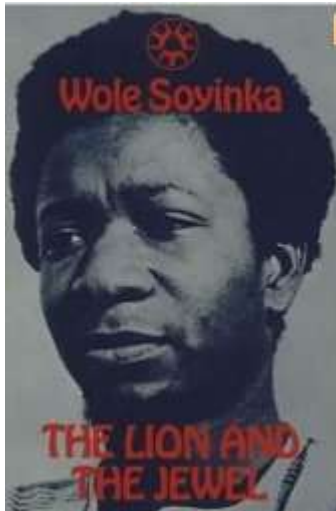


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**Sidi's Choice of Baroka and the Victory of Traditional Values
over Western Ones in Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel***

Fariha Ishrat Chowdhury, M.A.



<http://freduagyeman.blogspot.com/2010/11/17-lion-and-jewel-by-wole-soyinka.html>

Abstract

The Lion and the Jewel is an interesting play to study if one wishes to learn more about Soyinka, Nigeria, the effect of Western influence on its colonies, and a good one to

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perform if one has a relatively small theatre group with an emphasis on group movement for the mime and the dance scenes.

Set in the Nigerian village of Ilujinle, it takes place over the course of a day and is divided in Morning, Noon and Night. Its major themes constitute of the notion of progress in an African setting, tradition, synchronism, love and marriage, and the conflict between traditional Nigerian Yoruba values and the Western influence of Nigeria's colonizers.

The Lion and the Jewel is a satirical comedy with music, songs, and dance. Here we notice the treatment of serious issues in a generally light-hearted manner, content to oversimplify and to leave some issues unresolved with a view to providing an entertaining as well as provocative experience.

This paper presents a critical analysis of certain main characters with references to their activities and their possible interpretations in order to highlight the unpredictable ending of the play delineating tradition's triumph over modernity.

The Development of Characters



Photo by David Kipler

<http://news.wustl.edu/news/Pages/11510.aspx>

In *The Lion and the Jewel* we are acquainted with three major characters: Sidi, Lakunle and Baroka. The play opens with Lakunle's pursuit to win Sidi's heart.

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Lakunle

Lakunle is the schoolteacher of the village. He 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, throwing together phrases from the Bible and other Western works in hope of sounding intelligent. He is "in love" with Sidi, but can not marry her because she demands that he pay the traditional bride-price, something he refuses to do.

Initially we chalk up this refusal to his Western beliefs, and the belief that women shouldn't be bought and sold, but later in the play he reveals his true self - when Sidi's virginity is taken away, he leaps at the chance to bypass the bride-price by saying that she can't really expect him to pay the bride price now that she's no longer "pure". He represents one extreme of the play's central pendulum - the Western values.

Sidi

Sidi is a young girl in the village who has just had her ego boosted by a visit from a big-city photographer, who has taken her pictures and published them in a magazine. From then on, she is extremely conceited, thinking herself even higher than the Baroka, the Bale, the Chief of Illujinle. She refuses to marry Lakunle until he pays the bride price, and eventually goes to visit Baroka because she believes that she will be able to humiliate him by exposing his impotence. However, Baroka proves to be a cunning man and she falls right into his trap. She is the needle of the pendulum; she wavers from end to end, confused, before finally settling on the traditional side.

Baroka

Baroka is the leader of the village. He 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.

Conflict between Tradition and Modernity in Creative Writing

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Issues have been raised 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? We cannot answer this very easily. If we say 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 the older beliefs he represents.

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 Ilujinle, 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.

Bride-price, a Sign and Symbol and a Complex Situation

There are several reasons behind Sidi's hesitation in accepting Lakunle. The basic reason seems to be his refusal to pay the bride-price:

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.
No, Sidi! (*The Lion and the Jewel*, 8)

But Sidi is also 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.'

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

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

Opposing Religious Values – Convenience Plays a Better Part

In the same speech he forgets in his agitation that he is a Christian opposed to the village religion and appeals to the God of thunder and lightning. He declares that 'My love is selfless- the love of spirit. Not of flesh' but if it is so, then how can he be so concerned of 'bride price' even when he is about to lose the beloved? Lakunle himself is deliberately insincere and that it would be perfect to say that he is too weak to recognize his own inconsistencies. We may assume that Sidi refuses him being motivated by more to her personal opinions and disliking to this callous man rather than considering him a representative of western norms and values. But at the end she realizes that Baroka possesses what Lakunle lacks; the climax is, youth is eclipsed by the old.

Seduction of Modern Channels

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. (*The Lion and the Jewel*, 19)

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

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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:

In Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, there is a constant confrontation between tradition and modernity. Soyinka published the play in 1959, when Nigeria was struggling for independence under British control. Nigeria had been united as the "Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria" since 1914 and by the late 1950s was facing the challenge of whether or not it was ready for independence and capable of handling modern Western civilization. Some Nigerians felt that it was time for change while others wondered if they should move from their present culture. (Watts 1)

Romance

In the play, both men, Lakunle and Baroka play the role of romantic lovers in a different way. Lakunle plays this role for much of the play; he praises Sidi's beauty, kneels to her and performs services for her. Baroka, who seems anti-romantic to many of us, turns in a brief performance as a romantic lover. Having appealed to Sidi's vanity through the stamp-printing machine he weaves a spell of words around her:

In 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.

Victory of Old Africa?

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

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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.

The Old and the New – Complementing Each Other

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’. (Gibbes, 54) 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.

Reactionary Answer?

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. (Blishen 1975)

Conclusion

It is clear that *The Lion and the Jewel* is tilted in favour of the mature and discriminating Baroka and against the shallow and boyish Lakunle. But this does not imply that Soyinka is likely to support old men and dislike youths. He made his intentions as a playwright clear when he said: “I’ll admit, if as a dramatist I set a riddle which gives my audience a headache, not only in the theatre, but afterwards... the purpose of the theatre is to impart experience... Often this is indefinable. (Gibbes, 54). We can then believe that through the plot of *The Lion and the Jewel*, Soyinka deliberately has put a riddle which gives us a headache on analysing the victory of Baroka over Lakunle in which many of us would like to apply ethnic issue as a soothing balm. Sidi is then quite right to uphold her own racist vanity by marrying old Baroka.

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