

Clash of Cultures in Contemporary African Drama: an Analysis of Wole Soyinka's the Lion and the Jewel

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Abstract: This work is an attempt to illustrate the concept of culture conflict between tradition and modernity, western values and African traditional norms. As one of the most prominent contemporary African writers, Wole Soyinka, a Nigerian novelist, dramatist and critic does not shy to reconcile in his plays the social and cultural tensions between African culture and westernization through dramatic elements as satire and ironic in order to critique the elements of tradition as well as the requirements of western culture in his play *The Lion and the Jewel*. It is a real desire for Wole Soyinka as the first Sub-Saharan scholar to be awarded a Nobel Prize in literature in 1986 as the dramatist incorporates irony and satire to critique drastically western hegemony and African patriarchal society.

Keywords: culture, satire, hegemony, tensions, westernization, values

I. Introduction

Wole Soyinka is a Nigerian dramatist, poet and critic. He is one of the most prominent African scholars of the twentieth-first century to win a Nobel Prize in literature. Soyinka was born in 13 July, 1934 in Abeokuta in western Nigeria. After graduating at Ibadan College in 1954, Soyinka moved to the University of Leeds where he received his doctorate and later returned to Nigeria to teach drama and became a professor of Comparative literature and taught at various universities around the world as the University of Cambridge, Sheffield and Yale University. Soyinka has published extensively 20 books including novels, poetry and drama.

Drama plays a major role in Soyinka's literary trajectory as a scholar. His plays explore several themes as colonialism, African tradition and political dictatorship, social tensions between African societies and European values and the clash that result from this encounter. His play *Kongi's Harvest, Madmen and Specialists* and *A Dance of the Forests* succinctly deal with music, songs and dance as a marker of African orature. In his play, *The Lion and the Jewel*, Soyinka remains one of the prominent dramatists to deal with different perceptions of marriage and gender roles, masculinity, female beauty and male virility as well as the clash between tradition and modernity. As Wole Soyinka made use of satirical elements and ironic instances to critique the attitude of African intellectuals who blindly mimicked the western lifestyles and ignored traditional norms of thinking and values.

The work is centered on two parts. The first one will deal with the issue of colonial domination how westernized ways of life invaded African culture values and customs but the triumph of African traditional ways is a real asset in Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*. Secondly, the emphasis will be laid on the authentic narrative techniques as symbolism satire, irony used Wole Soyinka to focus on the infiltration of western values through the portrayal of new African intellectuals like the male character Lakunle whose borrowed western style and

thought are ridiculed in the favor of Baroka, a village chief, custodian of tradition and the repository of tribal norms.

II. Colonial Domination Versus African Culture

The concept of culture clash has been an important issue tackled by many modern African writers like the Nigerian intellectual Wole Soyinka as one of the most prolific of the twentieth century. It is obvious that Europe was the source of all the ills colonized nations suffered for many centuries back. With slave trade, Africa was deprived of its population; human resources which might lead to economic progress of the continent. After slavery with its social and cultural consequences, the African continent did witness again the wave of colonization; the second weapon that catapulted the cultural, economic and social development of the all colonized continents including Africa. Nigeria was not the exception because the country witnessed in the past presidential assassinations, civil war, coup d'états as well as political, corruption and dictatorship in contemporary period Western education was introduced to show all this European wealth to the people of the colonies. But this overtly evangelical act had a covert purpose of training some people to work for them. Next step was to oblige colonized people to abandon their traditional ways. Once they have added a considerable number of converts, they started exercising power over them, and steadily administering them. Once that amount of strength has been gained, way was open for exploitation of that country by imposing heavy taxes, usurping natural resources, enslaving people etc.

Colonialism hardly ever exploits the whole of a country. It contents itself with bringing to the light the natural resources, which it extracts, and exports to meet the needs of the mother country's industries, thereby allowing certain sectors of the colony follows its path of underdevelopment and poverty, or at all events sinks into it more deeply.¹

All these issues were recorded by many scholars among them Chinua Achebe, John Munonye and Wole Soyinka as a Nobel Prize winner reveals the force of tradition through the depiction of this character in *The Lion and The Jewel* where Baroka the village chief, is highly respected in this community. His status as a polygamist is a maker of African tradition where the practices of polygamy play an important role in securing power prestige, courage and dignity in traditional African community. Custodian of tribal norms and epitome of wisdom, Baroka, called the Bale used all his expertise to woo and win the heart of the village belle a beautiful girl Sidi. With an unbelievable beauty, the girl tends to seduce Lakunle, a fool and uprooted school master who look down upon his ways and customs of tradition and is against polygamy. As a modern man with a false conception about his tradition, Lakunle is a type of intellectual who despises Baroka and espouses the western ways of lifestyles, manners and he even refused to give the bride price to the village because he thinks that giving bride price is backward, foolish and barbaric practice which should be forgotten for people to move forward and which Sidi refuses. Otherwise the community will look down upon her and labeled as her as coward who is not virgin. This different perception of African culture allows Wole Soyinka to emphasis the social tensions between new African scholars where scholarships and western education had led to the downfall of African customs. In this respect, Baroka epitomizes the revival of tradition and the authenticity of African ways and beliefs.

Through old contrary to Sidi and Lakunle, Baroka represents the community and the respect of folklore. Wole Soyinka like his contemporary writers makes his best to incorporate in his work the concept of dances, songs, and drama in order to beautify African tradition. Lakunle, an uprooted intellectual may be compared to Obi Okwonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer At Ease*, where Obi after his studies abroad returned in his own country with borrowed perception of life which is different from his traditional beliefs.

