

## **Assertion of Ethnicity in Wole Soyinka's The Lion and the Jewell - A Postcolonial Study**

**Prof. P. KANNAN**

*Professor of English*

*Karnataka State Akkamahadevi Women's University, Vijayapura, Karnataka*

Wole Soyinka is a distinguished African intellectual as well as a versatile writer. His original name is Akinwande Oluwole Babatunde Soyinka. He was a Professor of Comparative Literature for twenty six years in Obafemi Awolowo University, Professor of Emeritus, Robert W. Woodruff Professor, Professor of Creative Writing, Scholar-in-Residence. He has the distinction of having taught in such reputed institutes as Universities of Cambridge, Oxford, and Yale. He has written poetry, dramas, novels and essays. He is a winner of Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986; Benson Medal from Royal Society of Literature in 1990; Academy of Achievement Golden Plate Award in 2009; Anisfield-Wolf Book Awarded Life Time Achievement in 2012; and Europe Theatre Prize Special Prize in 2017. He was an uncompromising activist against not only the colonial oppression but also against the oppressive governments in the free home country. He has gone into exile to protect himself from the death sentence proclaimed by Sani Abacha.

Soyinka has written thirty plays; four novels; three short stories; five memoirs; eight poetry collections; fourteen essays. Three of his works have been filmed. The most distinguishing feature of his literary output is the spirit of decolonization ideologically. His works attempt to arouse the Black Consciousness through opposing the western/Colonial Christian value system and reviving value system of Nigerian ethnicity. In this paper, an attempt is made to study how ethnicity is asserted in Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewell*.

The plot of the play deals with the conflict between the Colonial value system and Ethnic value system in which the ethnic value system is upheld. The character, Lakunle, is an English educated youngman. He is a teacher in a school. He represents the Western value system. The character, Baroka, is the village chief. He

represents the Nigerian ethnic value system. The character, Sidi, is a village young and beautiful girl for whom both Lakunle and Baroka compete. Though Sidi is willing to accept Lakunle, she avoids him because of his obsession with the western values especially his refusal to pay the bride price. She is not interested in Baroka because he is too old for her to marry him. Yet she attends a supper offered by him just in order to humiliate him. But she is impressed by him and decides to marry him rejecting Lakunle. Sidi's rejection of Lakunle is symbolically the rejection of the Western value system and acceptance of Baroka is the reassertion of Nigerian ethnicity.

In Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies colonialism is described as:

The term colonialism is important in defining the specific form of cultural exploitation that developed with the expansion of Europe over the last 400 years. ... It also meant that the relation between the colonizer and colonized was locked into a rigid hierarchy of difference deeply resistant to fair and equitable exchanges, whether economic, cultural or social. ... By the end of nineteenth century, colonialism had developed into a system of a historical categorization in which certain societies and cultures were perceived as intrinsically inferior. [KCPS, 45-48]

It is an ideological tendency of the colonisers which looks at the countries, the people, the culture, the language (s), the religion as inferior. According to the colonisers, the colonised are barbarous, savage, uncultured, uncivilised, irrational, unscientific, irreligious. The colonisers used the weapons to inflict fear upon the people of the colonisers. Then they introduced their own language, religion and culture in the life of the natives to

make their hegemony stronger. Besides, the natives are given the western education and made the so called intellectuals advocating the western culture. They are also called compradors. Jane Hiddleston describes colonialism as shown under:

Colonialism should be conceived as the conquest and subsequent control of another country, and involves both the subjugation of that country's native peoples and the administration its government, economy and produce. The act of colonization is a concrete process of invasion and a practical seizing of control, although it is important for postcolonial studies that this material, empirical manifestation of colonization is at the same time backed up by a colonial ideology that stresses cultural supremacy. Colonialism from this point of view both a specified political and economic project, and a larger discourse of hegemony and superiority that is enlisted to drive and support that concrete political act. The colonial project involves the literal process of entering into a foreign territory and assuming control of its society and industry, and, on a more conceptual level, the post facto promulgation of a cultural ideology that justifies the colonizer's presence on the basis of his superior knowledge and "civilization". [UPN,, 2]

