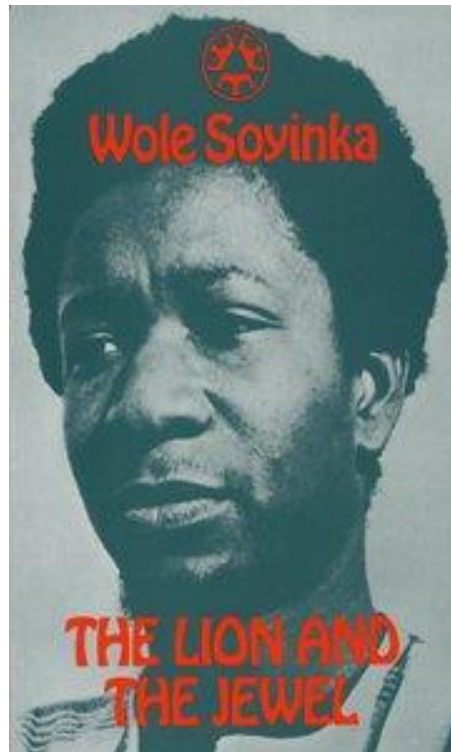


The Cultural Conflicts in Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*

Dr. V. Latha



Abstract

Wole Soyinka, the highly acclaimed Nigerian writer was the first African who won the Nobel Prize in 1986 for his great writings. His writings reveal his ardent attachment towards Yoruban roots. His desire for tradition and his longing for the growth of his own kinsmen show the conflict between tradition and modernity in all his works. He brings out the colonial and postcolonial sufferings of his own country. Soyinka's popular play *The Lion and the Jewel* was published in 1959 on the verge of Nigerian independence. This play reveals the internal psychic dilemma of his clan whether to accept the new future or to live in the past. This paper

concentrates on the plot, characters and themes while focusing on the cultural conflicts in the play *The Lion and the Jewel*.

Keywords: *The Lion and the Jewel*, culture and modernity, conflict, clans, colonial, postcolonial, dilemma, sufferings, Yoruba.

Conflicts between Cultures

This study analyses Wole Soyinka's play *The Lion and the Jewel* in the light of conflicts between cultures. The main conflict is between the so-called westernized school teacher Lakunle and the tradition bound village head Baroka. This conflict can also be viewed as the conflict between modernity and tradition as well as the conflict between new and old. The choice of Sidi between Baroka and Lakunle represents the choice between traditional values and modern social changes and hopes. The confrontation between the tradition and modernity is the conflict in Nigerian minds either to choose the British influence or to continue with their years old traditional life. Sidi's selection of Baroka reveals that her people, the Nigerian mind inclines only towards the traditional way of life. Soyinka, the famous postcolonial writer always supports his native culture which is portrayed clearly in his play.

Four Main Characters

The four main characters in the play exhibit the playwright's excellence in presenting conflicts on various levels. Lakunle, a school teacher of the village who is twenty-three years old presents himself as a representative of western culture and wants to impose it on the villagers of Illujinle. Sidi, the village belle who knows about her own beauty only after she has been captured by a photographer and her photo was published in a magazine. She is portrayed as a jewel in the village. Baroka, the village chief is known as a Lion. He has several wives and many women to attend to him. The fourth major character is Sadiku, Baroka's head wife. The playwright focuses on the cultural conflicts not only among the individuals but also among the various sectors in the society.

Impact of Society and Community

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LeBaron expresses that “Culture is always a factor in conflict, whether it plays a central role or influences it subtly and gently. For any conflict that touches us where it matters, where we make meaning and hold our identities, there is always a cultural component”. (1) The differences in values and behaviours among people are the main cause for the cultural conflicts. Culture has a great impact on day to day activities and conflicts between individuals can rise to conflicts between societies. The play *The Lion and the Jewel* presents the attitudes, attraction, social values and environment that are the root cause for the conflicts in culture.

Man is a social animal, therefore the impact of society and community play vital roles in shaping his culture and life style. The main reason for the conflicts is the change in the attitudes and acceptance of the people who have created their own norms. They want to modify the dimensions of their opinion and ideas during past years. This leads to discrimination between the citizens and there comes the loss of integration. Cole says, “The customs of a society reflect its culture”. (136) Thus when the customs of the society exhibit changes which are ultimately reflected in the culture of the individual and society. Cultural changes cannot be wiped out, but the attitude of acceptance results in solving the conflict.