Obi Okwonkwo's willingness to marry an outcast against the traditional norms of his community where the ideas of courage, respect of tradition, solidarity remain part an integral part of tradition values of African community. However, Achebe was among the African writers to describe the foundation of African culture

¹Frantz, FANON, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Press, 1961, p.10

which heavily was the respect of traditional values. In this respect, in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo was an advocate of tradition and courage who devoted his life and wealth to the well-being of his community. But with the arrival of the white men, *Things Fall Apart* brings about the personal and collective failure and the downfall of a whole community where Okonkwo's suicide symbolizes the erasure of African culture like Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* does revalorize the position of traditional chief like Baroka, custodian and advocate of tradition.

III. Narrative Structures in Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and The Jewel*

Soyinka as a playwright, poet and critic is a prominent writer because of his rich use of language in creative writing. His drama entitled *The Lion and the Jewel* is replete with rich and sophisticated images, and narrative techniques. In Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, the author introduces the concept of music by showing its contrast between traditional music such as drumming and singing. This epitomizes the vitality of African tradition especially Yoruba Culture as traditional music represents the natural force of Yoruba native culture and values. As the main character Elesin Oba enters along with drummers praise-singers.

In modern African fiction, narrative techniques are used by African writers such as flashbacks, a recollection, past events, irony to embellish the works of art as poetry, novels and drama. In *The Lion and the Jewel*, Soyinka does not turn a blind eye to the representations of symbolic elements in his works. As the title of the play illustrates, *The Lion and the Jewel* is pregnant with symbolic images that posit Soyinka's perception of modernity in African culture. The lion referring to Baroka, symbolizes strength, and courage. This animal is the king of the forest, illustrates the vitality of tradition and customs. Symbolism is all the more important as it reveals the upper position of status held by the village chieftain Baroka as the bale and the guardian of the old ways in opposition to Lakunle an uprooted modern intellectual who is lost amidst his traditional ways and adherence to modernity. Lakunle, the school master is the prototype of new African intellectual, who though westernized, is ignorant and stupid as he uses all his strengths to defend western values and modernization as he overtly criticizes Baroka's decision to forbid the railroad from entering the village of Ilunjinle. Through educated, Lakunle represent a real danger to his people and a threat to his community as a result of backward ideas. In this play, Sidi as the most beautiful girl of the village is deserved by everyone in the village including the schoolmaster Lakunle with his false ideas of modernity and ignorance. Baroka as the depository of tradition and through his wisdom and cunning managed to marry Sidi the beautiful belle of the village who epitomize the jewel of the village, and most flattered by the magazine of the photographer which propels Sidi's image and frame beyond the village and elsewhere. By introducing the magazine in his drama; Soyinka shows how the village people encounter with western civilization and modernization. The image of the Sango plays a key role in maintaining Yoruba religious cosmogony. As a symbol of justice, this deity uses thunder and lightning to promote justice and equality.

However, European music is described as weak and emblematic of European colonization which was the main source of domination and disturbance within Nigerian communities. In addition, the image of the chains in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, symbolizes colonial invasion and domination and how African people suffered from the ill-effects of European intrusion. It also represents how the native culture is always influenced by the dehumanizing ideology of colonization and cultural hegemony.

In addition, in his play *Swamp Dwellers*, Soyinka chronicles the clash between tradition and modernity and how the collective consciousness of tradition was erased and replaced by western individualism. This play also deals with corruption, religious hypocrisy and poverty. In this play, Soyinka drastically criticizes the hypocrisy of religious leaders who act on the behalf of money which is their uppermost desire. Soyinka makes his best to contrast the city with village's life as the city is associated with hardship, corruption, and decadence while village life symbolizes peace, security, and harmony.

It is pertinent to state that Wole Soyinka literary fiction is replete with ideas about the vitality of traditional rituals and superstitious beliefs. Soyinka's play *The Strong Breed* is one of them. This work tells the story of Eman who lives in a strange village and has to sacrifice his life in order to save his village. This play is specially based Yoruba festival of the New Year and the ritual of sacrificing:

Ours is a strong breed, my son. It is only a strong breed that can take this boat to the river year after year and wax stronger on it²

This ritual which must be performed by Eman on the behalf of purgation and spiritual renewal is illustrative of cultural purification within the Yoruba community. This situation makes Soyinka one of the most controversial figures in Nigerian public and literary life.

IV. Conclusion

Colonialism had deeply destroyed the harmony and the beauty of African culture and black civilization. The consequences of this historical event which were perpetuated by arrival of the white settlers in the colonized nations of Africa and Asia had always been disastrous to the lives of thousands of people who entirely lost their values, culture and religion. These ill-effects which were gendered by colonialism are always felt nowadays in many African post-independence nations around the world. This colonial enterprise may result in the emergence of corruption, political dictatorship and many other issues that prevent the African continent from moving towards economic and political development. Wole Soyinka as a Nigerian academic and literary scholar strives to revive the dynamics of African traditional culture. Through the use of stylistic devices, The Nigerian playwright is able to focus on the important roles played by irony, symbolism, and satire as well as the use of songs and drumming in African literature. Because African people did have a culture and a civilization of their own even before westernization and this traditional civilization is a marker of African personality and dignity.

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