Africa had been ravaged by centuries of colonial rule and in the 1950s, on the brink of Independence, Nigeria was passing through a stage of socio-economic transformation. It was an epoch in Nigerian history when Nigeria stood at the confluence of two traditions – the indigenous and the European. Ostensibly, the indigenous derived its matrix from native traditions, and the European which was viewed as a symbolic onslaught of modernity encroached upon age old norms, practices and precepts. A segment of society adhered blindly to the established concepts while the other became reluctant to be a passive recipient of ideas transmitted from generation to generation. This dichotomy threatened to evolve into a cultural chaos, as forging two cultures into a single smooth mosaic can always be a problematic proposition. Soyinka’s stance as a writer made him stand apart from these divergent stands for he believed in the healthy fusion of traditional values and modern verve. The ethos of this evolutionary period forms the subject matter of the plays of Soyinka. Drama for him became a weapon of change and his entire oeuvre inundated itself with the spirit of nationalism. In a televised discussion, Soyinka once remarked that literature, particularly theatre, was the only medium which could uplift the society and bring about a revolution within a given sociological order:

...any work of art which opens out the horizons of the human mind, the human intellect is by its very nature a force for change, a medium for change. In a black community here, theatre can be used and has been used as a re-educating process. It has been used as a form of purgation, it has been used cathartically; it has been used to make the black man in this society work out his historical experience and literally purge himself at the altar of self-realization ...theatre is revolutionary when it awakens the individual in the audiences. (Jeyifo, Conversations 16)

In the opinion of Soyinka this ‘force of change’ or ‘medium for change’ comes as consequence of a conflicting situation. Man is enmeshed in the complex social pattern of ideas and concepts. Life for him is a series of adjustments, struggles and conflicts.
The author’s commendable potential for delineating this conflict between the old and the new, covers the entire gamut of Nigerian life with religion, social taboos, education, myths, rituals and various other traditional aspects of life coming within its ambit. The universal appeal of Soyinka’s works emerges out of this very exciting and interesting confluence.

Tracing the beginnings of Soyinka’s protest in the plays written during the Nigerian pre-independence period, we find that initially in his early plays, he is not an overt reformer but one who is keen on awakening the people from their slumber. He goes on a quest of ideological alternatives for his afflicted society.

Soyinka’s plays produce protagonists of this period who are involved in a crusade against the powers that be. He was preoccupied with social justice and a hatred of oppressive institutions. He, himself said: “They said unto him, Be still / While the winds of terror tore out shutters / Of his neighbour’s home” (*A Shuttle in the Crypt* 87). Soyinka could not remain indifferent to the demand of the situation in his country.

It is part of Soyinka creed that individual effort can bring about changes. In his Seattle lecture “Drama And The Revolutionary Ideal”, he said: “It is the individual, working as a part of social milieu – and this may be a fluctuating milieu – who raises the consciousness of the community of which he was a part” (Quoted in Morell 72).

The human intellect by its very nature is a force for change and a medium for change. A conflict between the tradition and will is the beginning of Soyinka’s protest. In the plays written during the pre-independence decade, Soyinka adopts the masks of satire and parody directed against society itself and its power structures. His criticism is bound up with his metaphysics, and, in his terms, goes well beyond an attack on any particular system. It reaches towards an understanding of the fundamental basis of man’s existence. Soyinka’s work is, at this stage, basically a critique of society which develops out of metaphysical considerations.
Soyinka contends that Europeans, or Westerners, tend to see the tragic impulse as being encapsulated by a given world order at a given time and in relation to a particular individual. The African mind, on the other hand, has a tragic understanding which "transcends the causes of individual disjunction and recognizes them as reflections of a far greater disharmony in the communal psyche" (Soyinka Myth, Literature and the African World 46).

For Soyinka tragic understanding, therefore, lies in the complex awareness of the audience that human existence, which is contained within a tenuous and uncompromising physical environment, is concerned with the survival of the community and not specifically with the survival of any one individual. It is not through ethics or the moral codes of religions or through political dogmas, that this central conflict – man’s struggle with chaos – is resolved. It is the communal will expressed in the theatre by the audience, ‘willing through’ the central actor to bridge the chaos which provides this deeper understanding of man’s essential being.

For the Yoruba the balance of human life – the very meaning of human existence – consists of the dynamic correlation of the individual responsibility and the pressure of external events and forces. The protagonist in a Soyinka play is cradled and nourished by a tradition which helps him fight the foreign influences, and maintain his own moral integrity against the lethal attacks of alien culture. The model of social revolution is essentially one of recurring crises, where novel and alien forces are regularly mastered and integrated into the matrix of tradition and custom. It is to the challenge of this crisis that Soyinka commits his art of this decade and only within its context can the signature gestures of the beginnings of his protest achieve their full meaning.

In the period of 1950s, the one factor that seems to have grown in Soyinka’s mind and to have been increasingly asserted in his writing is spiritual regeneration – the need to rediscover the fundamental strengths of society and to rebuild Nigeria in a manner that is responsive to the spiritual forces that are at the heart of man’s being. The two plays of this period that I shall take up for detailed analysis are The Lion and the
Jewel and *The Swamp Dwellers*. They are subversive satiric sketches, representative of his early protests.

*The Lion and the Jewel* is a reminder of the strengths of the traditional values of the society and a shrewd and satirical challenge to modern pragmatism. *The Swamp Dwellers* is about the moral realignment necessary to make the land productive and the community whole in rural Nigeria.

In these two plays, *The Lion and the Jewel* and *The Swamp Dwellers*, there is a primordial bridge of ideological ambiguity. The fundamental thematic impulse is constant, that there seems to be a continual, restless swing between, on the one hand, a sincere and passionate quest for modernizing impulses and, on the other, a loving celebration of the exotic tropes of tradition. This rite of antithetic self revising is a potentially fatal flaw to a vocation of revolutionary commitment (Ososfisan 53-54).

*The Lion and the Jewel* is one of Wole Soyinka’s earliest plays – performed first in Ibadan, Nigeria, in 1959 and published in 1963. It has established his reputation as one of the foremost literary talents of our times. It is an effective, provocative and amusing play. It is a satirical musical comedy which uses caricature, exaggeration and simplification to provoke response and stir up discussion about the forces present in the country at the time.

