



## Nationalist Approach in Appropriating Traditional and Modern Identity in Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*

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### Abstract

Wole Soyinka, an African dramatist, has represented Nigerian culture and traditions in his works. He has highlighted the post-colonial context and the resistance by the natives to European cultural hegemony. This research paper aims at exploring the nationalist approach in explaining the current state of values and the attitude of people in Nigeria through a nationalistic idea that ascribes gender roles in its attempt to retain true self-identity. The nationalistic approach propounded by Fanon (1967) has been employed as the framework on Soyinka's play *The Lion and the Jewel*. The study finds out that Soyinka has highlighted gender roles and the customs related to marriage, bride price and the relation between husband and wife. He emphasizes the responsibility of women in terms of defining their roles and retaining their values by accepting the prescribed status assigned to them in a patriarchal setup.

**Keywords:** Wole Soyinka, Nigerian culture, post-colonial, nationalist approach

### Introduction

Wole Soyinka, a Nigerian dramatist, portrays African culture, tradition and the gender roles assigned to men and women. His works reflect his interest in the society, customs, and political conditions of his country. He portrays African life enriched with Yoruba traditions simultaneously representing the encroachment of European culture on it. Whitehead (2008) claims that Soyinka's interweaving of "Yoruba myth with western myth asserts the values and self-apprehension of the African world and thereby resists colonization by western 'theories and prescriptions'" (p. 15).

Soyinka is a socially conscious playwright that is mirrored in his works showing the native way of life intermeshed with modern social realities. His society faces the issue of hybridization and he articulates the idea of acceptance of new culture without divorcing the indigenous culture and traditions. Ojaide (2000) states that in his plays he is preoccupied with the desire spiritual regeneration of the individual and the community (p. 179). Ojaide, while reviewing Mary T. David's book on Soyinka claims that Soyinka's work reflects "cultural interaction" (p. 180) and exhibits the quest for renewal of life and values. He follows the traditions of many African writers but stands unique with his individualistic art. Wilkinson (1986) states that Soyinka's "freedom of spirit and richness of inventive creativity have found expression in a profusion of works" (p. 603).



His plays reflect his desire for his culture and nationalist ideas of retaining the Yoruba traditions. He wants to maintain the essence of his culture through creative imagination. He explores the change in traditions and lives of the Nigerian people and throws light on how modernity is paving its way in his ethnicity. Through his social vision, he intends to express the idea of modernity and tradition coexisting without losing the essential Yoruba values and identity.

### **Research Objective**

This research paper aims at exploring the nationalist discourse of spiritual and material spheres in Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* (1974). The main objective is to investigate the discourse and its elements in the characters of Baroka, the village Bale; and Sidi, the village belle and how roles are ascribed to the genders. The separation of spiritual and worldly parts of one's life can be seen in this play as the characters are trying to counter modernity and retain their true traditional identity. Trying to become liberal in their ways of handling the previous discourse, they have adopted new conservative thinking.

### **Framework**

In this study, the researchers have explored the nationalist approach of Soyinka while appropriating the clash between traditional and modern identity. Therefore, the framework propounded by Fanon (1967) presented in his essay "On National Culture" has been employed for conducting the analysis. He talks about the national culture and its significance in the life of an individual and nation. He emphasizes preserving the national culture for their survival. He has revolutionary thoughts and an anti-colonial stance. His masterpieces *The black skin and white mask* (1967), and *The wretched of the earth* (1963) served a lot in the development of the postcolonial stance.

### **Literature Review**

The nationalists do not dismiss modernity rather try to make it consistent with their ideas. Their approach prescribes the old position of the women in the modern world where they are responsible for maintaining the spirituality of indigenous ethnic life and home is the place where they can nurture this quality. They must not try to become westernized. This is the new freedom women acquired and the new woman is oppressed in a modern way with the newfangled patriarchy.

