

Portrayal of African women in Soyinka's *The Lion and The Jewel*

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Abstract

Women are not only discriminated within social or political circles but also in language. Women are represented through men's ideologies. The use of gender-biased language portrays women as inferior to men and that's why they are treated as second-class citizens in a society. If this norm continues then women will be forever invisible in political, social, and economic dialogue. Language should have been used showing all people are equal, and no one deserves to be discriminated as such. The representation of women in African literature remains a focal point in contemporary literary criticism. This paper examines how African women are portrayed in *The Lion and The Jewel* by Wole Soyinka, using a feminist critical lens to investigate the gender-aware perspective presented in the play. The study reveals a significant gender disparity, with women frequently depicted as subordinate in various aspects of life. It also underscores the ongoing dominance of male authority in many African patriarchal settings, where women continue to face marginalisation—particularly in rural communities where traditional practices still uphold gender inequality.

Keywords : African women, gender bias, patriarchy, conflict

Introduction

Feminist literary critique is a transformative movement initiated by feminists to challenge the portrayal of female identity and experiences through masculine perspectives, with the aim of promoting female awareness and understanding. Feminist critique, as described by several scholars, examines the portrayal of women in texts written by males. It involves the political and argumentative analysis of male literature and masculine culture from a feminist perspective, with a focus on women as readers. Feminist theory serves as a framework for examining literary texts through the lens of gender and for formulating interview questions. According to Tyson (2006), feminist critique is the analysis of how literature and other

cultural works either support or challenge the economic, political, social, and psychological subjugation of women. Feminist criticism is commonly employed to analyse how gender roles in literary works either mirror or challenge conventional gender roles. Feminist critics employ this theory to enhance our comprehension of women's experiences, both historically and contemporarily, and to foster our recognition of women's significance in society. Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and The Jewel*, written in 1963, is set in the context of postcolonial Nigeria, a period characterized by profound social transformations. Through the characters of Sidi and Sadiku, the play stages the tensions between African traditions and Western modernity in a Yoruba village. The representation of women becomes a privileged lens to explore the cultural and social conflicts of the time. Wole Soyinka portrays women in the play *The Lion and The Jewel* as being entangled in the conflict between traditional values and contemporary ideals. Women, represented by Sidi, have no agency in determining how they should lead their life. This is due to the fact that individuals are deprived of autonomy by both of these conflicting ideologies. The title of the play provides a clear indication of the portrayal of women: the "jewel" refers to Sidi, a beautiful lady who is objectified and desired by two specific males. The individuals in question are Baroka, an elderly man known as the "lion," and Lakunle, a young school teacher who has received a Western education.

Major Thrust

The title *The Lion and The Jewel* serves as a metaphor for the main conflict in the play. The "Lion" refers to Baroka, the Bale of Ilujinle, who symbolizes strength, dominance, and traditional authority. As the head of the village, Baroka's role is central to maintaining the cultural and social order. His pursuit of Sidi represents the power dynamics of the past-where women were considered valuable possessions to be controlled and managed by men in positions of authority. The "Jewel" represents Sidi, the young woman whose beauty and youth make her a highly desirable object. Throughout the play, Sidi is treated as a prize to be won by both Baroka and Lakunle, though neither man views her as a fully autonomous person with her own desires. The "jewel" also symbolizes how women, especially in patriarchal societies, are often valued primarily for their physical appearance and their ability

to perpetuate male-centered ideologies. Lakunle, a supporter of colonial rules, and Baroka, a personification of masculine authority, are both shown in this story. Despite having an unfair connection with Sidi and seizing her for himself, people in Ilujinle culture still see Baroka, the Bale of 63, as a revered person. Both of them demonstrate their agreement with the way things are done in Ilujinle culture by remaining silent when Baroka attempts to seduce them. By holding a ceremony to recognize Baroka's dominance, the whole community further supports the patriarchal traditions. It demonstrates how women were made use of in post-colonial Nigeria as a haven from patriarchy.