*The Lion and the Jewel* is set in a typical Yoruba village Ilujinle, which is ruled by an all powerful traditional chief, Baroka. The other characters in the play include a school teacher Lakunle, who is immensely influenced by the Western ways of life and looks contemptuously at the African culture; Sidi, a typical village girl and Sadiku, the eldest wife of Baroka. Lakunle is in love with Sidi. He stands in contrast to Baroka because throughout the play, he continues the futile effort of expressing and assuring Sidi of his true love for her, but Baroka succeeds in winning her over to his side in only one scene, thereby, establishing his supremacy. Baroka is the symbol of lion, which stands for strength, power and victory whereas Sidi symbolizes the jewel, which is precious, pure and beautiful.
Some decades before the play is set, Baroka had managed to have the railway line diverted so that it did not pass near to the village and, though he has made some concessions to change – there is a school in the village and his palace staff have formed a union – Baroka is still firmly in control. Shortly, before the play begins, Ilujinle has been visited by a photographer who has taken pictures of the village, its chief and, particularly, of Sidi, a very pretty young woman, the jewel of Ilujinle and of the title of the play. The village girl inflates with pride on finding her photographs on the cover and middle page of the Lagos magazine. Through his eldest wife, Sadiku, the bale invites Sidi to dinner. When she refuses the invitation and makes a disparaging comment about the bale’s age, he sets another, more devious, plan in action; he lies to Sadiku that he has become impotent, knowing that she will pass on this news and anticipating that Sidi’s cheekiness will draw her to his bedroom – the lion’s den. The plan works, and once he has a chance to talk to Sidi alone, he woos her so subtly and plays on her vanity so effectively that he is able to seduce her. Lakunle hears what has happened; he declares that he still prepared to marry Sidi, but she will have nothing to do with him. She has, she says, “felt the strength / the perpetual youthful zest / of the panther of the trees” and is happy to marry the sixty two year old chief. The play ends with Sadiku, ‘the mother of brides,’ invoking the fertile gods and Lakunle clearing a space among the dancers for a new ‘madonna’.

The settings of the play are carefully chosen. The Lion and the Jewel opens in ‘A clearing on the edge of the market, dominated by an immense odan tree. It is the village center. The wall of the bush school flanks the stage on the right …’ This setting locates the play at the heart of the community: the busy world of the traders and the classroom through which influences will seep into the society, and under a tree known for depth and generosity of its shade. The ‘odan tree’ and the ‘bush school’ are suggestive of the fact that the village is on the threshold of a new era. The scene opens with the appearance of Sidi on the stage, amidst the chanting of the multiplication tables by the children in the school. Dressed like ‘a true village belle’ and balancing a pail on her head with accustomed ease, she appears a paradigm of African womanhood. The word ‘true’ is indicative of her authentic and unadulterated personality. Her appearance on the stage is followed by that of the Lakunle, who is
dressed up in a crumpled, ill-fitted western suit: “...old style English suit threadbare but not ragged, cleaned but not ironed, obviously a size or two too small” (CP-2 3).

This description of sartorial inelegance very clearly sheds light on Lakunle’s unformed values, incompetence and imitative style. His appearance recalls the picture of an African student in London whose superficial notion of dignity is exposed in the following lines: “My dignity is sewn into the lining of a three piece suit, Stiff, and with the whiteness which Out-Europes Europe” (Soyinka, ‘The Other Immigrant’ 184).

With a motive to look like an elegant Englishman, he lands up looking like a clown, who is not taken seriously by anyone in the village. Thus, the setting and characters in the very first scene give a picture of a society which is experiencing two diverse cultures represented by the muddle-headed sloganeering represented by Lakunle and the hard-headed conservatism represented by Baroka.

Soyinka has portrayed Lakunle as a comic character with fine airs and little sense. But there is an underlying pathos arising from the fact that he is a split personality, the separate halves of which are clearly visible. Whatever is native and indigenous is vulgar and backward and all that is new and western is refined and modern in his opinion. In fact, he is the ‘caricature’ of a modern man, who is conforming to the path of raw modernity. In an interview with James Gibbs, Soyinka once remarked: “Now Lakunle – for me he is caricature. We have caricatures like that in our society. There are walking caricatures all over the Place. The ‘been-toos’ are caricatures” (‘Soyinka in Zimbabwe’ 73).

The dramatist has deliberately chosen a schoolmaster to highlight the crudeness of modernity. A schoolteacher epitomizes learning, wisdom and the forces of progress and change. He blazes a trail in society. But by depicting a schoolmaster as a ‘caricature’ of a modern man, Soyinka exhibits the intensity of the hurricane of the raw essence of modernism, which blew over the African continent during colonialism. Jones aptly comments on the superficial concept of modernism represented by Lakunle:
It is characteristic of Soyinka to have chosen a school teacher—that symbolize progress and civilization in the literacy-hungry Africa—to satirize superficial notions of progress. It is a distortion of the playwright’s meaning to take Lakunle as a serious prophet of real progress. He is in our author’s work as an early warning against an illusion of progress which is bound to lead to confusion. For the ‘book-nourished shrimp’ Lakunle, all would have been achieved when Ilujinle had had its first cocktail party and the first school of ballroom dancing. *(Perspectives 130)*

Lakunle’s obsessive abhorrence of the native culture is reflected in his very first speech when he objects to Sidi’s carrying a pail on the head. In his opinion it is an act of uncivilized beings. He intends to teach her the finer points of polite behaviour, so as to make her his ‘modern wife’. He rejects the traditional form of marriage where bride-price is a mandatory custom. Bride-price is a custom prevalent in the polygamous society to give a sense of security to women. The village belle is a firm believer of this custom. That is why she insists that her lover pay it, if he wants to marry her. But Lakunle sneers at this custom. His castigation of the custom shows his unproductive and confused reasoning:

> A savage custom, barbaric, out-dated,
> Rejected, denounced, accursed,
> Excommunicated, archaic, degrading,
> Humiliating, unspeakable, redundant, retrogressive,
> Remarkable, unpalatable *(CP-2 8)*

This speech by the schoolmaster is highly frivolous and paradoxical. His comment upon the custom as ‘savage’ as well as ‘remarkable’ depicts his confused state of mind. The speech makes no impact on Sidi but renders Lakunle breathless. His mere imitation of the western texts affects his understanding of the native culture too. He admits that he owns only the *Shorter Companion Dictionary* and has ordered the longer one. Lakunle, therefore, stands as an antithesis of Soyinka’s idea of authentic African subject as one of the culturally alienated figures mentioned by Soyinka, suffering “from externally induced fantasies of redemptive transformation in the image of alien masters …, a victim of the doctrine of self-negation” *(Myth xii).*
There is no better evidence of the ‘self negative’ of Lakunle than his being ridiculed by the villagers as well as by his beloved and ultimately being rejected by both. All his love, praise and flattery showered upon Sidi receive nothing but a cold shoulder in return. Moreover, it is astonishing to find that all his abilities to harangue about the modern culture vanish as soon as he confronts Baroka. He appears a meek villager with ‘no complaints,’ who is forced to dance for the entertainment of the bale. His act irritates his beloved and she suggests to him to become ‘a court jester’ instead of a schoolteacher.