There are a few concepts that constitute 'ethnicity' like bride-price, colonialism, and polygamy which need to be explained before the analysis of the play. The concept called 'Bride Price' is part and parcel of the institution of 'marriage' in the African culture. The concept of Bride-price is defined in Oxford Dictionary of Sociology thus:

The money or goods given by the kin of the groom to the kin of bride on marriage. Although it is sometimes seen as compensatory payment to the natal family for the upbringing of the daughter, it varies in form and meaning across cultures. In some, the 'bride-price' may become the property of the bride, and is treated as an insurance against divorce. [ODS, 52]

It is a price for the bride from the groom in various forms and kinds to ensure the ability and capability of the groom to sustain his marriage or family. The price was paid in the form of cattle, land, jewellery, money depending upon the regions and subcultures of the society. Without

the bride price, the marriage of man in the African society was almost unimaginable. It exerts the necessity on the male members of the society to work and earn so that they could afford to pay the bride price to get a bride in marriage with them. The marriages without the bride price were regarded as illegal. Even after the invasion of the whites/Christians into Africa and a lot of cultural reforms, the practice bride price is still continued. SIDI: ...

I've told you, and I say it again

I shall marry you today, next week

Or any day you name.

But my bride-price must first be paid.

Aha, now you turn away.

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.[LJ, 7]

Lakunle who has become western in education, culture and religion considers the bride-price to be:

LAKUNLE:

A savage custom, barbaric, out-date,

Rejected, denounced, accursed,

Excommunicated, archaic, degrading,

Humiliating, unspeakable, redundant.

Retrogressive, remarkable, unpalatable

...

An ignoble custom, infamous, ignominious

Shaming our heritage before the world [7]

LAKUNLE: Ignorant girl, can younot understand?

To the price would be

To buy a heiger off the market stall.

You'd be my chattel, my mere property. [LJ,8]

The tendency of colonialism considers the colonizer's cultural customs and tradition to be superior to and roll model for the rest of the world and looks down upon and treats the customs of the colonized as inferior. It is reflected in the custom of marriage. The European custom of marriage is monogamy or the custom one man and one wife. Their marriage is solemnized in the Church and the husband and wife are regarded as equal. Aime Cesaire exposes the foundation of superiority of Christianity like this: " the chief culprit in this domain is Christian pedantry,

which laid down the dishonest equations Christianity= civilization, paganism = savagery, from which there could not but ensue abominable colonialist and racist consequences, whose victims were to be Indians, the Yellow peoples, and the negroes". [DC,33] The division of labour or duty between them is characterised by the mutual dignity and respect. The Christian notion of marriage and husband and wife:

LAKUNLE: Oh Sidi, I want to wed

Because I love,

I seek a life companion ...

.....

And the man shall take the woman

And the two shall be together

As one flesh

Sidi, I seek a friend in need

An equal partner in my race of life.[LJ,8]

Polygamy was the system of marriage in the African societies from the time immemorial. It was more prevalent among the chiefs of the villages in the African societies. It was considered to be normal and just in the ethnic customs and convention of the African societies. This custom might have been established to have as many women as possible in a family to provide more labour force as the main occupations like cattle rearing and agriculture were maintained and carried out womenfolk. As far as the polygamy of the village chiefs is concerned, it was a protocol and ritual for the chiefs to have many wives. It is also testimony to the manliness of the chiefs.

Baroka is the village chief. He is the counterpart to Lakunle. He participates in the play within the play and takes photographs with Sidi. On his return home, he realises that he has not taken a new wife since five months. Sadiku, one of the wives of Baroka, meets Sidi and informs her that he wants to marry her which causes a lot of irritation to Lakunle. She also reminds her that she would be the last wife of Baroka as he has promised to stop taking new wife any longer. Sidi is invited to supper in Baroka's house that night. Both Lakunle and Sidi know that it is a trap to Sidi to make her Baroka's wife. Sadiku also briefs to Sidi about the advantages of the last wife of the village chief. She is privileged to sleep in the palace itself not in the outhouses which are meant for the

older/elder wives. She will be the head wife of the Baroka's successor. Sadiku has also revealed Sidi that Baroka lost his manhood in the last week.

