marry her husband; it is a part of her duty to ensure his happiness. By this act, the society emphasizes that the wives have to obey and do furnish all sorts of his desire. It is settled in the minds of the women in the society.

Adding Wives through the Good Offices of the First Wife – Complex Kinship Relations

Sadiku is the veteran representative of the tradition. She is proud of her role as the chief wife of a family in a polygamous society. While she is wooing Sidi for Baroka, states another tradition in the society that last wife of the Bale becomes chief wife to the next Bale.

The surprising fact is that the successor, most probably the dead Bale's son, could become the husband to his step-mother. It is not a serious matter in the society that a woman became wife to both father and son. Sadiku is an instance of such a practice prevails in the society. She reveals that she is the bare witness of Okiki's, father of Baroka, impotency "I was there when it happened to your father, the great Okiki. I did for him, I, the youngest and freshest of the wives".

These words state that she was the youngest wife of Okiki and now according to the custom, she has become the senior wife to Baroka, i.e. she married father and after his death she became wife to her step-son. Yoruba calls it is the responsibility of the king to take care of the youngest wife and children of the previous sovereign. This custom is called "isupo" among the Yoruba .

Victory of Old African Culture over Modernization

The Lion and the Jewel shows the triumph Baroka over Lakunle and many readers and critics regard this as a victory of old Africa over foreign-educated parvenu or upstarts. It is true that the vitality of Africa has been demonstrated and the established rulers have been shown as dignified, arrogant and powerful. But the way Soyinka presents Baroka is not acceptable to those who want to romanticize traditional African leaders. Baroka is not a straightforward conservative; he has made many a significant innovations and his language shows his familiarity with alien idioms and ideas. Several small African nations make a large part of their national income by selling beautiful stamps to collectors abroad. It is not then too surprising that the Bale should view stamp sales as a major source of revenue.

Soyinka's Baroka and Lakunle

Soyinka has portrayed Baroka and Lakunle - these two men to complement one-another, and his argument in the play is worked out through the juxtaposition of them. Baroka is presented in a much more favourable light than Lakunle, but Soyinka is dealing in relative rather than in absolute terms. He has taken us into a grey area and he forces us to look closely and distinguish different shades of grey. He does not allow us to "sit back and separate the black from the white at a quick glance".

We may, therefore, say that this play is not in favour of reckless progress and false imitation of so-called western practices; simultaneously it is not in favour of simply standing still. Like all good fictions, it gives us something to think and argue about.

Some critics accused Wole Soyinka of giving in *The Lion and the Jewel* a reactionary (that is, a backward looking) answer to these problems. Soyinka is not a writer who believes that "progress" is always a good thing. As a small example, he shares Baroka's view that modern roads are "murderous". On the other hand, like Baroka he has stated his belief that "the old must flow into the new". One critic replied to the charge that *The Lion and the Jewel* is a reactionary play by arguing that "one of the first duties of the comedian is the exploding of cliché. In other words, it had become a mechanical thing – a cliché - to say that the new must be preferable to the old. In *The Lion and the Jewel*, Wole Soyinka had simply refused to reproduce that cliché.

Conclusion

Thus the most prominent theme of this story is the rapid modernization of Africa, coupled with the rapid evangelization of the population. This has driven a wedge between the traditionalists, who seek to nullify the changes done in the name of progress due to vested interests or simply not liking the result of progress, and the modernists, who want to see the last of outdated traditional beliefs at all cost. There is also the conflict between education and traditional beliefs. The educated people seek to spread their knowledge to the tribal people in an attempt to make them more modern. This in turn is resisted by the tribal people who see no point in obtaining an education as it served them no use in their daily lives.

Another core theme is the marginalisation of women as property. Traditionally, they were seen as properties that could be bought, sold or accumulated. Even the modern Lakunle also falls victim to this, by looking down on Sidi for having a smaller brain and later by wanting to marry her after she lost her virginity since no dowry was required in such a situation.

=====

References

1. Blishen, Edward, ed. Books in Focus: The Lion and the Jewel. London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1975.
2. Falola, "Culture and Customs of Nigeria", Greenwood Press. Westport, Toyin. 2001.
3. Gibbs, James. "Soyinka in Zimbabwe: A Question and Answer Session", 2001.
4. Kumar, K. Naveen, "Yoruba Tradition and culture in Wole Soyinka's The lion and the jewel" Journal of Arts, Science & Commerce, -3, July 2011.
5. Maclean, Una. "Wole Soyinka: Soyinka's International Drama", Black Orpheus, Vol. 15, 1964.
6. Naikar, Basavaraj. S. "The Conflict between Tradition and Modernity in Wole Soyinka's The Lion and the Jewel", The Commonwealth Review, Vol. 8, 1996.

7. Ramachandran, C. N. "Structure within Structure: An Analysis of Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*", *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. 25, 1990,
8. Sethuraman, R. "The Role of Women in the Plays of Wole Soyinka", *World Literature Written in English*, Vol. 25, 1985.
9. Soyinka, Wole. (1974), "Collected Plays 2", Oxford University Press. London. 1982.

=====

Dr. P. Sreenivasulu Reddy
Department of English
GITAM University
Visakhapatnam -520045
Andhra Pradesh
India
sreemupydala@gmail.com