Chatterjee (1989) has discussed the Indian nationalist discourse to highlight the gender roles and the patriarchy's new way of handling modernity. This discourse was initiated as a counter-discourse to the colonial statements in which they declared the natives barbaric and uncivilized. Said (1994) points out that the colonizers always criticized the



social customs and values of the native people, declared them ill-mannered and considered it their duty to civilize them and initiate them to the modern ways of living. The people with nationalist philosophies were not in favour of losing their own culture and adopting the ruler's traditions. In reaction, they followed their way of living which exhibited an intermingling of the two cultures and based on this interaction, the roles were ascribed.

As Chatterjee (1989) remarks that the colonizers condemned the treatment of India in the texts. They laid stress on the identification of a scriptural response, construct the need for reformed tradition which may pave the way to modernity. Consequently, it constructed an "image of a new woman who was superior to the Western woman: the traditional Indian woman" (p. 622). This ideology challenged the supremacy of colonizers and the prospective solution which gave respect to itself, not the other. This entire resolution was "based on the division of culture into two domains "material and spiritual" (p. 623). The material world was associated with modernity and European civilization which was brought to overpower the locals. To overcome this way of control, the natives tended to assign more importance to their own cultures. The spiritual sphere is their traditional side where they are superior. They denounced the notion of imitation and appropriated their self-identity. They cultivate the material techniques of the Western civilization and simultaneously retained and strengthened the typical "spiritual essence of the national culture" (p. 623). The demarcation between material and spiritual then created the division between outer and inner; outer is that which attempts to influence the psyche while inner is which lies within one's essential self. They gave the idea that if the spiritual uniqueness of the culture is maintained; it can be managed to come to terms with the modern world without the loss of its true individuality.

Based on the notion of inner and outer elements, nationalism has ascribed gender roles. The world becomes the domain of man while the home is the space where women should remain unaffected by the outer world. This is how the social roles are defined under patriarchy which can assert itself in a new discourse. Then, it asserts that women are meant to represent home and the spiritual self and hence must stay at home without being influenced by modern trends. Men are considered responsible for dealing with the material world. So, the new liberal ideology in its new way proved to be the same conservative thinking for its gender roles. It postulates that in the current hybrid cultures, modernity could influence one's life, yet the inner sphere and spiritual culture must be dominant in such a way that the essential individuality remains distinctive and un-



dominated. The new discussion gives the concept of protection of women which means the protection and preservation of the inner core of their culture and its essence amidst women would remain traditional in every aspect of life, thus, representing the indigenous customs at the very heart of society – the home.

### Discussion and Analysis

*The Lion and the Jewel* represents the clash, indigenous traditions, and values that exist between the colonizer and the colonized. We often counter the instances where nationalism attempts to resist as well as subvert the new changes brought by the outer influences. The colonizers' attempts to educate the colonized harmonize several elements of the existing culture along with their culture to minister their ideology to the colonized more efficiently. It is then natural for the natives to resist the control and ideological manipulation which often creates a clash between the two. In his play, Soyinka articulates the interplay between the traditional ethos of the Yoruba people with the ethos of the western culture. Within the play, we encounter the local peoples' wish to retain their ethnic culture and identity in terms of the female gender roles yet at the same time, wish to appropriate the western ideology and identity in terms of the male-gendered role enabling the concept of a traditional modern man.

Soyinka in the play has portrayed the post-colonial condition and the resistance of the indigenous against the control of the colonizer's culture through the characters of Sidi, Baroka and Lakunle who belong to the same village. The former two characters represent the traditional African spirit whereas the latter represents the modern westernized ways of the colonizer. Liton (2012) states that this play, in the global context, can be on the map of Post-Colonial writing. It denounces the Anglo-African cross-cultural encounter. It, further, takes into account the cultures and the natives who have suffered dominance of the colonizer and the colonial rule, exploitation and subjugation.

The clash between Sidi and Lakunle is the conflict between the phenomenon of tradition and modernity while the opposition between Baroka and Lakunle is the clash between African consciousness and colonized psyche. At the end of the play, Sidi and Baroka emerge victorious which illustrates a marked preference for the African culture whereas the traditional views and customs are exhibited as the point of resistance that helps the inhabitants of the village to retain and reinforce their ethnic identity. Hence, Soyinka has highlighted the difference between modernity and tradition.

