

THE OLD MUST FLOW INTO THE NEW: SOYINKA'S THE LION AND THE JEWEL

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Soyinka's play, *The Lion and the Jewel* compares the old order and the new order in the Nigerian society. It presents ably the weakness of the average African especially a Nigerian for the white man's fashions thereby revealing the apish attitude of the African.

As found in several of his works, Soyinka contrasted his play with skill so as to entertain his audience by providing contrasts of characters and moods. The play opens with a lengthy dialogue where Lakunle forwards his love to Sidi. "Sidi my love will open your mind, Like the chaste leaf in the morning..." (CP II, P.7)

Soyinka's portrayal of Lakunle is subtle. He emerges as a comic character, but there is an underlying pathos arising from the recognition that he has a split personality, the two separate halves of which are clearly visible. He is engaged in doing violence to his 'true' nature. Although he loudly denounces the Bale for his backwardness – chief among the Bale's sins is his practice of polygamy – Lakunle secretly envies the man just this. It is with a start that he has to recall himself to his 'civilized' duty when his mind wanders off in unconscious admiration of the Bale. (His true nature sometimes gets the better of him and he indulges in a little bottom – pinching himself). His speech in criticism of the Bale demonstrates both the real Lakunle which he tries to suppress and the bloodless substitute which he holds in front of himself. He describes him as a, "Savage thing, degenerate. He would beat a helpless woman if he could." (CP II. P.33).

Lakunle is half-baked where both Sidi and the Bale are sound. The stage directions describe Sidi as 'a true village belle'. 'True' is indicative of her genuine quality. 'She balances the pail on her head with accustomed ease. Around her is wrapped the familiar broad cloth which is folded just above her breasts, leaving the shoulders bare.' This 'exposure' causes the self-conscious Lakunle acute embarrassment. Lakunle in contrast to Sidi is ridiculous in the costume by which he vainly strives to hold on desperately to the coat-tails of a fashion he does not understand. His appearance, 'in an old- style English suit, threadbare but not ragged, clean but not ironed' etc. signals a man of unformed values, incompetently imitative.

Viewed in this way, the play would be seen to be not a contrast between progress and reaction – represented by Lakunle and the Bale – but between a muddle-headed sloganeering and a hard-headed conservatism. Conservatism wins because it has a clearer view of life, and in the prevailing state of the contest is more likely to succeed. Within the contest of the play a victory for Lakunle would have been against the evidence, just as outside the context of the play the result of his confused leadership would be disastrous.

In other words Lakunle, the rival of Baroka, represents neither progress nor Western cultures but only the outward gloss image. Hence, the first elaborate dance associates him with

the image-man, the photographer, though Sidi is taken in for a while by her own to live for a long in the world of images. Hence, significantly she returns the album of her photographs to Lakunle in the end.

From the point of view of differentiating the image from the real – the two elaborate dances with music develop a structure counter to the movement of the “trickster”, the Bale. But the sequence which concerns the past, the Mime of the White Surveyor, cannot be explained in terms of a community which simply enjoys performing. Soyinka need not have introduced this passage, yet it seems particularly suitable that he did so in view of the way in which African leaders had been presented by British novelists, and in order to provide a historical dimension to the portrait of Baroka.

The convention allowed Soyinka to compare and contrast Lakunle with Baroka, symbolizes, ‘self and other’. Although superficially very different in social standing and accomplishments, there are substantial similarities. Both are, for example, performers and sensualists, and both woo Sidi. Both have ideas – very different ideas – about the future of Ilujinle: Baroka’s policy is highly selective. Lakunle, on the other hand, is in favour of the wholesale adoption of the gaudy trimmings of Western material culture. He represents only hollow westernization, not the real but only the image. The play abundantly establishes that Lakunle is “a book- nourished shrimp.”(p.67) In his wooing of Sidi, Baroka can only use his bookish knowledge: “My Ruth, my Rachel, Esther, Bahsheba thou sum of fabled perfections...”.(p.19). So rants Lakunle. To him progress means only factories, “newspapers... with pictures of seductive girls, ballroom dancing, and cocktail parties. (p.34). when Sadiku taunts him it is made clear that, to what extent he is cut off from the earth and life – giving forces:

Why don’t you do what other men have done. Take a farm for a season ...
Or will the smell of the wet soil be too much for your delicate nostrils?
(p.33).

Where Baroka has had a stamp making machine constructed and hopes to levy a tax on ‘the habit of talking with paper’. Lakunle looks forward to Ilujinle with a crowded social calendar, with the beauty competitions and cocktail parties attended by ladies in high-heeled shoes, with ‘red paint’ on their lips and their ‘hair stretched like a magazine photo’.

