

Cultural Conflict between Tradition versus Modernism in Wole

Soyinka's Play The Lion and the Jewel

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Abstract

Wole Soyinka Africa's most distinguished playwright winning the Nobel Prize for literature in 1986. He is a prolific writer and versatile genius of Africa. Soyinka is widely considered Africa's living playwright. The customs and traditions of Yoruba are typically presented in his play. The white missionaries and other western agents that invaded Africa during the period of the scramble for the continent came face to face with tradition and cultural practices which were inimical to their belief system. This resulted in the clash of two cultures. Cultural conflict is known as disagreement between belief and customs. 'Tradition' means "passing of belief or customs from one generation to the next" and 'modern' stands for "present or contemporary times". Modernity and tradition look to be the poles apart but in this research paper an attempt would be made in order to bring out the amalgamation of tradition and modernity in Wole Soyinka's celebrated play *The Lion and the Jewel*.

Keywords: Tradition, Yoruba culture, modernity, conflict, bride price, polygamy

Wole Soyinka is most distinguished playwright winning the Nobel Prize for literature in 1986. Being a social conscious writer, he is acclaimed worldwide, yet his home country rewarded him with solitary confinements, sentence to death and many exiles. His works are based on society, tradition, politics and culture of Africa. He is a keen observer of his land, culture and customs and very eminent in expressing the observer in writings.

The play *The Lion and the Jewel* has its setting in the village of Ilunjinle in Yoruba West Africa. It was published in 1963 by Oxford University Press. The play *The Lion and the Jewel* is characterized by ribald comedy and love, cultural conflict, where the old culture represented by the uneducated people of

Ilunjinle, led by Baroka, clashes with the new culture led by Lakunle, who is educated, a school teacher by profession, is influenced by the western ways who is straight opposite to the character of Baroka. Sidi is the central female character, an eighteen years old girl attracts both traditional Baroka and westernized Lakunle. The main confrontation between North pole and south pole exist till the end of the play due to character of Sidi. It shows familiarity of Soyinka with the various aspects of African tradition and the influence of the modern world on the African mind. Now, if the play reflects conflict between tradition and modernity, then we see that who is the winner? So many discussions have been made regarding the conflict between modernity and tradition in this play wherein tradition wins over modernity through the final action of Sidi.

The play is divided into three parts: morning, noon and night. Yoruba village Ilunjinle which is ruled by powerful chief Baroka, domineering chief. He is a man of action. He is sixty two years old and uneducated. Baroka is the one who follows the tradition and he is ruling the village in a typical manner. His character has been portrayed and understood by the dialogue he speaks in the morning act. He stands for tradition. He is the Bale, a prominent figure in the plays. He portrays himself as simply traditional. He's known as both the "Lion" because of his strength, and the "Fox" because of his cunning tricks. He enters the scene and all the villagers who were busy in music, dancing and moving at once got on their knees for their traditional greeting but Lakunle just bows and says good morning to him. This gesture offends Baroka who says, "Guru morning guru morning, ngh-hn! That is all we get from 'alakowe' you call at his house hoping he sends for beer, but all you get is guru morning. Will guru morning wet my throat" (Soyinka 16). He enjoying all the luxury that money and power could provide, the Bale has a harem full of prettiest women in the area, fresh stock being added frequently. He considers himself to be the agent of the great modern revolution against men like Lakunle.

Lakunle doesn't like the old tradition like music and dance. He said it's child nonsense. Hearing this from a western idealist. Baroka makes an astonishment statement. He says, "A-ah Mister Lakunle without these things you call nonsense, a bale life would be pretty dull" (Soyinka 16). These lines indicate that Baroka is rooted in his tradition and the music, song, mime and dance had a great effect on his life and his culture. He does not want modernity to enter his life Ilunjinle. So he does not allow the railway lines to his village. People think he wants to preserve his tradition but the fact is he is selfish, cunning and thinking only of his rule in the village.

The Lion and the Jewel depict the culture of polygamy. This polygamy is a pain for a female in which her husbands are allowed to marry many girls. They will use that girl for only physical pleasure and they will avoid that girl. After some period of time they will search for a new one. This polygamy was practiced in the play through the character of Baroka. He proudly explains that it enhances their heritage. He says even in the age of sixties he has given birth to a child, this shows the male domination and pride in their manhood.

”yes yes.....it is five full months since I took a wife....five full months”. (Soyinka 18)

Marrying of multiple wives is legal in Nigeria. Lofts and wives are the criteria of wealth of a person. So Baroka married many wives. The desire for more girls has not left him at the age of sixty two. He loves Sidi but when Sidi refuses he cunningly cheated Sidi. In the end of the play he raped her. The negative aspect of Baroka’s character has also been portrayed by an author.