Sidi does attend the supper in the palace of Baroka only to make fun of his loss of manhood. He bears with the sarcasm of Sidi with regard to the absence of Ailatu and his failure to produce a child for the last two years. Baroka is equally sarcastic in his reply to her whether he would marry her by asking whether she could marry him who as old as her own father. In the course of time, he proves that he is stronger than a young wrestler defeating him and impresses her by showing Sidi's picture/image in the tamps he is going to release. Sidi's attitude is transformed favourably towards Baroka:

Another claim of the colonisers is that it is they who introduced civilization in the colonies. They argue that it is they who built the infrastructure, reformed agriculture, introduced modern education, Christianity and English language. A close examination of all these aspects, it becomes clear that the colonisers were the true beneficiaries at the cost of the native people. The roads, railways and sea routes were for the benefit of their own transport and conveyance not for the natives. The cultivation of coffee, tea and sugarcane was the consumption of the whites and colonisers not for the natives. The modern education was nothing but the imposing their own knowledge systems on the natives whose ethnic knowledge systems were eroded by the western education.

Lakunle is the representative of the so called western civilization. He keeps glorifying the aspects of western civilization. With regard to the eating manners, he praises the table manners: 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.[8]

Later he glorifies how the colonizers improved the infrastructure:

They marked the route with the stakes, ate

Through the jungle and began the tracks. Trades,

Progress, adventure, Success, civilization [LJ,]

...

And motor roads  
 And railways would do just that, forcing  
 Civilization[25]

Sidi who has heard such descriptions of Lakunle about the civilization introduced by the English/West, happens to listen to Baroka's notion of civilization. She realises that Baroka is against or opposed to civilisation. On the contrary he is in favour of such civilisation which honours, rewards and benefits the native people. An illustration follows thus:

I do not hate progress, only its nature  
 Which makes all roofs and faces look the same.  
 And the wish of one old man is  
 That here and there,  
 .....  
 Among the bridges and murderous roads,  
 Below the humming birds which  
 Smoke the face of Sango, dispenser of  
 The snake-tongue lightening; between this moment  
 .....  
 Does sameness not revolt your being.[]

He concludes that the young and old should learn from each other. The western system is preconceived to teach the natives not to learn from them. They also create the impressions that they are founders of civilization although there used to be ethnic civilization in the colonies. The western civilization has erased the ethnic civilization of inclusion and created a make-belief that material progress is alone a mark of civilization.

The study reveals that the play deals with the conflict between colonialism and ethnicity. The spirit of colonialism

is represented by and reflected in an English educated native called Lakunle whose identity is that of comprador. He down plays the ethnic culture, tradition, norm, convention and civilization and glorifies their western counterpart. Baroka who is the representative and reflector of the ethnicity of Nigeria proves that that the ethnic civilization is not inferior to the Western civilization. He upholds and asserts the ethnic civilization which was misrepresented by the West. The study may be rightly concluded with the views of Frantz Fanon: "A civilization that proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadent civilization. A civilization that chooses to close its eyes to its most crucial problems is a stricken civilization. A civilization that uses its principles for trickery and deceit is a dying civilization".[ADC,31]

### References

1. Ashcroft, Bill, Griffiths, Gareth, Tiffin, Helen. Ed. *Key Concepts in Post-colonial Studies*, New York : Routledge, 2004.
2. Césaire, Aimé. *Discourse on Colonialism*, Trans. Joan Pinkham, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972
3. Fanon, Frantz. (1959) *A Dying Colonialism*, New York: Grove Press, 1965
4. Hiddleton, Jane. *Understanding Postcolonialism Negritude*, New York: Routledge, 2014
5. Scott, John & Marshall, Gordon. (1994) *Oxford Dictionary of Sociology*, New York: OUP, 2009.
6. Soyinka, Wole. (1962) *The Lion and Jewel*, New York: OUP, 1962.