

**Publication Information:** Book Title: The Lion and the Jewel. Contributors: Wole Soyinka - author. Publisher: Oxford University Press. Place of Publication: London. Publication Year: 1963. Page Number: 64.

Wole Soyinka

# THE LION and the JEWEL

LONDON Oxford University Press IBADAN 1963

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Oxford University Press, Amen House, London E.C.4 GLASGOW NEW YORK TORONTO  
MELBOURNE WELLINGTON BOMBAY CALCUTTA MADRAS KARACHI LAHORE DACCA CAPE  
TOWN SALISBURY NAIROBI IBADAN ACCRA KUALA LUMPUR HONG KONG

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*Cover designed by Taj Ahmed*

PRINTED AND BOUND IN ENGLAND BY HAZELL WATSON AND VINEY LTD AYLESBURY AND SLOUGH

## Characters

**SIDI** the Village Belle

**LAKUNLE** School teacher

**BAROKA** the 'Bale' of Ilujinle

**SADIKU** His head wife

**THE FAVOURITE**

**VILLAGE GIRLS**

**A WRESTLER**

**A SURVEYOR**

**SCHOOLBOYS**

**ATTENDANTS ON THE 'BALE'**

Musicians, Dancers, Mummers, Prisoners, Traders, the VILLAGE

## MORNING

*A clearing on the edge of the market, dominated by an immense 'odan' tree. It is the village centre. The wall of the bush school flanks the stage on the right, and a rude window opens on to the stage from the wall. There is a chant of the 'Arithmetic Times' issuing from this window. It begins a short while before the action begins. Sidi enters from left, carrying a small pail of water on her head. She is a slim girl with plaited hair. A true village belle. She balances the pail on her head with accustomed ease. Around her is wrapped the familiar broad cloth which is folded just above her breasts, leaving the shoulders bare.*

*Almost as soon as she appears on the stage, the schoolmaster's face also appears at the window. (The chanting continues -- 'Three times two are six', 'Three times three are nine', etc.) The teacher Lakunle, disappears. He is replaced by two of his pupils, aged roughly eleven, who make a buzzing noise at Sidi, repeatedly clapping their hands across the mouth. Lakunle now re-appears below the window and makes for Sidi, stopping only to give the boys admonitory whacks on the head before they can duck. They vanish with a howl and he shuts the window on them. The chanting dies away. The schoolmaster is nearly twentythree. He is dressed in an old-style English suit, threadbare but not ragged, clean but not ironed, obviously a size or two too small. His tie is done in a very small knot,*

*disappearing beneath a shiny black waistcoat. He wears twenty-three-inch-bottom trousers, and blanco-white tennis shoes.*

LAKUNLE: Let me take it.

SIDI: No

LAKUNLE: Let me. [*Seizes the pail. Some water spills on him.*]

SIDI: [*delighted.*]

There. Wet for your pains.  
Have you no shame?

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LAKUNLE: That is what the stewpot said to the fire.  
Have you no shame-at your age  
Licking my bottom? But she was tickled  
Just the same.

SIDI: The school teacher is full of stories  
This morning. And now, if the lesson  
Is over, may I have the pail?

LAKUNLE: No. I have told you not to carry loads  
On your head. But you are as stubborn  
As an illiterate goat. It is bad for the spine.  
And it shortens your neck, so that very soon  
You will have no neck at all. Do you wish to look  
Squashed like my pupils' drawings?

SIDI: Why should that worry me? Haven't you sworn  
That my looks do not affect your love?  
Yesterday, dragging your knees in the dust  
You said, Sidi, if you were crooked or fat,  
And your skin was scaly like a . . .

LAKUNLE: Stop!

SIDI: I only repeat what you said.

LAKUNLE: Yes, and I will stand by every word I spoke.  
But must you throw away your neck on that account?  
Sidi, it is so unwomanly. Only spiders  
Carry loads the way you do.

SIDI: [*huffily, exposing the neck to advantage.*]  
Well, it is my neck, not your spider.

LAKUNLE: [*looks, and gets suddenly agitated.*]  
And look at that! Look, look at that! [*Makes a general siveep in the direction of her breasts.*]  
Who was it talked of shame just now?  
How often must I tell you, Sidi, that  
A grown-up girl must cover up her . . .  
Her . . . shoulders? I can see quite . . . quite  
A good portion of -- that! And so I imagine

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Can every man in the village. Idlers  
All of them, good-for-nothing shameless men  
Casting their lustful eyes where  
They have no business . . .