Soyinka has presented the interplay between the colonial power and the indigenous resistance. George (2008) posits "the frame whereby society is conceptualized



as moving progressively towards secularization and nationhood is historically specific to the West and cannot be universalized to explain the African situation" (p. 283). It is precisely for this reason that the colonialist critique of the natives is countered by the rejection of modern ways by the locals. The concept of progress means different things to a modern and a traditional man. Lakunle disapproves Sidi and other people of the village by calling them barbaric and ignorant and as a retort, displays his colonized psyche through his words. The use of the word "savage" for locals is evidence of the fact that Lakunle considers them devoid of any human qualities and intelligence. We may conjecture that Lakunle's view of the local borders on racism. He refers to Sidi as an "ignorant girl" (p.9), very similar to the other people in the village and uses phrases such as "illiterate goat" (p. 4), "bush girl" (p. 7) and "a race of savages" (p. 5) for Sidi and the local people who adhere to their traditional customs. He considers his own culture outdated to show how he demeans the Yoruba culture. Similarly, his view of Baroka is condescending and recurrent with negative images whom he calls a savage and a degenerate thing; "He would beat a helpless woman if he could" (p. 33). Such an insulting attitude shows his opinion that natives are devoid of any positive or good value. It is his modern way of looking at the indigenous people and his mission to teach them and bring progress to the village. Niven (1976) asserts that "No panacea could be more welcome than a guide that sums up "Tradition versus Progress" (p. 283). Lakunle is completely westernized and does not believe in the power and value of one's ethnicity. His philosophy seems to be in opposition to the nationalist ideology of preserving one's legacy. Instead, he blindly imitates and follows Western values.

Sidi's rejection of Lakunle's concepts, education, modernity and freedom indicate her staunch adherence to her native tradition in which she does not find any fault and considers it a significant aspect of her life. Lakunle fails in his attempt of subjugating Sidi. Soyinka attempts to highlight the inadequacy of the colonizer's effort of oppressing the people mentally and emphasizes their aim towards cultural hegemony. He has stressed the point of owning one's heritage and cultural legacy. Whitehead (2008) believes that such a discourse functions through a strong individualistic approach to human life which emphasizes detached self. The play articulates Lakunle's effort to initiate both Sidi and Baroka to the modern western trends. Though Sidi and Baroka embrace modernity, they do so on their terms maintaining their real self which remains intact and pure. Sidi's rebuffing Lakunle's proposal and Baroka's refusal for the road is the resistance against the empowerment by the European power structures.



Lakunle denounces native culture and does not agree to pay the bride price which is an old tradition. He aims at changing the lifestyle of people and has in his mind the vision of making Sidi a modern Westernized woman whom he considers superior. He advises her to be a modern wife. He tries to convince her with his language, love and pleasure of new life as he says to Sidi that I had a wish to marry her because he has a love for her. He wants a life companion. He further says that he needs a friend, a better half in his race of life. But in response to his proposal, Sidi stresses the payment of bride-price which he considers an ignoble custom, infamous, ignominious shaming our heritage before the world because he favours cultural displacement and exchange of Western values with the African world. Sidi believes in the traditions of her village and does not want to be oppressed by him in the name of modernity. She shows strong resistance to this way of empowering. She is a rooted African girl who remains uninfluenced by the pleasures of new trends and stays adamant in terms of the bride price.

Baroka denounces the European schemes in his village which will decrease his power and let people move towards modernity. He also criticizes Lakunle's way of demeaning norms as he says, "A-ah Mister Lakunle. Without these things you call nonsense, a Bale's life would be pretty dull" (p. 16). Through these rejections, Soyinka has developed a discourse to encounter the cultural control by the Western on the natives.

