

Structure Within Structure: An Analysis of *The Lion and the Jewel*

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Although Wole Soyinka's plays have received considerable if not adequate critical attention in India and abroad, the focus has been mostly on his political plays. For instance Michael Etherton discusses Soyinka as a satirist and political thinker in *The Development of African Drama*, and analyzes only *Madmen and Specialists*, *A Dance of the Forests*, and *Opera Wonyosi*. Simon O. Umukoro comments on "the political vision" in Soyinka's plays with particular reference to *A Dance of the Forests* and *Kongi's Harvest* (172). Lewis Nkosi is interested primarily in tracing Soyinka's political ideology in *A Dance of the Forests* and *The Road*. Consequent upon such undue emphasis placed on the political plays, Soyinka's sheer comic genius and the implicit community values have not been recognized at all. In fact Adrian Roscoe goes to the extent of contending that "...the ironic humour of 'Telephone Conversation' and the mirth of *The Lion and the Jewel*...were mere 'jeux d'esprit,' lighthearted interludes in a career whose underlying mood had grown increasingly dark" (1971: 48).

The Lion and the Jewel is a significant work for many reasons. In spirit and structure it is typical of African theater which, like ancient Indian theater, weaves music, dance and drama into a rich tapestry in contrast to the main life of Western theater which so often divorces music and dance from drama. Soyinka himself has highlighted this point. Referring to *Shakuntala* he wonders: "Wasn't this closer in many instances to the culture, the literature, the creativity of my own society?" (Gibbs "Zimbabwe" 68). It is not a question

of simply adding a few songs and dances to the main text; the totality of poetic drama lies in the rich structure resulting from the different, often interlocking, elements of dance, music and drama. "And the whole thing about plays, especially poetic plays," Soyinka points out, "is that there are constant dimensions which are created not even so much in the action as by the metaphor, the metaphorical language" (Gibbs "Zimbabwe" 87). The present paper attempts to analyze the different "dimensions" of *The Lion and the Jewel*. Soyinka's comic genius lies in organizing such diverse structures as counterpoints to one another within implicit value-structures.

The first broad structure on which others are superimposed in the play is that of the archetypal "Trickster Figure." Jung, who analyzed the "Trickster Figure" for the first time, traced it to the carnival of the medieval church: "In picaresque tales, in carnivals and revels, in magic rites and healing, in man's religious fears and exaltations, this phantom of trickster haunts the mythology of all ages" (260). According to Jung, the "Trickster" is "a forerunner of the saviour, and, like him, God, man, and animal at once. He is both subhuman and superhuman, a bestial and divine being" (263).

Obviously, the central character in *The Lion and the Jewel*, Baroka the Bale, is the "trickster figure." He is called by everyone "the Old Fox"; and he is a lecher who even at sixty wants to marry a young girl. Lakunle describes him as a "savage thing, degenerate/He would beat a helpless woman if he could" (*Collected Plays* 2: 33. All other quotations from the text refer to this edition). Baroka describes himself as a "seven-horned devil of strength" (43). He has a huge harem; is given to misuse of authority and corruption; and is wily. Hearing that Sidi has rejected his offer, he pretends to be impotent and baits Sidi who is finally seduced by him. But Baroka also has vitality and zest for life. He is an excellent hunter, generous and open-handed, and the young as

well as the old are reported to seek his counsel. In short, Baroka is the “trickster figure” *par excellence*, “God, man, and animal” all at once.

However, there are significant variations on the theme of the “trickster figure.” For a start, there are not one but two tricksters in the play. The village belle Sidi too is a trickster who plays—or attempts to play—a practical joke on the Bale. And that reveals the other, more important, variation. The archetypal trickster figure is himself tricked in the end; he falls “victim in his turn to the vengeance of those whom he has injured” as Jung explains (256). But in *The Lion and the Jewel* the major trickster, Baroka, is not tricked in turn at all; on the other hand he succeeds in his cunning; and it is the minor trickster, Sidi, who demonstrates the principle of “the biter bit.” When at the end Sidi marries Baroka after being deceived by him, we ought to feel sorry for her and dislike the Bale. But we don’t. How does the playwright maneuver us so as to admire the arch trickster?