The pretensions on his part to appear a radical thinker by denouncing the doormat concept of wife and woman as a child-bearing machine suggests his imitation of the west rather than the real understanding of the Western ethos. In his opinion:

The world will judge our progress by
The girls that win beauty contests.
While Lagos builds new factories daily
We only play ‘ayo’ and gossip
Where is our school of ballroom dancing?
Who here can throw a cocktail party?
We must be modern with the rest
Or live forgotten by the world
We must reject the palm wine habit
And take to tea, with milk and sugar. (CP-2 34)

The characters like Lakunle, who are always condemning traditional values instead of bringing any radical transformation in post-colonial Africa, pose a threat to the society. The vignette of the young man given by the playwright further illustrates the point:

Lakunle is a poor, struggling school-teacher, hundreds of whom I know, who think they can match characters like Baroka with imperfect weapons, with half understood weapons, with notions of what modern city should be. (Gibbs, ‘Soyinka in Zimbabwe’ 74).
On the other hand, Baroka is an evidence of what Soyinka terms ‘self-apprehension’ and stands in contrast to the alienated and confused Lakunle. Being the traditional chief, Baroka holds a position of influence in the village. He is not a destroyer of trees, but a thoughtful and shrewd steward of the village. He has got the stamp machine designed in the village, after being fascinated by the idea of the postage stamp. Moreover, he has allowed his servants to form a trade union also and has conceded them a day off. This shows that Baroka is gradually responding to the winds of change which are blowing in the village. But he is more apprehensive of the disasters of progress too and intends to place any new cultural form within the traditional structure of thought and belief. In the seduction scene, he comments on the impersonal and dehumanized existence of man in a Western set up:

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 the murderous roads,
Below the humming birds which
Smoke the face of Sango…we must leave
Virgin plots of lives, rich decay
And the tang of vapour rising from
Forgotten heaps of compost…
Does sameness not revolt your being…(CP-2 47-48)

These words reflect the wisdom and vision of Baroka, who has the ability of foreseeing both aspects of progress. In these lines the very stench of decay is presented in positive terms. The imagery of the decaying vegetation of the present conveys the growth of the future. Baroka waxes eloquent while imagistically eulogizing the beauty of tradition by talking about the ‘heaps of compost, lying undisturbed on the soil’. The sameness of the land on the onset of the so-called modern progress forebodes the loss of African identity. That is why Baroka, the repository of traditional values is averse to the idea of rapid progress.

Though Soyinka has always been critical of the ancient Nigerian *hales* and chiefs, who used to lead an affluent and extravagant life, he portrays Baroka as a dynamic...
character, who is an embodiment of the positive aspects of modern and traditional values. Despite his weaknesses and connivances, the dramatist has given him an edge over Lakunle because he knows the art of surviving in a society, which is undergoing a change. The words uttered by him in the seduction scene reflect his sagacity:

The proof of wisdom is the wish to learn
   Even from Children. And the haste of youth
   Must learn its temper from the gloss
   Of ancient leather, from a strength
   Knit close along the grain. The school teacher
   And I, must learn one from the other. (CP-2 48-49)

Baroka’s magnanimity and ability to learn even from the children and the schoolmaster makes him a highly dynamic character. He even realizes Sidi of her potential unlike Lakunle, who calls her an ignorant bush girl. Thus, the victory of Baroka over Lakunle implies the triumph of the sound over the half-baked. The playwright himself comments:

I love the old man. I think he is wily, reactionary bastard, but he is so thoroughly grounded in his roots that he wins. I mean, never mind whether he is on the side of tradition or reaction, the important thing is that he has no doubt about where he comes from and where he belongs. He even knows how to manipulate, how to keep under check, in control, the putative forces of new order which threaten his being…. (Gibbs, ‘Soyinka in Zimbabwe’ 72).

All these characteristics give special status to the character of Baroka who, therefore, stands as a paradigm of Soyinka’s concept of the constructive fusion of the traditional and modern elements. He knows the art of surviving and living successfully. Despite the relentless onslaught of modernity, Baroka as the rational being with the right kind of equilibrium succeeds in retaining his position. A traditional African expression uttered by him while wooing Sidi illustrates his position:

The monkey sweats,
   It is only the hair upon his back
   Which still deceives the world … (CP-2 49)
Baroka highlights that his life is not as pleasure-loving as it is thought to be. He is undergoing a tough time where he has to make an effort to come to terms with the new developments. M. Pushpa has aptly called Baroka a ‘traditional modernist’. The quality of putting a spoke in the wheel of progress makes the *bale* a highly distinguished character. He is, therefore, an epicenter of the equilibrium between the world of antiquity and modernity.

Soyinka was also aware of the value of gesture, dance, mine and music as means of communication. These sequences are highly stylized and influenced by Yoruba conventions. In an interview entitled “Why I am a Secular Humanist”, Soyinka says, “I take most of my metaphors from the Yoruba world view”. Soyinka’s point of view is reinforced by two structural devices in the play – the division into the three scenes of *Morning*, *Noon* and *Night*, and the use of the mime sequences.

The flashback technique is effectively used. These moments are set up deliberately and clearly as little pieces on their own, and yet perfectly integrated into the whole. The device to say, in effect, lets play a game and tell this part of the story. The *bale* says of the first mime “Shall we / Resume your play?” (16); Lakunle sets up the second very much as the story teller “Did you not know it? Well, sit down and listen” (23). Sadiku anticipates the third mime by saying to Lakunle “Will you let them without giving you a special performance?” (51). It is a technique of great theatrical effect and charm and one which emphasizes the playful spirit of the whole drama.

The first part of the play, *Morning* opens with a lengthy dialogue, an exchange in which Lakunle attempts to advance his suit with Sidi. He is interrupted by the news that the photographer has brought the magazines, and by the extended dance drama sequence which follows this announcement. In the dance drama, *Dance of the Lost Photographer*, the previous visit of the photographer is re-enacted. The dance exhibits the inroads that westernization was making into the pristine Nigerian villages before independence.

The opening scene of the second part, *Noon*, moves Baroka’s plot forward, but then shifts into the past with an account, in words and actions, of how Baroka bribed the surveyor from the Public Works Department to divert the railway line in order to save
guard his domination over Ilujinle. *The Mime of the White Surveyor* highlights the corruption and cunningness of the Chief.

The third part of the play, *Night*, starts with Sadiku’s dance of triumph, moves onto the scene in which Sidi is seduced and then shifts back to the village center for Lakunle’s vigil. When news breaks of the forthcoming marriage, Lakunle is briefly bewildered and the community gathers to celebrate in a time honoured style. The marriage dance is important in establishing the final mood of the play. It follows the invocation of the ‘fertile gods’, the blessing of the bride, and a song which anticipates a rapturous fecundity. The Yoruba masque is used by Soyinka to provoke and entertain the audience, challenging them to respond to a new theatrical experience.

