

Tradition Versus Colonial Mentality: Understanding The Effects of Colonization in "The Lion and The Jewel"

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Wole Soyinka is considered by many to be an exceptionally gifted and a radically ideological writer who is sometimes difficult to comprehend. In fact, some of his later writings clearly illustrate this understanding well. Soyinka's works do not directly reflect much about colonialism and its impact on Africa or any colonized country nor does he write much against the British Imperialism. Soyinka principally focuses on social, religious, economic, moral and political problems that existed in Africa. *The Lion and the Jewel* cannot be deemed to be in the category of postcolonial writing too. Nevertheless, Soyinka being an African, the effects of colonialism is deeply embedded in him and is sometimes reflected and manifested in his works. *The Lion and the Jewel* is more or less about a conflict between modernism and tradition. Lakunle, a teacher in the play attempts to marry Sidi who is considered to be the jewel of their village. But, somehow, Lakunle fails to impress Sidi with his education, his civilized behavior and his respect for the European world. Lakunle, therefore, is a representation of a person possessing a highly dominant Colonial Mentality. Through his admiration for the imperial power, their lifestyles, etiquettes and manners Lakunle clearly projects the state of his personal colonization. Lakunle cannot help but praise and admire the country or power that has colonized him and his country.

This paper will try to bring out those elements of post colonial ethos which are sometimes consciously and unconsciously hidden

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in his work. The main objective of this paper, however, is to try and bring out the very notion of a Colonial Mentality as discreetly yet prominently presented in *The Lion and the Jewel* by Wole Soyinka. This paper will also highlight the rigid and strong adherence to tradition represented in the play. An attempt will be made to identify Lakunle, the hero of the play, as the unconscious manifestation of the author in representing the Colonial Mentality inherently present in many Africans.

Wole Soyinka was born Nigeria in July 13, 1934. He was a playwright and a political activist. He received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986. Soyinka occasionally wrote of modern West Africa in a satirical style. His work is normally serious in content as he basically writes about the evil that resides with those in power and the abuse of power and authority exercised by such men of power. Wole Soyinka graduated from the University of Leeds in 1958 with a degree in English. When he returned to Nigeria, he started an acting company and wrote one of his first significant play, *A Dance of the Forests*, for the Nigerian independence celebrations, which was received by the audience and the Nigerian authority with mixed emotions. Many of Soyinka's plays were written in a lighter vein, making fun of pretentious, westernized school teachers in *The Lion and the Jewel*, and ridiculing the clever preachers of upstart prayer-churches who feasted on the credulity of their parishioners in *The Trials of Brother Jero* and *Jero's Metamorphosis*. His other plays, such as *The Road*, *The Strong Breed*, *From Zia with Love*, *Kongi's Harvest*, and even the parody *King Baabu*, discloses his total lack of regard for African dictatorial leadership and his disappointment with the society of Nigeria in its entirety. His best works displays humor and an excellent poetic style. He also possesses a wonderful gift for irony and satire. He is best known for truthfully portraying and displaying his complex

characters and the language they employ to their position in society and their qualities morally.

Soyinka was the first black African to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Soyinka has been a supporter of Nigerian democracy for a very long time. During the time he spent being a political activist, he was imprisoned and exiled. Soyinka took active part in many political groups, which includes the National Democratic Organization, the National Liberation Council of Nigeria, and the Pro-National Conference Organizations (PRONACO). Soyinka was also credited with the title of establishing the Democratic Front for a People's Federation in 2010. He also served as the chairman of the party for a very long period.

Wole Soyinka skillfully portrays the prominent and prevailing problem that existed among many Africans during post-colonization period in Africa through his play *The Lion and the Jewel*, which is, the ongoing battle between traditions versus a Colonial Mentality residing in most educated Africans. Education was one of the main tool or weapon of colonization, employed by the imperial power. Giving the colonized countries education had many effects; one was the creation of binary opposites with which the natives were identified. The number one rationale for imparting knowledge to the Africans (by the Imperial power) was the implied notion that the natives needed education because they were an uncivilized and uncouth race, and that education will make them civilized. A perfect manifestation of the white man's burden inflicted upon the naive Africans. The terrible result which the introduction of education brought about was the colonizer's ability to convince the natives to accept their simple ways as uncivilized, barbaric and wrong. And the solution given as a remedy for this accursed situation was education.

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Most educated Africans were thoroughly brainwashed by the imperial power and as such they developed a sensibility almost similar to those of the Europeans. The uneducated Africans were influenced especially on matters regarding their outlook towards their lifestyle, habit, mannerism and etiquettes. They sometimes desire to distant themselves from their nativity and even detest their own mother tongue. Ngugi Wa Thiong'O mentions this in his book *Decolonizing the Mind*, he states;

“...the biggest weaponunleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland.” (Ngugi, 3)

Elleke Boehmer in his book *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature* also wrote, “...many writers' geographic and cultural affiliations became more divided, displaced and uncertain” (225). In *The Lion and The Jewel*, Lakunle the hero of the play openly remarked to Sidi, the heroine of the play and explained his true feelings regarding the way he sees the race of Sidi,

“... what is a jewel to pigs?
If now I am misunderstood by you
And your race of savages, I rise above taunts
And remain unruffled.” (Soyinka, 5)

This statement is interesting because of the fact that it was delivered by Lakunle, an African and not a European. Lakunle's ambivalence in the play is clearly illustrated by it. When Lakunle, vented his anger towards Sidi in the opening act of *The Lion and the Jewel*,

which is fittingly named MORNING, there is ample evidence in his outburst that he is won over by the imperial power and its ways. Lakunle, a transcultured school teacher by profession, held high reverence for the so called civilized race and is keen on changing the outlook, manners and traditions of Sidi's village. He even said to Sidi that she was a, "Bush girl you are, bush-girl you'll always be; uncivilized and primitive – bush-girl!" (Soyinka, 9).