Difference in the Attitudes of Major Characters

Soyinka presents the difference in the attitudes of these major characters. The characters differ in their ideas and acceptance. Their way of thinking is different from each other. The aspects like generation gap, communication and perceptions are the major factors for their conflicts. LeBaron says that. “culture is inextricable from conflict, though it does not cause it. When differences surface in families, organizations, or communities, culture is always present, shaping perceptions, attitudes, behaviours and outcomes”. (1) The contact between different groups or individuals aims to understand and observe another culture. This acceptance leads to the growth of civilization.

Baroka, the Aged Man

Baroka, the aged man, the lion of the village sticks to the old tradition and customs of the society. He feels proud to possess many wives and pleased to prove his manhood even at the age

of sixty three. His suppression of women and humiliation of other gender is a mark of his dominance in the society. The power of patriarchy is projected through the character of Baroka. Lakunle who wants to present himself as a man of western culture tries to impress not only Sidi but also the audience through his wonderful loving words and helping Sidi while bringing water. He wants her to be a modern girl and expects to behave like an English lady. His fight against giving bride price is a mark of his respect for women. His ideas are not accepted by Baroka and there is a gap of understanding between the two. This gap leads to conflict which is mainly due to lack of education. Education makes the new generation think and react to the transformation in the society and assimilate the new culture. However they are controlled and confronted by the restrictions enforced by tradition.

The clash between the new generation and the age old tradition and misunderstanding as a result of which leads to identity crisis and later towards cultural conflict. The play *The Lion and the Jewel* is set in the Nigerian village of Illujinle. The play takes place under the heads of morning, noon and night. The conflict in the play is between the traditional Nigerian Yoruba and the western influence of Nigerian colonizers. The playwright Wole Soyinka excellently presents the two great worldviews namely the Afro-centric view and Euro-centric view. The play explores the value of traditional Yoruba ways against the European standard of living. Lakunle, the naïve school master believes in modernity and accepts the European ideologies without proper understanding.

Baroka, the village leader accepts the tradition without doubts and looks at modernity with the eyes of suspicion and thinks it a threat to the society.

Lakunle

The play opens with a humiliating comment on Lakunle who inclines towards westernization. He pours out his love for Sidi but she does not pay attention to his proposal. She is stubborn in her traditional values and stresses that she will accept him if only he pays bride price for her. But Lakunle considers bride price is a barbaric and outdated custom. He feels that it is a kind of disrespect to womanhood. But Sidi comments his approach is full of stupidity. She

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calls his speech nonsense. But Lakunle is willing to dedicate himself to Sidi. Though she snubs and humiliates him, he expresses his love for her. He says, “Nonsense? Nonsense? Do you hear? Does anybody listen? Can the stones bear to listen to this? Do you call it nonsense that I poured the waters of my soul to wash your feet? (6) His westernized ideas of respecting and helping wife at need are considered as a matter of nonsense by Sidi.

Sidi

Sidi becomes popular and proud of her beauty when her photograph covers three pages and Baroka’s photograph appears in a corner of a page. Her dilemma to accept the proposal of a modern man, Lakunle and the traditional old man, Baroka shows the inconsistency in her mind. The bride price is a traditional African custom of marriage. This is a kind of honour to the bride. If a girl marries without the price, it is assumed that she is not a virgin. This is the reason why Sidi insists Lakunle give the bride price to prove her chastity. But Lakunle believes that this custom is an outdated barbaric system. He opposes this custom because of the influence of the western concept of gender equality. He says, “To pay price would be to buy a heifer off the market stall. You would be my chattel, my mere property”. (22) But Sidi does not pay attention to this idea and rejects Lakunle. She thinks that Lakunle is a miser and considers his idea as, “a cheating way, mean and miserly”. (10)

Preference for African Traditions

Wole Soyinka shows his preference for African traditions in many places in the play *The Lion and the Jewel*. On the one hand the play shows the influence of the modern British in the minds of Africans and on the other the failure to impose it. Kronenfeld writes, “the comedy clearly operates in terms of the characters adjusting ideology (tradition or modern), or selecting convenient aspects of it, in accordance with their situation and their psychological needs”. (307) The cultural conflict reveals a confrontation between the two ways of life. Baroka’s movements and actions prove his stand for traditional life. He expects respect from his men and wants to stop spreading of western civilization in Ilujinle. He is against the public works that has been carried out in the village. When the public works department sends in workers and surveyors to clear the jungles in order to lay a railway track, Baroka bribes the surveyor with money, a coop of hens

and a goat and stops the work. He aims to keep the village in its own traditional form with no progress at all.

