

The dramatic quality of the lion and the jewel

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Abstract

Wole Soyinka, a Nigerian playwright, novelist and critic, is the first black African writer to get the prestigious Nobel Prize for literature in 1986. The play *Lion and the Jewel* was first performed in 1959. It chronicles how Baroka, the Lion, fights with the modern Lakunle over the right to marry Sidi, the titular Jewel. Lakunle is portrayed as the civilized antithesis of Baroka and unilaterally attempts to modernize his community and change its social conventions for no reason other than the fact that he can. The transcript of the play was first published in 1962 by Oxford University Press. Soyinka emphasizes the theme of the corrupted African culture through the play, as well as how the youth should embrace the original African culture.

Keywords: lion, baroka, lakunle

Introduction

The *Lion and the Jewel* is one of Wole Soyinka's early plays. It is a verse comedy in which the dramatist blends western dramatic techniques with native elements. He employs devices which are alien to the western drama. The story line, set in the village of Ilunjinle, is quite simple. Sidi, the village belle, realizes that she is beautiful on seeing her photographs in the magazine brought by the stranger. Lakunle, the schoolmaster woos her. Baroka, the chief sees her photograph and desires to have her in his harem as his youngest wife. He sends his senior wife Sadiku to ask Sidi to be his wife. Sidi rejects him saying that he is too old for her. Baroka pretends that he has lost his manhood. Sadiku betrays his trust to Sidi who comes to him to taunt him. Seizing this opportunity, he seduces her. The fallen girl refuses to marry Lakunle and goes to Baroka. Soyinka employs the flash back technique effectively and differently in the play. The first episode relates to Baroka preventing the laying of the railroad through Ilunjinle. It is presented in the form of mime. The prisoners come guarded by two wardens. The white surveyor examines his map and directs the workers. The wrestler of Baroka suddenly appears and brings the bale. He frightens the workers, bribes the surveyor and thus prevents the laying of the road. All this is presented on the stage as miming.

The next episode to be staged in the form of dance is the arrival of the stranger and his photographer Sidi. This is given as a play within-the-play in which Lakunle plays the role of the stranger. The event is re-enacted. Unlike in the western drama, say *Hamlet*, there is no dialogue here. Every action is made as miming and dancing accompanied by music. The ritual dancing of Sadiku, in front of the carved image of the bale is yet another instance of the native African art used effectively in an English play. On learning that Baroka has lost his virility, his senior wife celebrates it with the virility dance. The major themes of the play receive equal importance, though not explicitly stated. Soyinka explores the nature of authority in the traditional Yoruba society. Baroka is the unquestioned chief, feared and respected by the entire tribal community. Even the western educated Lakunle pays his respect to him. The role of woman in the African society is yet

another theme that is touched upon. In a society which practices polygamy, women are treated as slaves. Sadiku is servile to her master and cringes before him. The favourite of Baroka does all kinds of jobs at the bidding of her husband. But when there is a chance women show their supremacy. Sadiku celebrates Baroka's loss of manhood saying it is the woman who is the ultimate winner. She once brought down Odiki, Baroka's father by her strength. Now, the chief himself has lost his virility. In her triumphant dance, she sings, "Take warning my master, we'll scotch you in the end". Though her joy is short-lived, she will wait for another occasion to set scores with her master. Women in the African society have started realizing their importance.

Yet another theme is the conflict between old and the new, modern life and traditional values. Soyinka himself denies that there is any clash between cultures in the play. Yet it is evident that Lakunle stands for modernization while Baroka represents tradition. The former wants change, while the latter is for preventing civilization. The incursions of western culture in the form of the photograph affect the life of the people. The success of the play depends on the comic elements. Lakunle is a comic figure with his romantic notions and big words. He is the laughing stock of the village. The episode of the stranger's earlier visit is presented in a mime and the stranger as well as Lakunle who acts his role is mocked at.

The language is appropriate to the plot and characterization. It ranges from outbursts of Lakunle's words of romance to the comic poetry of Baroka's where he calls his wife, "The sole out puller of my sweat-bathed hair". The dramatist adheres to the unities of time, place and action. The play is appropriately divided into three sections namely, Morning, noon and night and the action takes place at the village square and the Bale's palace. The action revolves around the three main characters. Thus the unities are followed effectively.

In this short play, there is little scope for the development of characters. But the characters are sharply drawn. The boisterous, cunning Baroka is a foil to gentle Lakunle. Sidi is proud and self-opinionated who finds her rustic wisdom no match for the wily chief. The play is full of proverbs,

ritualistic dances, miming and the music of the drummers. The rich cultural heritage of the African society is presented vividly in this short play.

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