The conflict between tradition and modernity is the central thematic concern of Wole Soyinka’s *The Lion and the Jewel*. A deft comedy which provides excellent theatre to the audience, it draws heavily on the theme of colonial conflict. The main characters of this comedy can be classified into two groups: Baroka, Sadiku and Sidi represent the traditional African values of life. The conflict between the two value-systems is triggered off by the germination of amorous love between Sidi, a beautiful young girl of about sixteen years and Lakunle, a young school teacher in Ilujinle.

The play works through caricature and simplification to make a provocative contribution to the debate about the direction in which African society should move. Thus in the play ‘*The Lion and the Jewel*’ as in other plays, Soyinka proves that the use of songs as accompanied by music, dance, drum beating and mimes can be an effective and a stylistic dramatic device. The obvious merits of the play as a stage comedy have led to its becoming one of the most popular of all Soyinka’s plays.

Subsequent critical discussion of the play has frequently been based on the assumption that Baroka represents static, ‘traditional’ African values, that Lakunle represents western

civilization, and that Soyinka, in a reactionary mood, favored Baroka by letting him win the girl, Sidi, who 'represents' the new generation. This assessment is based on several misreading, Baroka is a bale, he holds a position of influence in Yoruba society, but this is not a static community. The 'tradition' in which he exists is constantly changing; bales have to be politically agile, they have to come to terms with new developments and anticipate change, Baroka is highly intelligent and a 'survivor'; he has listened to what the Christians' Holy Book says; he has let the palace workers form a union, and he has got his blacksmiths to make a printing press. He is, in his own way, responding to the winds of change which are blowing by trimming his sails. Lakunle, on the other hand, far from representing Western civilization, has no claim to be a representative of anything other than demi-god evolves with missionary prejudices; he is infatuated with the vulgar and tawdry in English life-blown off his feet. Sidi is young, attractive, independent, and disrespectful. Despite her plaits and wrapper, she is at odds with the role often ascribed to young Yoruba women. A key statement of the playwright's vision is found in the seduction scene where Baroka argues that '*The old must flow into the new.*'

This argument pervades the form as well as the meaning of the play, for *The Lion and the Jewel* stands at the confluence of two traditions; the Yoruba masque and the European satirical musical. It is an early masterpiece, capable of unleashing tremendous power on the stage, of provoking and entertaining, of speaking to those familiar with either the Yoruba or the European tradition, and of challenging them to respond to a new theatrical experience. It is unfair to view the play as a dramatization of 'conflict between traditionalism and modernism'. Soyinka rightly points out:

Not just the teachers, the western critics too; they always follow the line of least resistance and see the clash of cultures. There is no clash of cultures in that play. (Ramachandran pp.64-65)

Both men enjoy using language. Lakunle has knowledge of local idioms which he can employ with wit and effect. For instance, he picks up Sidi's 'what the stewpot said to the fire... But she was tickled just the same'. However, the school teacher frequently lapses into barren, borrowed and bombastic rhetoric. His memory is cluttered with alien images and with quotations from romantic fiction and the Christian liturgy. He pleads:

Sidi, my heart/Bursts into flowers with my love. But you, you and the dead of this village trample it with feet of ignorance. (P.10)

He swears he will stand against earth, heaven and the nine Hells. He quotes: 'and the man shall take the woman/and the two shall be together/As one flesh.' In an enjoyable passage in the opening dialogue with Sidi, he condemns the payment of bride-price with a list of fine-sounding words which he has learnt from his Shorter Companion dictionary. When he runs out of appropriate adjective, he calls into service others of doubtful suitability and eventually splutters to a halt. At this point Sidi asks, in an image which sums up her response to Lakunle's use of language, 'Is the bag empty?'

Baroka's attitude to language is entirely different from Lakunle's: he handles words with care, delighting in their individual qualities. His manipulation of sense, image and sound is well illustrated in the seduction scene, where he speaks, for example, of 'progress' which makes all roofs and faces look the same.' He evokes an image of 'virgin plots of lives, rich decay' and the tang of vapour rising from 'forgotten heaps of compost, lying/undisturbed... In these lines the very stench of decay is presented in positive terms for the decaying vegetation of today will, it is recognized promote growth tomorrow. Baroka, the image reveals, is a conservationist ahead of

his time, who regards isolation as part of plan for the decaying vegetation of today will, it is recognized, to promote growth tomorrow. Baroka, The image of Ilujinle as a compost heap is one which reverberates, indeed it draws attention to a concept which recurs again and again in Soyinka's work and which has become a feature of his view of life. This is summed up in a line from 'Requiem'. Rust is ripeness.' which suggests that in evidence of decay is to be found maturity and fruitfulness. He describes himself as a "seven-horned devil of strength."¹¹ He has a huge harem: is given to misuse of authority and corruption: and is wily. Hearing that Sidi has rejected his offer, he pretends to impotent and baits Sidi who is finally seduced by him.