The mimes emphasise the continuing life of the community by taking us back into the episodes that are part of the lore of the people, events that have their consequences in the present action and which, by implication, will go on being retold and re-enacted in the future as new generations remember their roots and their traditions. The mimes are an essential element in the play, developing and enriching the action in a most effective way. Soyinka exploits this theatrical device taken from the traditional dramas of the African communities. As Joe de Graft has pointed out in his essay “Roots In African Drama and Theatre”:

> In most instances the mode of narrative expression employed in the enactment of these dramas was more mimetic than linguistic, the resultant forms being more closely bound to dance movement and music than to everyday speech and dialogue. Hence the mimetic hunters’ dances of the Khomani Bushmen and numerous other African tribes; the mimetic invocation dances of priestly cults; the simple mimetic re-enactments of snatches of legends during harvest ceremonies, festivals and funeral celebrations; and the mimetic provocation and victory dances of warriors. (481)

Soyinka has constructed his play with skill so as to intrigue and entertain his audience; he provides variety and establishes contrasts of characters and moods. Lakunle and Baroka have very different ideas about the future of Ilujinle. Baroka’s policy is highly selective; Lakunle, on the other hand, is in favour of the wholesale
adoption of the gaudy trimmings of the Western material culture. Where Baroka has
had a stamp making machine constructed and hopes to levy a tax on ‘the habit of
talking with paper’, Lakunle looks forward to an Ilujinle with a crowded social
calendar, with the beauty competitions and cocktail parties attended by ladies with
high heeled shoes, with ‘red paint’ on their lips and their ‘hair stretched like a
magazine photo’. The play contrasts the present and the past; the forward looking
moderns and the upholders of past traditions.

Baroka represents static, traditional African values. He lives lazily in his harem and
exercises his prowess with a daily bout of wrestling, stands for the tribal past of
chieftainship and old world ways of lift. Yet he is highly intelligent and a ‘survivor’;
he has listened to what the Christians’ Holy Book says; he has let the palace workers
form a union, and he has got his blacksmiths to make a printing press. He is, in his
own way, responding to the winds of change which are blowing by trimming his sails.

The Lion and the Jewel is a celebration of Baroka, his vitality and cunning, and it
recommends a syncretistic approach. A key statement of the playwright’s vision is
found in the seduction scene where Baroka argues that ‘the old must flow into the
new’. This argument pervades the form as well as the meaning of the play. With much
mime and dance, the play also has an allegorical meaning. Is Sidi the Nigerian people
who might believe in the impotence of the past but will nevertheless experience its
power? (Martin Esslin, Two Nigerian Playwrights 287).

Throughout the play, Soyinka points the action, and develops and forms the characters
through a command of language that delights us with its variety and its pertinence to
action and personalities. Soyinka’s voice, his attitudes, hopes and fears, are quite
clearly heard, for his play is a statement of a point of view as much as entertaining.

The ‘form’ of the verse in The Lion and the Jewel is irregular but imparts both
vigour and style to the characters. Lakunle’s ‘education’ is shown to have relied
heavily on a mixture of the Bible, romantic novels and Readers’ Digest as can be seen
by his references. From the Bible and the Prayer Book we get the pieces described by
the playwright as ‘pulpit declamatory’ and the contorted images that so baffled Sidi.
Lakunle: Do you call it
Nonsense that I poured the waters
Of my soul
To wash your feet?
Sidi: You did what! (CP-2 7)

Or even a more flamboyant flow:

Lakunle: My Ruth, my Rachel, Esther, Bathsheba.
Thou sum of fabled perfections
From Genesis to Revelations
Listen no to the voice of this
Infidel… (CP-2 21)

The cunning of Baroka, the bale of the village is again pointed by the manner in which he speaks – either by lulling his prey into a false sense of security or by pulling the leg of the vulnerable Lakunle. Soyinka exploits the fun that ‘pidgin’ English can offer and establishes the personality and authority of the bale in such simple little exchanges as that when Baroka disturbs the mime of the first visit of ‘the stranger’ to the village.

Baroka: Akowe, Teacher wa. Misita Lakunle.
(As the others take up the cry ‘Misita Lakunle’ he is forced to stop. He returns and bows deeply from the waist.)

Lakunle: A good morning to you sir.

Baroka: Guru morin, guru morin, ngh hn! That is
All we get from ‘alakowe’. You call at his house.
Hoping he sends for beer, but all you get is
Guru morin. Will guru morin wet my throat?
Well, well our man of knowledge,
I hope you have no
Query for an old man today. (CP-2 16)

Songs, too round off the action as they have started it. At the opening our attention is drawn to the schoolmaster by his pupils singing the ‘Arithmetic Times’. At the close
all are dancing to the praise of the newly conceived child in Sidi’s womb. We are reminded by words and actions of birth and rebirth, continuity and contentment.

The Lion and the Jewel marks the consolidation of the early efforts into a coherence of form and language that was to develop in later plays. Soyinka comments on the state of the world about him and the sour realities of power that were destroying the idyll. No one is, however, fundamentally attacked. Theatrical ingenuity and inventiveness keep the play alive and attractive.

Soyinka cares for traditional qualities of life when we see the character of bale. But he also conveys, that tradition has value to society only if it is tempered with awareness of changing times and represents vital and not static forces.

The Lion and The Jewel presents a clash between a firm rooted traditionalist and a frivolous pursuer of modernism. The victory of the former over the latter illuminates the vision of the dramatist, which is explicit in these words of the bale, who is the mouthpiece of the dramatist himself: “The old must flow into the new, Sidi / Not blind itself or stand foolishly” (CP-2 54).

These words constitute the key argument of the play. A constructive fusion of traditionalism and modernism is requisite for Nigeria to emerge as a nation of Soyinka’s dreams. Blind imitation of the glamour of modern world, by forgetting the traditional values can make the society hollow like husk. At the same time, sticking superstitiously to the tradition can also reduce human being to the status of the early man. A more forceful statement of some of the dangers implicit in the rejection of all things traditional or its reverse, that is, thoughtless clinging to traditional power may be seen in Soyinka’s later play Kongi’s Harvest (1967), a companion piece to The Lion and the Jewel.

Soyinka started writing The Swamp Dwellers (1963) after reading that oil had been found in marketable quantities in the Niger Delta. This news prompted him to think about other communities he knew which had experienced a similar access to sudden wealth and to ponder the impact of wealth on relationships in a hitherto subsistence economy. Soyinka was seeking, through a response to a news item about oil finds, an
image which would convey his concern about the social changes brought about by access to wealth. Easy money, whatever its source, destroys, as the experience of the oil boom years in Nigeria showed only too clearly.

It depicts the lure of the new generation towards the modern city life in Nigeria. It is a typical Yoruba tragedy presenting a confrontation between the protagonist, Igwezu and the inimical forces represented by superstitious practices. The protagonist stands for the rational but frustrated youth of Nigeria, who dares to protests and question the authenticity of life-stifling rituals and practices. It presents a clash between the village chief and a young teacher. It is an amusing play where Soyinka has presented a young man who adheres to all the vulgarity and superficiality of the western world and thus appears a caricature of a modern human being.