Although Sidi is a traditional girl, her photograph appearing on the front page of the magazine makes her proud. She boasts of her fame in the city. She says about the magazine "that would bestow upon me beauty beyond the dreams of a goddess... the book which announces this beauty to the world" (p. 11) and even refuses to marry Lakunle. "Known as I am to the whole wide world, I would demand my worth to wed a mere village school teacher" (p. 12). This reflects that along with being traditional, the natives share the concepts of pride and appreciation and wish to be recognized for their identities. Baroka's trick of his impotency is to show that Nigeria has not lost its identity and it still has the power of its traditions and customs with which it can move forward.

Sidi realizes Baroka's sexual strength and surrenders to him which is the victory of African culture and values. "Finally the conflict between modern European and African values is resolved in favour of the latter. Lakunle, despite his European ways of life, is looked down upon and ultimately rejected by Sidi who conforms to African tradition by marrying Baroka" (Liton, 2012, p. 426).

Colonizers have always won in controlling the natives but here Lakunle fails as he faces resistance and natives win by maintaining their identity by complying with their



own culture. Baroka rejects Lakunle's ideas of progress and has the power to reject the European culture to restore their own culture. Curiously he accepts Sidi's photograph in the city magazine and claims his progress is dependent on her support. This masculine manner of accepting Sidi along with her fame is his way of approaching things. Sidi says, "While the Lion is forgotten, he seeks to have me as his property where I must fade beneath his jealous hold...Baroka merely seeks to raise his manhood above my beauty. He seeks new fame" (p. 21). He wants to infuse modern ways into his life only when they strengthen and reaffirm his traditional identity and power as a village chief. Lakunle's concept of progress is based on roads and bridges. Baroka on the other hand believes in rediscovering one's self then accepting modernity. We may safely conjecture that he does not hate modernity rather uses it strategically as Lakunle remarks "Baroka has such a selective eye, none suits him but the best" (p. 25).

Soyinka has portrayed women as important figures in resisting modernity. Retaining traditions and their self-realization is a very significant element in his play. They reject European subordination and instead accept their role in the patriarchy of their own culture. Lakunle and Baroka both being male have the same views about Sidi considering her fragile. The only difference is that Lakunle wants to make her a European woman where she can get equality and freedom but Baroka wishes to maintain her traditional image and role. Sidi similarly realizes that Lakunle's way of empowering is oppressive and prefers a traditional man who shares her customs as well as her in cooperation with elements of modernity in life: her vanity. Sidi rejects Lakunle's notion of women being the weaker sex and goes to Baroka who wants to progress with Sidi and believes in the power of a traditional woman.

The play highlights Soyinka's nationalist views in the African context. The distinction of material and spiritual spheres can be observed in the characters and how the approach of home and world defines the gender roles in the text. Two worlds are prominent and how these different ideologies work in the play is obvious through the acceptance and rejection of these persons. Lakunle is representative of the material world which is embedded with the western notion of progress and advancement. He imitates the European ways in every aspect of his life from dressing, education, thinking to marriage. His nationalistic approach is strongly influenced by modernity, and he shows an active dislike for the old African culture. He does not believe in hybridization but advocates a complete replacement of customs. His notions stand opposite to nationalist beliefs in which progress can be attained only with the spiritual side of the old norms.



Sidi's and Baroka's dialogues and actions highlight their traditional way of thinking while at the same time their modern approach. Sidi's reaction towards her photograph is the signal of her first entry into Lagos and she boasts of her beauty. She thinks she has earned fame in the city and no one from the village can match her. Her responses to Lakunle and Saduka are reflective of her new thinking. She is the new conventional woman who believes in city fame but also knows the significance of bride price, her virginity and dance celebrations. She does not separate her identity from customs and nor fully assigns herself the sole recognition through modern pictures.