But Baroka also has vitality and zest for life. He is an excellent hunter, generous and open-handed, and the young as well as the old are reported to seek his counsel. In other words, he is, The trickster figure par excellence, God, man, and animal all at once. (P.47)

There are occasions in *The Lion and the Jewel* when the dialogue and speech-making are over-extended. As a playwright, Soyinka depended too much on speeches, but he showed even in his early work that he was aware of the value of gesture, dance and mime as means of communication. The sequences of physical action are strategically placed in this play so as to provide comments and establish rhythms. Some of them are particularly revealing and some are highly stylized. For instance, when Sidi enters the Bale's bedroom she finds him engaged in a trial of strength with a wrestler and embarks on an exchange of proverbs which complements the wrestling match. When Baroka throws his adversary, he performs an action which anticipates his final conquest of Sidi-an embrace which is not shown. As Sidi's head falls on the Bale's shoulder, the lights dim and dancers burst on to the stage. These performers, who cross and re-cross the stage and then reappear in the market-clearing, dance Baroka's story, or a version of it. The performance consists of a number of women pursuing a masked, male-figure 'Baroka'; 'Baroka' performs a dance of virility but eventually wearies and is no longer capable of responding to the tantalizing motions of the women; Sadiku then enters the dance to 'join in at the kill.' This sequence is highly stylized, deeply influenced by Yoruba conventions and, since Baroka is even at that moment enjoying Sidi, deeply ironic.

Thus, Soyinka presents delicately the weakness of the average African for the white man's fashions and tendency to ape him in every possible manner. Through unexpected twists and apparently simple symbols he presents his approach to social problems. According to M. Pushpa, "A very mild clash between the African values and the modern Ideas is depicted in *The Lion and the Jewel* (p.150).

The Lion and the Jewel is a play of exceptional charm and dexterity. It portrays clearly the clash of cultures and how a *self* oriented person attracts towards *the other*. The obvious merits of the play as a stage comedy have led to its becoming one of the most popular of all Soyinka's plays.

The play *The Lion and the Jewel*, brought him to the attention of the Royal court. There he saw drama as a social force in action and came into contact with a generation of stimulating British playwrights and producers' (Terry Browne).

The dances have the scope of expressing the most realistic imitation of action such as the pantomime of the felling of the trees in *The Lion and the Jewel*. Sidi "Stages" a pantomime to re-enact the arrival of the photographer from Lagos who has fallen in love with her, takes photographs of the village and gives her an image in the front page in a popular magazine. The

magazine, bearing a beautiful image of Sidi, has just been received back in the village and the pantomime is meant to celebrate Sidi's joy and pride in her youthful beauty. Lind fords praises the Lucidity of the play '*The Lion and the Jewel*' (Annemarie Heywood, p.131).

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Thus Soyinka subtly portrays the acceptance of the welcoming the new into the African society. In a transitional stage the country was not ready to accept the socio-cultural changes. But one must accept these changes; as change is a continuous phenomenon. There are many incidents in this play which discussed above suggest that common African is not totally ready to welcome the new. It was a period of transition in Nigeria, when western education had strengthened its hold on the people. A new breed of men, with different social and cultural orientation had sprung up. As a result, there was a clash between accepted ideas and new ideas, as each one of them showed a tendency towards a system of indoctrination. Soyinka combines imaginative inventiveness with reflection and shows a clear grasp of psychology. His usual concern with liberating his action from the limits of a single 'line' in space and time here finds only muted expression, for Soyinka, is rightly intent upon keeping his comic plot moving along a single plane of reality. He even obeys the classical 'unities' since, as in most of his plays, he confines his action to a single place and a single day.

In *The Lion and the Jewel* Soyinka seems to reassert the value of a traditional and communally – based society. The play could be described as a condemnation of self – seeking individualism. There is a mockery of 'modern' ways in general and the play exposes the self – seeking element in all the characters. It is not out of loyalty that people make use of the traditional ideas or the motivations of pride and power or out of moral or religious conviction.

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