The Swamp Dwellers exhibits the great dramatist's preoccupation with the native culture, landscape, people and their beliefs, and his aversion to the superstitions and outdated practices prevalent in the Nigerian society forms the basis of the play. This short play covers a wide range of themes – a typical Nigerian village poised on the edge of change, erosion of traditional values, lure of the younger generation towards city life and superstitious practices which are stumbling blocks in the progress of Nigerian society. Interwoven with these subsidiary themes is the central theme of the play which is the collision between the old and the new in the Nigerian society.

The title of the play, The Swamp Dwellers, itself becomes self-explanatory in the context of the swampy situation faced by the inhabitants of the village. The Swamp image is indispensable for the understanding of the text. The Swamp symbolized an engulfing and besieging situation. In entangles a person and the more one tries to get out of it, the more one is sucked into it. Even the fate of a person who comes to rescue the one caught up in the swamp is quite insecure and perilous. A saviour can save the entangled person by his tenacious grip, but at the same time, it can cost him his life if he is fragile and undetermined.

In The Swamp Dwellers, the playwright has presented a swampy and miry situation both in the village as well as in the city. The life of the villagers is completely inundated with the age-old customs and beliefs. They have been blindly following the
Serpent cult propagated by the village priest, Kadiye since long. Despite facing the miseries associated with floods and paucity of arable land, they have never ever defied the commands of the priest. So, their life is entangled in the quagmire of superstition. Likewise, the city also represents a miry situation, where all the human values have eroded and nothing but materialism prevails. The basic relationships of life have lost their sanctity. A brother turns against a brother and a woman leaves her husband for a financially secure man. Both Awuchike and Igwezu’s wife, Desu symbolize the swamp of the city life. The one deceives his brother while the other breaks all the sacred ties of marriage. Eldred Jones also holds the opinion that the drain of the youth away to the city is no less than the predatory swamps. Whosoever mingles with the city life is considered lost forever in the mire of the city.

The setting he chose for the play is a hut raised on stilts above the swamps and even before the lights come up on the stage the audience is introduced to the environment in which the drama is set: there are sounds of ‘frogs, rain and other swamp noises’. The hut is constructed from ‘marsh stakes and hemp ropes’ and in it Makuri makes baskets from rushes while his wife, Alu, works on her adire cloth. This image of a couple living at subsistence level and using raw materials from their immediate environment is broken by the object which stands in the middle of the room, a barber’s swivel chair. Through the chair, Soyinka indicates that a different and distant world is making an impact on Makuri and Alu’s home. In the course of the play, he suggests that the world from which swivel chairs are sent is a source of pain, disappointment and frustration; it is a place where greed dominates, where family relationships break down and where the hard hearted prosper. Mahadeva remarks that the chair represents the ‘hostile force’, which is threatening the poor family. But this chair has much wider symbolic implications. It conveys the concern of the protagonist for his parents, who sends it to them with his first income in the city and much more than that the upholder of tradition, Kadiye faces his severest trial while seated on this modern artifact.

Soyinka tell the story of Makuri and Alu and their twin sons, Awuchike and Igwezu. Ten years before the play opens, Awuchike had set off across the swamps for the city to seek his fortune. Nothing has been heard of him since. The mother believes that her
son is drowned in the Swamps while the father does not subscribe to this view. Both
of them are awaiting their son Igwezu, who has returned to the village after about ten
years. In the village, the land is scarce and men find it difficult to earn their living in
the face of a hostile nature. The young men of the village are lured to the distant,
tantalizing life of the city. Makuri, the old man gives expression to this fact in one of
his statements: “All young men go into the big town to try their hand at making
money ... only some of them remember their folk and send word once in a while”
(CP-I 83).

Awuchike symbolizes the younger generation of Nigeria, which is vanishing into the
quagmire of modern life and has developed a disregard for cultural ties. He grows rich
in the city and has forgotten his family ties-his old parents and brother and so is
‘dead’ for them. The materialistic and uncaring attitude of Awuchike makes the old
mother over-possessive for her other son. When Igwezu gets a little late in reaching
his home from the Swamps, she becomes restless because she is deeply apprehensive
that he might not be swallowed by the Swamps. Her words reflect the fearfulness of
an emotional mother of losing her son to the Swamp: “I’m going after him. I don’t
want to lose him too. I don’t want him missing his foothold and vanishing without a
cry, without a chance for anyone to save him” (CP-I 83). She further laments: “I am
going out to shout his name until he hears me. I had another son before the mire drew
him into the depths. I don’t want Igwezu going the same way” (CP-I 83).

Some months before the opening dialogues, Igwezu had planted his fields, provided
the Kadiye, or priest of the Serpent of the Swamp, with a calf to sacrifice to the
Serpent and left with his young wife for the city. There he found Awuchike alive and
wealthy, but ‘dead’ to his parents and to any sense of family responsibility. Igwezu
had struggled and earned enough money to fulfill his promise to send his father a
swivel chair. But he had not prospered; his wife had left him for his rich brother and
he had been forced to use the harvest he anticipated from his fields as security on a
loan from the same rich and unbrotherly brother. Very shortly before the lights come
up on Makuri and Alu at the start of *The Swamp Dwellers*, Igwezu has returned home
and has almost immediately, rushed out to inspect his crops. A desolate sight awaited
him for the rains have been very heavy and the crops have been ruined by floods: the
Kadiye, who had promised protection in return for the sacrificial calf, had failed him and, indeed, the community. Far from being embarrassed or ashamed, the Kadiye, hearing that Igwezu had returned and anticipating that he had made his fortune in the city, visits Makuri’s house and asks to be shaved by Igwezu. Eventually, he seats himself in the swivel chair, thereby incautiously placing himself at the mercy of the disappointed young man. With a razor at the priest’s throat and his hand quivering rage and spiritual confusion, Igwezu pours out a stream of questions about the priest’s promises and conduct. At one moment he seems sufficiently angry to slice into the rolls of fat beneath the priestly chin. But he restrains himself and he eventually allows the terrified Kadiye to scamper away. Then he faces up to his own position and flees, knowing that the villagers will demand his blood when they hear how he has humiliated his priest.

The grossness of Kadiye’s figure is suggestive of his lack of concern for his people amidst a disastrous harvest. The beggar’s sharp perceptions sense Kadiye’s size from his voice. His question to Igwezu: “Is he fat, Master?” receives an appropriate reply: “Aye, he is fat He rolls himself like a fat and greasy porpoise” (CP-1 101). The porpoise simile is suggestive of Kadiye’s corrupt and luxurious life. He feeds upon the ignorance of villagers and is indifferent to their pain.