Clash between Generations

The play portrays the clash between the octogenarian village head and a young school teacher. Soyinka has presented a young man who is a caricature of a modern human being representing vulgarity and superficiality. Baroka is the mouthpiece of Soyinka expressing his love for traditional culture of his country. His love is not the uncritical patriotism or romantic nostalgia but a strong and deep understanding of Nigerian heritage, which have permanent values. Soyinka manages to expose societal mistakes focusing on youth and the problem of self-definition. This play is a challenge and criticizes the African life through European conventions of dramatic representations. Soyinka presents the customs and traditions in his Yoruban country.

Soyinka shows the polygamous society through Bale, the village head who marries as many girls as he wants. He can change his favourite when his pleasure is over with her. Baroka plays a trick to get Sidi through Sadiku, his head wife. He wants to have Sidi as his last favourite. Therefore, he laments that he has become impotent and spreads this news to Sidi through Sadiku with an idea that he will surely get her. In Nigeria marrying multiple wives is legal and it is regarded as a feature of traditional life. Falola indicates that, "...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" (56) and he further adds, "the woman and her children remain under the economic and social care of the family". (58)

The successor of dead Bale marries the last and favourite wife of the dead Bale, as his first wife. According to the custom, the first wife becomes the senior and receives all honours in the family. Baroka too has many wives in his harem from Sadiku to his favourite wife Ailatu. At the age of sixty two his desire for Sidi clearly states his hunt for girls. Maclean calls the play "a Nigerian bedroom Farce for its convention of polygamy". (51) According to the customs of the village, the first wife has to persuade the girls to marry her husband as a kind of her duty to ensure her husband's happiness. To ascertain this Kumar says, "by this act, the society

emphasizes that wives have to obey and do furnish all sorts for the fulfilment of his desire. It is settled in the minds of the women in the society”. (5)

The dead Bale’s son becomes husband to his step-mother. In Sadiku’s case he 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”. (30) By means of this dialogue she reveals that she was the favourite wife of Baroka’s father and after his death she becomes the senior wife of Baroka.

As custom suggests, Sadiku the senior wife of Baroka, attracts and gets women whom Baroka wants to obtain. In this regard, she approaches Sidi and persuades her to accept Baroka her husband. Lakunle begs Sidi not to agree, but she has to assert herself to put an end to his clowning. Sadiku is rather happy about Baroka’s confession of his impotency. Sidi goes to see Baroka on the grounds that she did not intend to reject his invitation and proposal knowing well that he would not be capable of doing anything. In an unexpected turn of events, but as expected by Baroka, he seduces Sidi. This play tells about the contrasts: old versus new and culture versus change. Since the lion bit the jewel, Sidi has lost her chastity, she decides to marry Baroka. Though Lakunle offers his hand for Sidi after she was seduced by Baroka, she refuses his proposal and joyfully goes to marry Baroka.

Adherence to Modernity Does Not Mean Turning Our Backs upon Tradition

Soyinka insists that the one who adheres to modernity, is not the one who turns his back upon tradition, but rather the one who reinterprets it creatively and rationally. He also accepts that tradition helps people go into the future without being uprooted or alienated from the past. The blind imitation of the glamour of the modern world and forgetting all the traditional values can make the society hollow like husk. But an unintelligent sticking to tradition also reduces a human being to the status of an early man. Soyinka argues that British establish their colonies in the name of developing the undeveloped nations but they occupy the soil of others only to plunder and prosper their own country. He uses the themes of disparity between immaturity and

maturity and traditional victory over modernism. Soyinka satirizes the dangerously superficial concept of progress in the name of westernization.

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