Partly Soyinka achieves this through his emphasis on dance. The first communal dance in the play is a re-creation of a real incident concerning a stranger to the village, a photographer. The dancers depict, through elaborate miming and gestures, the photographer coming on his motorcycle which stops suddenly, his attempts at repairing the machine, and his falling into the river while focusing his camera on Sidi. Lakunle, the schoolteacher, is forced to play the role of the photographer in the dance; and thus Lakunle is identified with the ridiculous stranger.

It is in this context that one becomes uneasy at a view of the play as a dramatization of “conflict between traditionalism and modernism” as, for instance, Lewis Nkosi does (187). Soyinka rightly points out: “Not just the teachers, the western critics too; they always follow the line of least resistance and see the clash of cultures. There is no clash of cultures in that play” (Gibbs

"Zimbabwe" 79). If we see Lakunle as a symbol of modernity and Baroka of tradition, and conclude that the playwright aligns himself with tradition against modernity, we will be totally missing the import of the play. Lakunle represents not Western culture but only hollow westernization, not the real but only the image. The play abundantly establishes that Lakunle is a modern version of Don Quixote, "a book-nourished shrimp" (57). In his wooing of Sidi, he can only use his bookish knowledge: "My Ruth, my Rachel, Esther, Bathsheba/Thou sum of fabled perfections..." (19), so rants Lakunle. To him progress means only factories, "newspapers...with pictures of seductive girls" (34), ballroom dancing, and cocktail parties. To what extent he is cut off from the earth and life-giving forces is made clear when Sadiku taunts him: "Why don't you do what other men have done. Take a farm for a season...Or will the smell of the wet soil be too much for your delicate nostrils?" (33).

In other words, Lakunle, the rival of Baroka, represents neither progress nor Western culture but only the outward gloss image. Hence the first elaborate dance associates him with the image-man, the photographer. Though Sidi is taken in for a while by her own photographs (as she is by Lakunle), she is too earthy and too full of life to live for long in the world of images. Hence, significantly, she returns the album of her photographs to Lakunle in the end.

From this point of view—that is, from the point of view of differentiating the image from the real—the two elaborate dances with music develop a structure counter to the movement of the "trickster figure." The dances, being community dances, emphasize the sense of one's belonging to one's community. In the beginning of the first dance we notice that Lakunle is very reluctant to join the others; and he is almost physically dragged by the participants to take up the role of the stranger. But, significantly, Baroka

automatically joins the dance and is accepted as such even when he intrudes on the dancers in the middle. He naturally belongs to the community whereas Lakunle is always an outsider.

Even the second dance after the seduction of Sidi is interesting from this point of view. In this dance, called "the dance of virility" (51), the female dancers pursue a masked male and enact the story of Baroka—or, the story of Baroka as they understand it. In this mumming the Baroka-figure is made a comic figure, to be taunted and ridiculed by his wives. But we, as readers or audience, know by now that the Baroka-figure in the dance is only a false image, only a masked figure, not the real Baroka. Lakunle appears vastly to enjoy this spectacle in spite of himself. He can never free himself from the "images"—of love, of progress, and of Reality.

Such structures, created by the elaborate dances on the themes of the individual versus community, and the real versus the image, run counter to the movement of the trickster-figure, and make us overlook the darker aspects of the trickster. They create a festive atmosphere in which even the calculated seduction of a simple girl is accepted by us (as Sidi accepts it) as only proper and natural.

In fact, in the play of Soyinka music and dance stand for life-affirming values as they involve an individual's coming out of his ego-centered universe and entering a community-centered universe. Hence the abstract structures created by the dances run always counter to ego-structures involving vain politicians and fanatical religious leaders. In support of this statement we could consider another major play of Soyinka, *Kongi's Harvest*. In this play, whereas all other dances and music are centered on the traditional ruler, Oba Danlola, Sarumi, the next heir, and Segi the courtesan (all normative characters), the dictator Kongi and his retinue are devoid of

music and dance. The alternating action in the "First Part" brilliantly represents such a contrast: the scene shifts alternatively from Kongi's Retreat to Segi's Club, from solemn counselors and secretaries deeply involved in devising the right "images" for Kongi to the noisy revelers and music of the club, in short from life-thwarting forces to love and affirmation of life.