SIDI: Are you at that again? Why, I've done the fold  
So high and so tight, I can hardly breathe.  
And all because you keep at me so much.  
I have to leave my arms so I can use them . . .  
Or don't you know that?

LAKUNLE: You could wear something.  
Most modest women do. But you, no.  
You must run about naked in the streets.  
Does it not worry you . . . the bad names,  
The lewd jokes, the tongue-licking noises  
Which girls, uncovered like you,  
Draw after them?

SIDI: This is too much. Is it you, LAKUNLE,  
Telling me that I make myself common talk?  
When the whole world knows of the madman  
Of Ilujinle, who calls himself a teacher!  
Is it SIDI who makes the men choke  
In their cups, or you, with your big loud words  
And no meaning? You and your ragged books  
Dragging your feet to every threshold  
And rushing them out again as curses  
Greet you instead of welcome. Is it Sidi  
They call a fool -- even the children --  
Or you with your fine airs and little sense!

LAKUNLE: [*first indignant, then recovers composure.*]  
For that, 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.

SIDI: [*furious, shakes both fists at him.*]

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O . . . oh, you make me want to pulp your brain.

LAKUNLE: [*retreats a little, but puts her aside with a very lofty gesture.*]  
A natural feeling, arising out of envy;  
For, as a woman, you have a smaller brain  
Than mine.

SIDI: [*madder still.*]  
Again! I'd like to know  
Just what gives you these thoughts  
Of manly conceit.

LAKUNLE: [*very very, patronizing.*]  
No, no. I have fallen for that trick before.  
You can no longer draw me into arguments  
Which go above your head.

SIDI: [*can't find the right words, chokes back.*]  
Give me the pail now. And if you ever dare  
To stop me in the streets again . . .

LAKUNLE: Now, now, Sidi . . .

SIDI: Give it or I'll . . .

LAKUNLE: [*holds on to her.*]  
Please, don't be angry with me.  
I didn't mean you in particular.  
And anyway, it isn't what I say.  
The scientists have proved it. It's in my books.  
Women have a smaller brain than men  
That's why they are called the weaker sex.

SIDI: [*throws him off.*]  
The weaker sex, is it?  
Is it a weaker breed who pounds the yam  
Or bends all day to plant the millet  
With a child strapped to her back?

LAKUNLE: That is all part of what I say.  
But don't you worry. In a year or two  
You will have machines which will do

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Your pounding, which will grind your pepper  
Without it getting in your eyes.

SIDI: O-oh. You really mean to turn  
The whole world upside down.

LAKUNLE: The world? Oh, that. Well, maybe later.  
Charity, they say, begins at home.  
For now, it is this village I shall turn  
Inside out. Beginning with that crafty rogue,  
Your past master of self-indulgence -- Baroka.

SIDI: Are you still on about the Bale?  
What has he done to you?

LAKUNLE: He'll find out. Soon enough, I'll let him know.

SIDI: These thoughts of future wonders -- do you buy them  
Or merely go mad and dream of them?

LAKUNLE: A prophet has honour except  
In his own home. Wise men have been called mad  
Before me and after, many more shall be  
So abused. But to answer you, the measure  
Is not entirely of my own coinage.  
What I boast is known in Lagos, that city  
Of magic, in Badagry where Saro women bathe  
In gold, even in smaller towns less than  
Twelve miles from here . . .

SIDI: Well go there. Go to these places where  
Women would understand you  
If you told them of your plans with which  
You oppress me daily. Do you not know  
What name they give you here?  
Have you lost shame completely that jeers  
Pass you over.

LAKUNLE: No. I have told you no. Shame belongs  
Only to the ignorant.

SIDI: Well, I am going.  
Shall I take the pail or not?

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LAKUNLE: Not till you swear to marry me.  
[*Takes her hand, instantly soulful.*]  
Sidi, a man must prepare to fight alone.  
But it helps if he has a woman  
To stand by him, a woman who . . .  
Can understand . . . like you.

SIDI: I do?

LAKUNLE: Sidi, my love will open your mind  
Like the chaste leaf in the morning, when  
The sun first touches it.

SIDI: If you start that I will run away.  
I had enough of that nonsense yesterday.

LAKUNLE: Nonsense? Nonsense? Do you hear?  
Does anybody listen? Can the stones  
Bear to listen to this? Do you call it  
Nonsense that I poured the waters of my soul  
To wash your feet?

SIDI: You did what!

LAKUNLE: Wasted! Wasted! SIDI, my heart  
Bursts into flowers with my love.  
But you, you and the dead of this village  
Trample it with feet of ignorance.

