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Sundiata

“Sundiata: an epic of old Mali” is an African tale transferred by the griots to the modern generation. The story has been authored by Djibril Tamsir Niane and shed lights on the leadership qualities of Sundiata, who was born after a prophecy about his splendid qualities and leadership skills. He was born to the king of Niane, who married an ugly woman, as he was told the prophecy that she would give birth to his son who would set new examples of leadership and would rule a significant part of the African region. The story has been preserved in the literature through the oral as well as written sources and being told to the future generations to help them explore their exemplary forefathers. The story of Sundiata is captivating because he does not disappoint as a character. He goes through many difficulties, resistance from family and even exile but he is able to emerge from all that victoriously and he is able to save his people. The use of supernatural forces may shed light on the heroic status of Sundiata; however, becoming close with strangers, getting favors from them and utilizing his wisdom to rule over the people are some of the aspects which define his leadership skills and style.

One of the most important aspects of the personality of Sundiata, which played an important role in refining his leadership skills and qualities, was the use of supernatural powers. The critics are of the view that most of the characters in the fictional stories have the supernatural powers, which help them to achieve their aims and goals and the character of Sundiata is no exception in this regard. Deme describes in his article that “Sundiata’s association with mystical powers can be traced back to his mother Sogolon Kedjou, the buffalo woman. His supernatural powers and his consequent royal destiny are rooted in the double nature of his mother Sogolon (Deme, 36).” One of the most important things to acknowledge in this regard is that he only used the supernatural powers to fight against his enemies and defeat them. He just wanted to get the victory for his people and did not use the powers for his personal gains. He was completely different from his stepbrother, who not only used the supernatural powers for his personal gains, but aloes tried to use them for the purpose of oppressing and killing people, in order to exert his power on them (Hay, 15).

The character of Sundiata represents the true hero as he was able to rise through all the difficulties and problems thrown his way and still stood tall and served his people. He was born to an ugly mother and could not walk on his feet till he was seven years old and he was brutally victimized by his stepmother for the first decade of his life. His willpower and the strength to prove him can be noted from the fact that he was not able to walk on his feet till he was seven years old; however, he could not see his mother getting embarrassed by his stepmother due to his inability to walk. So he decided to walk on his own and was able to do so, by initially taking the help of crutches and then without them as well. After the death of his father, he left his homeland along with his mother and siblings, as he did not want to be on the mercy of his stepmother, as well as create the problems for the rule of his stepbrother. However, his heroic nature is evident from the fact that when the people of his native land needed his support, he was there to fight the battle on their behalf. This is actually a clear description of what the readers always expect from a character, which is said to be a leader. The people of Niani had reached to the point where they acknowledged that they needed Sundiata and only he had the ability to help them in their predicament. This shows that as a character, he gets to be the chosen hero for everyone. Niane mentions in the story that “Maghan Sundiata, I salute you; the king of Mali, the throne of your fathers awaits you. Whatever rank you may hold here, leave all these honours and come and deliver your fatherland. The brave awaits you, come and restore rightful authority to Mali (Niane, 45).”

Another remarkable aspect of the personality of Sundiata was that he was able to win the favors of strangers. There are a number of other characters in history, as well as in fiction, who were able to cast their spell on the strangers and become comfortable and close with them and Sundiata is also one of them as used to gain favor wherever he went. Irrespective of the fact that he was in his country or in a foreign land, he used to get the liking of the people. One of the most important examples in this regard is that when he left his land and started roaming to other countries with his mother and siblings, he impressed people with his way of speech and thinking. King Mema was one of his admirers who offered him to stay at his land and prepare to get the rule. However, when the people of his native land needed him against the odds, he asked the permission from the king, who did not want him to go, however, eventually ordered his army to go and fight with him. Talking about the leadership skills of the Mali Empire, Oyler has mentioned in his article that “In the Sundiata epic, individuals from the royal and noble lines of the Mali Empire demonstrated leadership for the speakers of Mande languages (Oyler, 81).” It was one of the most important aspects of the leadership qualities of the people of that region that they used to win the favours of the strangers by their polite and dignified language and speech.

Another important aspect of the personality of Sundiata which depicts his leadership is his wisdom. He was able to pass the test of the witches who were sent by his stepmother to trick or test him. He instead was quite kind and generous to them and they told him that they could not bring any harm to him. He dealt them with great wisdom which is the most important reason that instead of providing him harm, the witches told him that they would serve him, and they are not capable of causing any harm to him, even if they want to do so. The wisdom and leadership skills of Sundiata are also evident through his war tactics. He always tried to assess the strategy of the enemy forces and then plan his own. Such an attitude and leadership enabled him to go against the counsel of the chiefs who told him to wait till the next day to attack the king. However, he had another plan in mind. He defied the ideology of the chiefs of counsel and attacked the enemy at night, instead of waiting for the next day. By doing so, he was able to catch them off guard and overpower them. On the other hand, if he had waited for the next day to launch the attacks, the enemy forces would have become vigilant and gave him a tough competition (Niane, 38).

 The character of Sundiata was able to depict his leadership through his ruling style as well. When he got the control of his native land, by fighting off the enemy forces, he did not try to exert his power on the general public. However, he dealt with the scenario with great wisdom and divided different countries among different people and allowed them to opt for their rulers. A few critics share the point of view that he was able to learn this wisdom through the years of his life in exile. Hale has compared his character with other heroes and shared that

“Several critics have suggested a number of reasons rooted in the parallel between Laye's exile from Guinea in 1966 because of conflict with the regime of Sekou Toure and Sundiata's exile from Niani in the early thirteenth century because of Queen Berete's desire for her own son to become king (Hale, 793).”

He was able to develop his leadership skills over the course of years, through his experience of living life in exile and learning from the training of king of Mali. He was able to win the heart of his people and rule over them while taking care of their needs and wishes (Niane, 47).

Sundiata is one of the most remarkable characters of the African literature, which has been preserved through the oral and written traditions. The story of Sundiata has been transferred through the words of griots. He had a heroic personality and had exemplary leadership skills and wisdom. Due to his leadership qualities, he was able to lend a hand of support to the people who had turned their back towards him after the death of his father. Still, he developed into a great leader and proved the prophecy right.

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