A religious sanction prevents the people from making good use of the small piece of land available, as it is supposed to be the domain of the Serpent of the Swamp. The elders of the village have grown up to accept this anomalous system. Whatever may be their problem, they seek the advice of the Serpent. Makuri is fanatical about the infallibility of the Serpent. When the blind Beggar suggests retrieving a small plot from the swamps, Makuri is aghast – it is sacrilege for him. “Mind what you are you are saying, son. Mind what profanities you utter in this house” (92).

Makuri makes a precise statement of the doctrine of the Serpentism: which further illuminates the dead practices of Nigerian society that have become conventions and customs and are being followed blindly through the rapidly changing times: “The land that we till and live on has been ours from the beginning of time. The bounds are marked by ageless iroko trees that have lived since the birth of the Serpent, since the
birth of the world, since the start of time itself. What is ours is ours. But what belongs to the Serpent may never be taken away from him” (93).

The younger generation questions the complete sway of the Serpent and his priest, the Kadiye. When Igwezu, Makuri’s son argues with the Kadiye, the father is apologetic and tries to explain the new found awakening in his son. The new generation is averse to the idea of a supernatural being holding sway over a major portion of the meager resources available, instead of alleviating human suffering. Eldred Jones aptly remarks about the dehumanizing effect of city life:

The spiritual death by which the young sever all familial and indeed all human ties with the village and commit themselves to a totally new life in the towns is one of the main threats to the society of the village. It is also a threat to the humanity of the emigrants, one has to develop new ways – a city heart – in order to survive in the city. (The Writing of Wole Soyinka 40)

The village here is poised on the edge of change. The sheltered life of the village is threatened with disruption by outside forces. The theme revolves around the conflicting values of the old and the young. Tradition which stifles growth is frowned upon by Soyinka. It is very clear that the Serpent is not a physical reality; it exists only as a notion in the minds of the people, who do not bother to verify the veracity of this legend. The Swamp resembles the Niger Delta Region. The cult of Serpent worship is akin to the Ijaw culture of Nigeria. The dry land of Bukanji is a reference to the more arid parts of Nigeria. The Serpent could be the Nigerian Establishment itself. Soyinka considers his country a wasteland, physically and spiritually. The Swamp has to be drained of filth and mire, and the dry land has to be irrigated. Spiritually, Nigeria has to be emancipated, heart and soul. Old religious beliefs have hindered the efforts to regenerate the land. Soyinka realized the conservatism of the system and felt the need for a desperate remedy for its revitalization.

Soyinka wrote this play in prose, in a naturalistic style; the unities are adhered to and prejudices for the well made play are not violated. But it moves on occasions towards the symbolist and melodramatic; it is a play of mood and atmosphere, constructed so as to provide with ample opportunity to make comparisons and reach judgements by
the audience, by awakening their senses. Indeed, Soyinka repeatedly makes his point through implied contrasts – a characteristic feature of much of his work.

The most obvious contrast in *The Swamp Dwellers* is between the twin brothers, who look alike, but behave very differently. A wide chasm separates the temperament of these twins. Awuchike though ‘dead’ to his parents and to any sense of family responsibility is a successful timber merchant in the city. Although Awuchike never appears in person in the entire drama, his shadow is always there. Igwezu, on the other hand, has religiously performed all the rites and has maintained his spiritual attachment to the village. Yet he meets with humiliating failure in the city and is spiritually a more devastating failure than his brother. It is, indeed, an ironical situation. Awuchike is totally detached from his moorings whereas Igwezu cherishes the healthy values of life. The former, therefore, exemplifies the Nigerian youth, which is lured by the negative aspect of modernization. He has imbibed the raw essence of the West and degrades to the extent of marrying his brother’s wife, Desu. Moreover, he has broken all the fundamental relationships – ‘the ties and the love of kinship’. Both Awuchike and Desu, therefore, exhibit the vices prevalent in the modern society, where adultery and treachery are no sins. There is also a contrast between the women in the family: the weakness and infidelity of Igwezu’s wife is set against the strength and virtue of Alu, who remained faithful to her husband, despite temptations from visiting traders.

Igwezu, on the other hand, embodies an ideal amalgamation of traditional values and modern temper. He has a progressive vision and leaves to earn a decent livelihood in the city. But he fails because he does not have that ruthless commercialism which success in the city apparently demands. He fulfils the promise of sending a barber’s chair to his father from the town as soon as he makes some money in the city. But the irony of the situation is that he meets failure on every front of life. His come-back to the village after facing betrayal from his wife and brother depicts the impact of modernization on human relations. The dejection on every front of life shatters Igwezu. The mental state of the young protagonist is reflected in his words uttered during a conversation with his father. His words illustrate the deterioration of modern man, who has devalued human relationships and has become inhuman:
When I met with harshness in the city, I did not complain. When I felt the
nakedness of its hostility, I accepted it. When I saw its knife sever the ties and
the love of kinship, and turn brother against brother… (CP-1 103)

But Igwezu’s comment is left incomplete on the interruption of Alu, who again
enquires about her other son. Igwezu then informs her about the prosperity of
Awuchike in the city, who is ‘dead’ for them and for the village. The words mark the
beginning of Igwezu’s transformation from a meek village boy to a typical Soyinkan
hero, who has developed the power of reasoning and questioning the life-stifling
practices prevalent in the traditional society.

Soyinka also introduces the major character of the blind Beggar, largely for the
purpose of establishing contrasts and comparisons. We gather that after losing his
crops to locusts, the Beggar had left his home in Bukanji and walked South, passing
quickly through ‘the city’, searching for land to cultivate. He recounts the disasters in
his home town in Bukanji, and Makuri quotes a proverb: “the hand of the gods are
unequal. Their gifts become burden of …[men]” (100). He is “tall and thin” and a
muslim, in most respects a striking contrast to the Kadiye. His experiences of
misfortune provide a comparison with Igwezu’s, and his determination to find
satisfying employment creates a pattern of endeavour which, it is hinted, the young
man may be able to follow. The play ends on a very sad note when Igwezu leaves the
village, thereby, making a clarion call to his countrymen to shed the superstitious
practices.

Igwezu and the Beggar share a kinship of spirits – both experience a crisis of faith
which leads them to doubt the existence of a just and loving God, for it looks as if the
wicked nature is laughing at human efforts. Each of them seeks an escape, but they
discover that a complete escape from nature’s afflictions is not possible. The Beggar
does not believe in the concept of giving and receiving alms as a religious injunction.
He has evolved a philosophy of progress and self reliance for it is man alone who can
alleviate his own sufferings. He decries the capricious nature of the so called
guardians of religion. He represents a new force in the play, a new way of thinking in
the hide-bound traditional society. The beggar plays a highly symbolic role in the
play. Eldred Jones equates the beggar with Jesus Christ and washing of his feet by
Alu similar to that of the washing of Jesus’ feet as described in St. Luke-7 (37-50).
Beggar is a Christ-like figure because of his iconoclastic beliefs. Despite being a lowly creature, he exhibits ample strength of character by shunning away the practice of begging as the only option left for the blinds. The beggar’s equanimity and spiritual strength is reminiscent of Jesus’ altruism and goodness. One can hardly disagree with Jones when he comment about the beggar’s role in the play: “The beggar is also Christ-like in that he enters a hide-bound traditional society and makes men being to think again” (The Writing of Wole Soyinka 41).