SIDI: [*shakes her head in bafflement.*]  
If the snail finds splinters in his shell  
He changes house. Why do you stay?

LAKUNLE: Faith. Because I have faith.  
Oh SIDI, vow to me your own undying love  
And I will scorn the jibes of these bush minds  
Who know no better. Swear, Sidi,  
Swear you will be my wife and I will  
Stand against earth, heaven, and the nine  
Hells . . .

SIDI: Now there you go again.  
One little thing

And you must chirrup like a cockatoo.  
You talk and talk and deafen me  
With words which always sound the same  
And make no meaning.  
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.

LAKUNLE: On my head let fall their scorn.

SIDI: They will say I was no virgin  
That I was forced to sell my shame  
And marry you without a price.

LAKUNLE: A savage custom, barbaric, out-dated,  
Rejected, denounced, accursed,  
Excommunicated, archaic, degrading,  
Humiliating, unspeakable, redundant.  
Retrogressive, remarkable, unpalatable.

SIDI: Is the bag empty? Why did you stop?

LAKUNLE: I own only the Shorter Companion  
Dictionary, but I have ordered  
The Longer One -- you wait!

SIDI: Just pay the price.

LAKUNLE: [*with a sudden shout.*]  
An ignoble custom, infamous, ignominious  
Shaming our heritage before the world.  
SIDI, I do not seek a wife  
To fetch and carry,  
To cook and scrub,

To bring forth children by the gross . . .

SIDI: Heaven forgive you! Do you now scorn  
Child-bearing in a wife?

LAKUNLE: Of course I do not. I only mean . . .  
Oh SIDI, I want to wed  
Because I love,  
I seek a life-companion . . .  
[*pulpit-declamatory.*]  
'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.

SIDI: [*attentive no more. Deeply engrossed in counting the beads on her neck.*]  
Then pay the price.

LAKUNLE: Ignorant girl, can you not understand?  
To pay the price would be  
To buy a heifer off the market stall.  
You'd be my chattel, my mere property.  
No, SIDI! [*very tenderly.*]  
When we are wed, you shall not walk or sit  
Tethered, as it were, to my dirtied heels.  
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.  
I will not have you wait on me  
Till I have dined my fill.  
No wife of mine, no lawful wedded wife  
Shall eat the leavings off my plate --  
That is for the children.  
I want to walk beside you in the street,

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Side by side and arm in arm  
Just like the Lagos couples I have seen  
High-heeled shoes for the lady, red paint  
On her lips. And her hair is stretched  
Like a magazine photo. I will teach you  
The waltz and we'll both learn the foxtrot  
And we'll spend the week-end in night-clubs at Ibadan.  
Oh I must show you the grandeur of towns  
We'll live there if you like or merely pay visits.  
So choose. Be a modern wife, look me in the eye  
And give me a little kiss -- like this.  
[*Kisses her.*]

SIDI: [*backs away.*] No, don't! I tell you I dislike  
This strange unhealthy mouthing you perform.  
Every time, your action deceives me  
Making me think that you merely wish  
To whisper something in my ear.  
Then comes this licking of my lips with yours.  
It's so unclean. And then,  
The sound you make -- 'Pyout!'  
Are you being rude to me?

LAKUNLE: [*wearily.*] It's never any use.  
Bush-girl you are, bush-girl you'll always be;  
Uncivilized and primitive -- bush-girl!  
I kissed you as all educated men --  
And Christians -- kiss their wives.  
It is the way of civilized romance.

SIDI: [*lightly.*] A way you mean, to avoid  
Payment of lawful bride-price  
A cheating way, mean and miserly.

LAKUNLE: [*violently.*] It is not.  
[ *Sidi bursts out laughing. LAKUNLE changes his tone to a soulful one, both eyes dreamily shut.*]

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Romance is the sweetening of the soul  
With fragrance offered by the stricken heart.

SIDI: [*looks at him in wonder for a while.*]  
Away with you. The village says you're mad,  
And I begin to understand.  
I wonder that they let you run the school.  
You and your talk. You'll ruin your pupils too  
And then they'll utter madness just like you.  
[*Noise off-stage.*]  
There are people coming  
Give me the bucket or they'll jeer.  
[*Enter a crowd of youths and drummers, the girls being in various stages of excitement.*]

FIRST GIRL: Sidi, he has returned. He came back just as  
he said he would.

SIDI: Who has?

FIRST GIRL: The stranger. The man from the outside world.  
The clown who fell in the river for you.  
[*They all burst out laughing.*]

SIDI: The one who rode on the devil's own horse?