Lakunle, as a product of the colonial power and the education imposed upon the colonized, is of the opinion that the uneducated Africans are backward in culture and considered it is his duty to change them or refine them. He feels he is the only civilized person in the entire village. Wole Soyinka reflects the general notion of the white man's burden through the character of Lakunle. Speaking through Lakunle the same notion is expressed in the following words,

"LAKUNLE: Charity, they say, begins at home.
For now, it is this village I shall turn
Inside out." (Soyinka, 6)

Here Lakunle talks about his desire to change the entire system of thought prevailing in the village, which according to him is a group of savages and primitive people. His idea of trying to change the social custom and tradition is clearly highlighted by his desire to avoid paying the bride price for Sidi. Lakunle feels giving a bride her price reduce the position of females to being a mere property which someone can just possess by paying its price. He exclaimed,

"LAKUNLE: To pay the price would be
To buy a heifer off the market stall
You'd be my chattel, my mere property." (Soyinka, 8)

But, the ambivalence in the character of Lakunle could be said to be the result of the education that he has received from a

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culture which he so admires conflicting with his own ethnic identity. As much as he reveres the western civilization and culture, he is still very keen on marrying a native African beau Sidi who is *the jewel* in the play as the title suggested. His idea of a civilized being also is a mirror or a reflection of the European culture, and he just cannot get out of that mind set. To Lakunle, a civilized being is one who acts like the European;

“LAKUNLE : Together we shall sit at table
- Not on the floor – and eat,
not with fingers, but with knives
And forks and breakable plates
Like civilized beings.” (Soyinka, 9)

Lakunle is so thoroughly impressed by the so called civilized race that he even decided to speak against the African culture by saying,

“LAKUNLE: A savage custom, barbaric, outdated
Rejected, denounced, accursed,
Excommunicated, archaic, degrading,
Humiliating, unspeakable, redundant...” (Soyinka, 8)

Sidi on the other hand, though looked upon by Lakunle as the *weaker sex* (Soyinka 6) remained true to her identity, tradition and culture. When Lakunle calls her, “*My Ruth, my Rachel, Esther, Bathsheba*” (Soyinka, 17) Sidi answered Lakunle by saying,

“SIDI: My name is Sidi. And now, let me be.
My name is Sidi, and I am beautiful.
. . . I need no funny names
To tell me of my fame.” (Soyinka, 18)

Lakunle over here can be seen identifying beauty with that of the western concept of beauty. Sidi boldly admits that she doesn't need labeling or that she doesn't need to identify herself with the

western concept of who and what beauty is. She proudly testifies that she is beautiful and that she doesn't need the western classification either to present her beauty. Sidi also reminded Lakunle time and again that if she was to marry him, Lakunle will need to pay her bride price which is a mandatory action accorded to their custom and tradition.

Sidi even showed her slight negativity towards the highly praised western culture by Lakunle when they asked Lakunle to take part in a play and asked him to imitate a certain photographer,

“SIDI: You are dressed like him
You look like him
You speak his tongue
You think like him.” (Soyinka, 13)

The implication here is that since Lakunle dressed like him, looked like him and think like him, he must also necessarily act like him; *him* is used metaphorically to connote the westerners or the European colonizers.

Much like Sidi, Baroka, the chief of the village is one who dearly holds on to their tradition and culture. He doesn't allow changes in the form of modernization to affect his village, and he sticks to their tradition and custom of marrying many wives, the practice of polygamy. Baroka is hated by Lakunle, not surprisingly, because Baroka wishes to marry Sidi. Baroka's contempt for the English language is explained when he exclaimed, “*Will guru morin wet my throat?*” (Soyinka, 15). Here “*guru morin*” means “*good morning*” and since Baroka is uneducated he cannot pronounce it correctly or rather he purposely avoids pronouncing it correctly.

Lakunle, therefore, is the perfect example of a hybrid culture evolving out of colonization. He is stuck between his love for his culture and his reverence for the education and lifestyle he achieved.

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Ngugi wa Thiong'O expressed, "*It is the final triumph of a system of domination when the dominated start singing its virtues*" (Ngugi, 20). Though the original intent may not be so, Wole Soyinka perfectly brings out different characters to clearly distinguish the complexities in characters that arise out of colonialism, and its negative effect or impact on an educated mind. Soyinka also manages to instill among readers the importance of being true to one's culture and tradition through the character of Baroka and Sidi and also through the decision of made by Sidi towards the end of the play to be with Baroka, a figure who stood for tradition and culture. However, in the play there is a sense of acceptance of the power of education, when Sidi somehow reluctantly said to Lakunle,

"SIDI: You see book man
 We cannot really do
 Without your head." (Soyinka, 16)

And in a conversation she had with Baroka she also softly said,

"SIDI" As the school teacher tells me often,
 [Very miserably.]
 I have a simple mind." (Soyinka, 43-44)

This reluctant realization and admittance of the superiority of the reasoning power of Lakunle can be somewhat interpreted as the acknowledgement of the power of the colonizer as the character of Lakunle is somehow appropriated to stands for the other, i.e., the colonizer and their powers in this paper. But in the end the willingness of Sidi to marry Baroka or her decision to be with Baroka over Lakunle illustrates what could be interpreted as the author's inner desire to position tradition over Colonial Mentality.

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