Igwezu, a native of the Swamp, after his stint in the city has acquired an objective perspective of his community and its beliefs. He has no faith in the concept of the Serpent and he knows well, it is the Kadiye, who exploits the people. “You lie upon the land Kadiye, and choke it in the folds of a Serpent” (110). Igwezu changes from an ignorant person into a man who has developed questioning powers, and is in a position to adopt a defiant stance. He questions the efficacy of the sacrifice itself. Makuri and his generation are not receptive to new ideas. They have achieved a compromise with the surroundings, “a fatalistic acceptance of good and evil which is a kind of peace” (Jones, The Writing 30).

Soyinka ends the play on a note of hope as the Beggar says, “I shall die here to give account.” The oil lamps go out slowly and the moonlight falls on the unmoving figure who has joined the barber’s swivel chair as a strange presence in Makuri’s room, an encouraging presence, a man of integrity, a figure who embodies some hope for the future. The blind Beggar is the beacon of light, the moral prop: “he is a broken reed, but he is the one thing to hold on to; he provides a link in the chain of hope albeit a weak one” (Jones, The Writing 117).

Soyinka reacts sharply to this kind of life – stifling rituals and traditional values. Values and notions that are constructive have to be incorporated into our mental framework. The Serpent cult is only a sham; the only beneficiary of this is the Kadiye. The older generation is hopelessly caught in the web of these blind beliefs. Igwezu’s realization and protest do not lead to a complete demolition of the traditional bulwark; they only pave the way for a moral reawakening. Exploitation of the weaker sections of the society is the order of the day in both the cities and the villages. Igwezu realizes this after his experiences in the city and the village. It is the domination of religious
beliefs and taboos in the village; in the city, it is the blatant materialism and its naked hostility. Igwezu says: “The city reared itself in the air, and with the strength of its legs of brass kicked the adventurer in the small of his back.” The above dialogue contains hints of the powerful vehicle of dramatic expression which Soyinka was to fashion out of contemporary, Nigerian English.

The society presented in the play is a three tiered one – the conservatives rooted in a sense of permanence of the traditional beliefs, the corrupt priests and his followers, and the two positive forces, Igwezu and the blind Beggar. The play is built on these balancing forces, counter-balances and paradoxes.

Soyinka shows an awareness in The Swamp Dwellers, as in later and more complex plays, of life and history moving almost in cycles. The image of the Mobius Strip, which he employs in his poem Idanre, is useful: in a sense, a cycle or revolution is complete, yet the final situation is not identical to that at the beginning of the play. We have completed a circuit of the Mobius Strip.

In its particular attention to the question of rebellion of youth against adult authority, The Swamp Dwellers resembles Soyinka’s 1965 radio play Camwood on the Leaves (1965). In both plays, Soyinka interrogates a fundamental African belief that elders should be respected and that they are a source of wisdom. These two plays also represent religious authority, their object of criticism being the corrupt African religious leadership, which employs religion as an instrument of oppression. It is the pervading sense of being trapped in an overwhelmingly oppressive social and political situation that also links these plays to Soyinka’s prison poems A Shuttle in the Crypt (1972), in which the conflict between the individual and state leads to the deprivation of personal freedom.

Soyinka is ultra-critical of such traditions as stifle the growth of the society. It is very clear that the Serpent is not a physical reality; it exists only as a notion in the minds of people, who do not dare to verify the veracity of this legend. Soyinka exhibits his creative genius by making use of rituals to convey a message in his plays. Whatever the ritual may be, the Yoruba writer has the potential of presenting a clash between
the old and the new, so as to awaken his people from a deep slumber. Commenting upon the use of rituals by Soyinka, Jasbir Jain aptly remarks.

Soyinka uses ritual in several different ways: it is part of the performance for it is not borrowed or transplanted from some other culture. It is embodied in the native dance, ceremony or festival. The African myths, beliefs, the earthiness, the attitude towards sex and procreation are woven into the thematic structure, as proverbs are woven into the lingual one. Yet Soyinka’s theatre has strong political overtones. His concerns are never far away from the question of revolution or war or civil strife, or of the ruler and the ruled, the master and the slave. (‘The African World-View’ 155)

Soyinka’s beginnings of protest in these early plays can be very aptly summed up in his own contributions to the African-Scandinavian Writers’ Conference in Stockholm, 1967. He says:

... the situation in Africa today is the same as in the rest of the world; it is not one of the tragedies which come of isolated human failures, but the very collapse of humanity.

... I am suggesting it is about time the African Writer stopped being a mere chronicler and understood also that part of his essential purpose in society is to write with a very definite vision. ... he must at least begin by exposing the future in a clear and truthful exposition of the present. (Wastberg 121)

Igwezu has been seen as the portrait of the playwright and as a sentimental hero. The Kadiye has been regarded as a grotesque villain. The play, as a whole, has been praised as an evocative study in disappointment and condemned for not preaching a positive message by showing the villagers casting off their superstitions and marching off to construct dykes and increase the amount of land available for farming.

Kadiye’s very first ostentatious appearance in the play amidst drumming sounds and praise songs depicts his status in the village. He makes ridiculous vows, like abstaining from shaving and washing until the rains cease to impress the gullible villagers. Such vows have no role in the upliftment and betterment of society. Kadiye who considers himself as the people’s protector expresses no remorse at the loss
incurred by Igwezu in the city and back home in the village. He is in reality a charlatan feeding upon the trust of people and giving them nothing but words in return. Commenting upon the fetters of superstition encouraged by the pompous and avaricious priests like Kadiye, Saleh Abu remarks:

Religion has often been regarded as a though-denying camouflage which provides a safe rostrum for leaders like the kadiye from which they exploit the people in return for no tangible material or social benefits ....Despite glaring selfishness and greed in the Kadiye, makuri and Alu remain in a state of humble service in his presence. Igwezu used to be in such a state until his eyes were opened by the city where might is right; and the flood jerks his brain into the thinking —gear on his return to the village. (21)

Practices propagated by men like Kadiye are irrational, irrelevant and meaningless. His sole objective is to hoodwink people and continue his fiefdom. The rapacious and self-seeking priest, Kadiye, therefore, represents the hollowness of traditional way of life. He dupes the guillible villagers of their money in the name of religion. The chief protagonist, Igwezu literally strips him off through his questions:

Everything which he received, from the grain to the bull?... The goat the white cockerel which I gave before I left?...And he made it clear—that the offering was from me? That I demanded the protection of the heavens on me and my house, on my father and my mother, on my wife, land and chattels?.... And ever since I began to till the soil, did I not give the soil his due? Did I not bring the first of the shrine, and pour the first oil upon the altar? (CP-1 109)

Belief in tradition should uplift the society but a tradition which accounts for the frustration and suffering of people has to be questioned. The Soyinkan hero having the potential of shaking the edifice of superstition and questioning the legitimacy of power of Kadiye is Igwezu. When Kadiye comes to Makuri’s hut for getting a shave, he confronts the anguish of the young man. The upholder of tradition is made to sit rather uncomfortably in the chair, an artifact of modern world with a razor held over his chin. It appears a severe kind of trial for him. Kadiye is bamboozled by a fusillade of questions from Igwezu:
Who must appease the serpent of the swamps? Who takes the gifts of the people, in order that the beast may be gorged and made sleepy eyed with the feast of sacrifice... Why are you so fat, Kadiye?... If I slew all the fatted calf, Kadiye, do you think the land might breathe again? If I slew all the cattle in the land and sacrificed every measure of goodness, would it make any difference to our lives, Kadiye? Would it make any difference to our fates?

These words become symptomatic of emotional and psychic anarchy, which rages in the mind of the protagonist. The turbulence is so intense that he loses control and pulls off the façade of the priest. But his audacity in questioning the sincerity of Kadiye cannot go unpunished in the society which is inundated in dogmatism and blind-faith. The Kadiye’s threat, once he is free, ‘You will pay, I swear it ... you will pay’ is not an empty one. Igwezu’s father knows its import, so he suggests to his son to go back to the city until it is forgotten. Oyin Ogunba interprets this daring act of the protagonist as atheism, which has developed out of his dejection on every front of life:

Igwezu’s atheism in this play is a product of circumstances, not an inherent godlessness. His attitude, in fact, raises an important topical question, namely, what does one do with gods who refuse to be modern or even frankly oppose modernism? His answer is simple: reject them. And in this Igwezu is not alone nowadays, although he is alone in the play. If Serpent of the Swamp refuses to change, Igwezu will be willing to remind him that he is a mere snake. But Igwezu fails – he is, in fact, too passionate to succeed. This, however, is not a triumph of tradition – it is rather an indication of the magnitude of the task ahead. (‘Modern Drama in West Africa’ 99)

Ostensibly, Igwezu’s questions have set the tone and ambience of a change in the village. He, therefore, emerges as the torch-bearer of society and enables the hide-bound swamp dwellers to reconsider their acts and beliefs. After this triumph over Kadiye, the beggar addresses Igwezu us a ‘slayer of serpents’. The Serpent has not been completely slain but his regime has been shaken for the first time. But the price,
which Igwezu has to pay for awakening the people from the somnambulistic state is his migration to the city.

An equivocal and intricate ending is a typical Soyinka style. Igwezu’s return to the city, which had once before reared up and kicked him with its legs of brass, is a pathetic situation. Critics have interpreted the move of the protagonist as a hopeless situation.

There is no room for hope in the play, as the whole country seems to suffer from natural disasters and even in places like city, where nature is not so capricious, there are socially produced sources of deprivation which rob someone like Igwezu of even imagining his personal and community’s fortunes changing for the better. He belongs to a generation which can look neither to tradition nor to the modernity offered by the African city for ethical moorings, since both are being mediated by greed and rapacious materialism… (Msiska 59)

But in the seemingly hopeless situation in The Swamp Dwellers there is hope. The endeavour of the hero to shake the very roots of complacency cannot go futile. There is someone to whom Igwezu can leave the farm; someone who has faith enough to say: “The swallows find their nest again when the cold is over. Even the bats desert dark holes in the trees and flap wet leaves with wings of leather … I shall be here to give account” (CP-I 112).

These words uttered by the blind beggar are full of optimism and symbolize renewal and a kind of resilience. Swallow is a migratory bird, which triumphs over the cold weather. The words of beggar regarding the swallow become synonymous with the symbolic resurrection of the chief protagonist Igwezu, who ultimately like a swallow shall conquer hopelessness, despair and despondency, and stage a come-back with a note of renewal, hope and faith. In these words, Soyinka offers to the reader an innovative paradigm of the much needed and progressive amalgam of traditionalism and modernism which anytime can prove beneficial and productive vis-a-vis a particular race, culture or sociological ethos. The case of the personages in The Swamp Dwellers especially as applying to the protagonist Igwezu is no exception.
In *The Swamp Dwellers*, Soyinka presents a collision between two forces represented by Kadiye and the duo of Igwezu and the blind beggar. Kadiye is the representative of the antiquated beliefs while the duo advocates the newfangled. Both Igwezu and the blind beggar are iconoclasts and refuse to bow to the tyranny of tradition – a tradition, which is misused and exploited by the mischievous like Kadiye.

Thus, Soyinka’s two plays, *The Lion and the Jewel* and *The Swamp Dwellers*, representing his earliest form of protest, cover a wide range of topics and characters. The domination of will and the will to power and knowledge, power mongers as predators, the opportunists, are some of his characters astride his wide canvas. He dramatizes the conflict and correspondences between city and village: tradition and modernism, conflicts of ideas and visions, of illusion and reality. At the same time, he evolves a clear perception of his future as a playwright who employs the idiom of African art to create a theatre which is responsive to contemporary events.

In *The Lion and the Jewel*, Soyinka advocates the maintenance of harmony with the tradition and forbids to stray far off like Lakunle, who has imbibed the crudeness of modernism. In this play written at the infancy of Soyinka’s literary career, we find his protest at its mildest – a satirical comment on the society which is on the brink of modernism. *The Swamp Dwellers* preaches reason and logic to voice against the life-stifling rituals, propagated by priests like Kadiye. The playwright wants to make the people aware of the blind faith and dogmatism which had enveloped the Nigerian society since ages. His protagonist, Igwezu, who is an ideal amalgamation of tradition and modernism, therefore, takes the uphill task of shattering the edifice of superstition.

A blind adherence to tradition cripples the society. The assertion of the individual will and its struggle against establishment therefore, marks the beginning of Soyinka’s protest. This point is well illustrated in his poem *A Shuttle in the Crypt*:

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A time of evil cries
renunciation of the saintly vision
summons instant hands to tear
All painted masks … (21)
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In the following chapter we move from the period of colonial rule to Nigeria’s Independence in 1960. Tearing the ‘Masks of Protest’, which was only a subtle form of protest, Soyinka adopts a more overt way of awakening the people, thus paving the way to the ‘Beginnings of Dissent’.