Modernity is portrayed through the character of Lakunle who is a school teacher and has a tendency to imitate the west. He is twenty two years old. He is a man of words. He stands for modern European, especially British value of life. He is also called as Semi European. He is much fascinated by the most superficial aspects of modern life, such as, night clubs, ballroom, dance, etc. He falls in love with Sidi, As he sees her carrying a pot of water on her head, he feels, anxious for her and therefore advises her.

“I have told you not to carry loads. On your head but you are as born are as stubborn. As an illiterate goat it is bad for your spine; you will have to neck at all. Do you wish to look squashed like my pupil’s drawing?”(Soyinka 4)

He also explains her why he wants to marry her. He thinks her to be an intelligent girl who can understand him, and therefore support him in his struggle for your life.

“Not till you swear to marry me”.

‘Sidi, a man must prepare to fight alone;

But it helps if he has a women;

To stand by him, a women, who; can understand....like you”. (Soyinka 7)

He refuses her to pay a pride price because he want to marry her not to buy. He thinks it is uncivilized, outrageous custom:

“ Ignorant girl, can you not understand?

To pay the pride price would be

To buy a heifer off the market stall.

You'd my chattel, my mere property”. (Soyinka 8)

He argue with Sidiandhe criticize the evils of bride price by the following words

“A savage custom , barbaric, out dated, Rejected, denounced, accursed, Excommunicated,archaic, degrading, humiliating, unspeakable, redundant, retrogressive, remarkable, unpalatable”.(Soyinka 8)

His attire is totally modern but that looks pathetic on his small body. He believes in the modern European concept of love finally resulting in marriage. Though, he is Africa by birth, he has Europeanized himself by his modern education and contact with alien nature. His western conceptions are not understood by simple people and thus they term him ‘mad’

Lakunle dreams about the effect of modern civilization in their rural village. They aspire the construction of roads, building and modern transport system would bringa drastic change in their lives. He thinks himself if the modernism is entered into Nigeria the cultures and traditions of Nigeria will be changed. Polygamy will be replaced by Monogamy, the system of paying bride price should be abolished. The clay pots would be replaced by modern metal tins. The palm wine habit would be replaced by tea with milk and sugar. He aspires that they would publish their own newspaper, build new factories and industries and send their girls for beauty contests.

“Within two year ortwo. .I swear, This town shall see a transformation; bride price will be thing forgotten: And wives shall take their place by men. A motor road will pass this spot; And springthe city ways to us. We'll buy saucepans for all the women; clay pots are crude and unhygienic; No man shall take more wives than one. . . We,ll burn the forest cut the trees ; Then plant a modern park of lovers;We,ll print newspapers everyday; With pictures of seductive girls. The world will judge our progress by; The girls that win

beauty contests... We must reject the palm wine habit; And take to tea, with milk and sugar.(Soyinka 34)

Even he seems to forget his principles at the end of the play when he eagerly embraces the thought that Sidi 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 bride- price too”.(Soyinka 61).

The Lakunle wants an ideal solution to the problems faced by the villagers but ideal things don't really a matter of real circumstances.

Sidi is another character who seems drenched in traditional ways of life. She is only eighteen and beautiful young woman in the village Ilujinle. She is considered as village ' belle'. A foreign photographer publishes images of her in magazine. Her images are occupied in most of the page. Upon seeing her images, Sidi becomes extremely conceited and believes she is more important than the village Bale. Lakunle love Sidi but she expected the bride price from Lakunle.

” I have told you, and I say it again

I shall marry you today, next week

Or any day do you name.

But my bride- price must first be paid...

But I tell you, Lakunle, I must have

The full bride price”.(Soyinka 10)

When he refuses she rejected Lakunle. He advises her to wear modern clothes but she love the traditional dresses. Sidi is very clear in her mind. Lakunle considers kissing is 'a way of civilized

romance' but Sidi does not like it because she looks at it from the African point of view. She considered it rather unhygienic. "No, don't! I tell you I dislike; This strange unhealthy mouthing you perform".(Soyinka 10)

She was proud of her virginity and says that if she would not take the bride price then she would be targeted and talked by the villagers. They would start to say she is not a virgin so that Lakunle married her without bride price. This was the reason for her 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 bride price" (Soyinka 8)

Sidi is also presented as an unintelligent girl who is tricked after Sadiku spreads the rumor that Baroka is impotent. She believes Sadiku and Baroka. But Baroka broke her belief and raped her. Sidi ultimately decides to marry the man after she loses the virginity to him.

People are molding traditions for their personal likings. Both Tradition (Baroka) and Modernity (Lakunle) are fighting for Sidi. The final surrender of Sidi to Baroka is evidence of the victory of traditional African values over the modern European ones in the African context.

To conclude thus the conflict between Tradition and Modernity is present in the play. Soyinka satirically portrayed the clashes between tradition and modern. In the context tradition stands for reality and modernism stands for idealism and idealism falls badly against reality. The ideal solution as the thought of by Lakunle was neglected for the real life confrontation of Baroka.



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