SECOND GIRL: Yes, the same. The stranger with the one-eyed box.  
[*She demonstrates the action of a camera amidst admiring titters.*]

THIRD GIRL: And he brought his new horse right into the village  
square this time. This one has only two feet. You should  
have seen him. B-r-r-r-r.  
[*Runs around the platform driving an imaginary motor-bike.*]

SIDI: And has he brought . . . ?

FIRST GIRL: The images? He brought them all. There was hardly  
any part of the village which does not show in the book.  
[*Clicks the imaginary shutter.*]

SIDI: The book? Did you see the book?  
Had he the precious book  
That would bestow upon me  
Beauty beyond the dreams of a goddess?

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For so he said.  
The book which would announce  
This beauty to the world --  
Have you seen it?

THIRD GIRL: Yes, yes, he did. But the Bale is still feasting his eyes on the images. Oh, Sidi, he was right You *are* beautiful. On the cover of the book is an image of you from here [*touches the top of her head*] to here [*her stomach*]. And in the middle leaves, from the beginning of one leaf right across to the end of another, is one of you from head to toe. Do you remember it? It was the one for which he made you stretch your arms towards the sun. [*Rapturously.*] Oh, Sidi, you looked as if, at that moment, the sun himself had been your lover. [*They all gasp with pretended shock at this blasphemy and one slaps her playfully on the buttocks.*]

FIRST GIRL: The Bale is jealous, but he pretends to be proud of you. And when this man tells him how famous you are in the capital, he pretends to be pleased, saying how much honour and fame you have brought to the village.

SIDI: [*with amazement.*] Is not Baroka's image in the book at all?

SECOND GIRL: [*contemptuous.*] Oh yes, it is. But it would have been much better for the Bale if the stranger had omitted him altogether. His image is in a little corner somewhere in the book, and even that corner he shares with one of the village latrines.

SIDI: Is that the truth? Swear! Ask Ogun to Strike you dead.

GIRL: Ogun strike me dead if I lie.

SIDI: If that is true, then I am more esteemed  
Than Bale Baroka,  
The Lion of Ilujinle.  
This means that I am greater than  
The Fox of the Undergrowth,  
The living god among men . . .

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LAKUNLE: [*peevishly.*] And devil among women.

SIDI: Be silent, you.  
You are merely filled with spite.

LAKUNLE: I know him what he is. This is  
Divine justice that a mere woman  
Should outstrip him in the end.

SIDI: Be quiet;  
Or I swear I'll never speak to you again.  
[*Affects sudden coyness.*]  
In fact, I am not so sure I'll want to wed you now.

LAKUNLE: Sidi!

SIDI: Well, why should I?  
Known as I am to the whole wide world,  
I would demean my worth to wed  
A mere village school teacher.

LAKUNLE: [*in agony.*] Sidi!

SIDI: And one who is too mean  
To pay the bride-price like a man.

LAKUNLE: Oh, Sidi, don't!

SIDI: [*plunging into an enjoyment of Lakunle's misery.*]  
Well, don't you know?  
Sidi is more important even than the Bale.  
More famous than that panther of the trees.  
He is beneath me now --  
Your fearless rake, the scourge of womanhood!  
But now,  
He shares the corner of the leaf  
With the lowest of the low --  
With the dug-out village latrine!  
While I -- How many leaves did my own image take?

FIRST GIRL: Two in the middle and

SIDI: No, no. Let the school teacher count!  
How many were there, teacher-man?

LAKUNLE: Three leaves.

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SIDI: [*threateningly.*] One leaf for every heart that I shall break.  
Beware!  
[*Leaps suddenly into the air.*]  
Hurray! I'm beautiful!  
Hurray for the wandering stranger!

CROWD: Hurray for the Lagos man!

SIDI: [*wildly excited.*] I know. Let us dance the dance of the lost  
Traveller.

SHOUTS: Yes, let's.

SIDI: Who will dance the devil-horse?  
You, you, you and you.  
[*The four girls fall out.*]  
A python. Who will dance the snake?  
Ha ha! Your eyes are shifty and your ways are sly.  
[*The selected youth is pushed out amidst jeers.*]  
The stranger. We've got to have the being  
From the mad outer world . . . You there,  
No, you have never felt the surge  
Of burning liquor in your milky veins.  
Who can we pick that knows the walk of drunks?  
You? . . . No, the thought itself  
Would knock you out as sure as wine . . . Ah!  
[*Turns round slowly to where Lakunle is standing with a  
kindly, fatherly smile for the children at play.*]  
Come on book-worm, you'll play his part.

LAKUNLE: No, no. I've never been drunk in all my life.