
**CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY THE LION AND
THE JEWEL BY WOLE SOYINKA**



Introduction

Wole Soyinka is Africa's most distinguished playwright, winning the Nobel Prize for literature in 1986. Nigerian literature was born in earnest with the award of Nobel Prize in literature to Wole Soyinka. Soyinka, often referred to as the Bringer of Light to African Literatures, has put Nigerian literature on the world map, and since 1986, hundreds of Nigerians have proudly taken to studying Nigerian literature, as departments of Nigerian literature are being created in all the universities across the country. Writers of different genres have been published. Some have won prizes, while some are finalists in national and international contests, adding their voices to the identity, authenticity, aesthetics and glory of Nigerian literature. Written by Wole Soyinka the play *The Lion And The Jewel* has its setting in the village of Ilunjunle in Yoruba West Africa. It was published in 1963 by Oxford University Press. This article is a modest attempt to bring out how his play *The Lion And The Jewel* is characterized by culture conflict, ribald comedy and love, where the old culture represented by the uneducated people in Ilunjunle, led by Baroka, Sidi and the rest, clashes with the new culture led by Lakunle, who is educated, school teacher by profession is influenced by the western ways.

So many discussions have been made regarding the conflict between tradition and modernity in this play where in 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? One cannot answer this very easily. If he says

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 then older beliefs he represents.

Confronted with Complications

But still we are confronted with some complications; the first is that Lakunle is not a particularly 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, nightclubs, 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 as 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.

Traditional Bride Price

When Lakunle, the school teacher is teaching a class the times table, Sidi walks past carrying a pail of water on her head. He is described as wearing a threadbare and rumpled clean English suit that is a little too small for him. He wears a tie that disappears beneath his waistcoat. His trousers are ridiculously oversized, and his shoes are Blanco-white. He comes out and retorts, saying that he told her not to carry loads on her head or her neck may be shortened. He also tells her not to expose so much of her cleavage with the cloth she wore around her breasts. She says that it was too inconvenient for her to do so. Sidi colds him, saying that the village thinks him stupid, but Lakunle says that he isn't that easily cowed by taunts. Lakunle also insults her, saying that her brain is smaller than his. He claims that his books say so.

Lakunle 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. He is in love with Sidi, but he has not married her because she demands that he should pay the traditional bride price, something he refuses to do:

I have told you, and I say it a gain
I shall marry you today, next week
Or any day you name.
But my bride-price must first be paid....
But I tell you, Lakunle, I must have
The full 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 a price.

Sidi says that she doesn't care for his love. Eventually, we find out that Sidi doesn't want to marry him because Lakunle refuses to pay her bride-price because he thinks it a uncivilized, outrageous custom:

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. (The Lion and the Jewel, 8)

Sidi tells him that if she did so, people will jeer at her, saying that she wasn't a virgin. Lakunle further professes how he wants to marry her and treat her 'just like the Lagos couples I have seen'. Sidi doesn't care. She also tells him that she finds the Western custom of kissing repulsive. She also tells him that not paying her bride price is mean and miserly.

Sidi is 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."

Polygamy and Monogamy

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 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 will admit

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