Baroka's nationalistic approach of spiritual and worldly sets her pride away. His idea defines the gender roles as he is the representative of the new patriarchy who accepts Sidi's picture and her fame in Lagos but wants to assign her the conventional role of a woman who has to sustain the culture of home. According to him, her purpose is to protect and support the customs. His intermingled thoughts on tradition and modernity are depicted in his wooing Sidi and talking of the city. He also allows his servants a day off. "This is the price I pay once every week, for being progressive... And in keeping with the habits, I am told, of modern towns. This is their day off" (p. 35). He has also made a machine of stamps which will print different pictures on it, especially of Sidi. He wants to start this modern trend from his village and claims that they will make a start by cutting stamps for their village only.

The spiritual role of Sidi as the last wife of Baroka is decided by the trick he plays on her. She accepts her role in which she will be fulfilling the role of the spirit of a culture that is why she gives magazines to Lakunle. Baroka expresses his idea that a woman supporting a man increases the strength of the man. The daring little girl of the village awakened a powerful and strong devil in him. He considers their union the first step towards progress.

The conservatism in new nationalist thinking is made obvious through Baroka's choosing Sidi as a wife and not giving her a chance of getting further fame in the city. As he believes a woman should not be allowed to participate in the material world as they represent the spiritual domain and have to remain in the inner space allotted to them. This is clear through his winning her as a wife and being his wife means to be traditional in every aspect. When she becomes ready for marriage, she returns the magazine to Lakunle which is her decision of remaining in the same status as Bale's wife. "A present from Sidi. I tried to tear it up" (p. 56).





The idea of security as well as protection of women by men is also significant in the patriarchal view. Saduka asks Lakunle if he cannot protect Sidi and provide her security, he fails to come up to the mark of the nationalist definition of masculinity. Man is the one who provides shelter to his wife, shows his physical strength as well as participates in worldly affairs such as the instance of Baroka who impresses Sidi with his physical appearance and specific way of progress which is markedly different from that of Lakunle.

The very title of Soyinka's play reflects the traditional spirit of the Yoruba tribe. The image of 'lion' is attributed to Baroka as the symbol of traditional roots, strength and bearing. The symbol of a lion is often associated with attributes such as royalty, conquest, wisdom and authority. Soyinka's portrayal of women may be viewed as a positive one by the readers. Sidi, the pivot, around which the plot revolves is the jewel for which both Baroka and Lakunle contest over desperately trying to woo and win her favour. The fact that it is ultimately Baroka whom Sidi agrees to marry highlights her preference of the national and indigenous spirit in face of the modern world and its culture.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, the play articulates the resistance against the Eurocentric discourse of modernity and cultural hegemony which "makes the play anti colonial nationalist writing. What a post-colonial literary attempt to write back to the centre" (Liton, 2012, p. 430). Culture is the expression of national consciousness and its final triumph is the main objective of Soyinka's idea. The theatre is employed to exhibit his national ideology and the resistance of his people. Soyinka presents the need for the rediscovery and reaffirmation of one's identity, values as well as African cultural legacy by resisting the European culture.

Kronenfeld writes that it operates in terms of characters adjusting ideology (tradition or modern), or steeling convenient aspect of it "in accordance with their situation and their psychological needs" (Quoted in Kumar, 2011, p. 89). The characters seem to be stuck in their minds standing for modernity or tradition and the idea of modern progress is based on the change in psyche and minds of characters. Lakunle is the one who is transformed but cannot change others. Sidi or Baroka are the ones who have not been able to transform their minds completely in favour of modern Lagos. Females in society are marginalized in every situation, that is, limited to the boundaries of home and subjugated by patriarchy.



The nationalist discourse of India, a post-colonial state, asserts that *The Lion and the Jewel* is very similar to its state of affairs where patriarchy has adopted a new way to ascribe roles. The manner of defining femininity and masculinity are the same and the demarcation of spiritual and material domains is used to resist the cultural hegemony dictated by the European power structures. Nationalist resistance is represented and highlighted in Sidi's and Baroka's characters. Sidi who is different from other girls has to surrender to patriarchal control that believes in the fixed roles of women. Culture and women both are presented as one, and men have to struggle to preserve them.



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