From a feminist perspective, *The Lion and The Jewel* critically examines the roles that women are expected to play within both traditional and modern Nigerian societies. The main woman character in this play is Sidi. Both Baroka and Lakunle consider Sidi as a beautiful prize which each of them want to win over. And another woman character- Sadiku is the first wife of the bale, who is a strong independent women, limited by the patriarchal society she lives in. Lakunle, although advocating for modernity, still upholds patriarchal views about women. He criticizes Sidi for her adherence to traditional practices, such as carrying a water pail on her head, and believes that by "educating" her, he can transform her into a modern woman who meets his Westernized ideals. Marginalization of women as bare property is one of the major themes in *The Lion and the Jewel*. This theme begins to unfold from the discussion between modern Lakunle and Sidi as the play begins. Lakunle does not want Sidi to carry the pail of water on her head as he knows that *it is bad for the spine* (TLTJ, p. 2). He fears that it may dock her neck. Lakunle tries hard to move Sidi that he does not *seek a woman to bring and carry, to cook and drop and to bring forth children by the gross* (TLTJ, p.7 & 8). However, his understanding of modernity is superficial, as he fails to challenge the underlying gender inequality that exists in his society. His focus is on reshaping Sidi into an idealized version of a modern woman, rather than recognizing her autonomy. Lakunle's modern testament conforming of the equating effect of marriage is of no use to Sidi who considers Lakunle wild. Sidi will not marry Lakunle because the ultimate harbourages to pay the "bride- price", an obligatory demand being in their traditional testament. The idea of "bride-price" makes it clear that women in Ilujinley are traditionally seen as bare property which can be bought or sold, accumulated or consumed. Indeed the modern Lakunle is not free from this constricting testament when he thinks that it will be easier for him now to

marry Sidi once she has lost her chastity, since no “bride- price” is demanded in such a situation. So it is, as if, a matter of buying a fundamental girl. Likewise, modern Lakunle can't restrain himself from inferring that the men are stronger sex and the women are weaker sex when he looks down on Sidi for having a “lower brain”. Baroka, on the other hand, represents the traditional patriarchal values of the village. He sees women as tools to further his power and legacy, and his desire to marry Sidi is part of his effort to maintain his control over the village's traditions and gender norms. His manipulation of Sidi reflects the ways in which women's bodies and choices are controlled by patriarchal structures, whether in the form of traditional customs or the modern ideologies that seek to "transform" them. While Sidi is initially attracted to Lakunle's modern ideals, her eventual submission to Baroka underscores the complexities of gender roles in postcolonial societies. The play reveals how women, even when seemingly empowered by new opportunities or modern ideas, are still bound by societal expectations and the dominant patriarchal systems that seek to control them. Sidi's journey from independence to submission highlights the struggles faced by many women, as they navigate the conflicting demands of tradition and modernity. The strategic intelligence of the female characters is particularly evident in their manipulation of male desire. When Sidi finally confronts Baroka, she uses her supposed naivety as a weapon: *Oh Bale, tell me more. I do not understand these things. I am a simple village girl* (TLTJ, p. 55). This performance of innocence, delivered with subtle irony, represents what Mae Henderson (1994) calls masking, a survival strategy in which women consciously play with the stereotypes imposed upon them. The magazine brought by the outsider to Ilujinle also plays an important part as to inform us of the real position of women in Yoruba. Sidi was just a simple village girl long before the magazine arrived, but the appearance of the magazine featuring prints of the village and its dwellers, including three full runners showing images of Sidi gives her a sense of power. It gradually becomes the source of her power over the course of the play, especially because of the way it depicts her beauty. It makes a sharp distinction between Sidi and Baroka disrespecting the ultimate by including only a small picture of him next to a restroom. Sidi is more important than Baroka only in terms of her beauty which will ultimately be enjoyed by Baroka himself. Thus, though the magazine seems to suggest that Sidi is more important, it also lowers Sidi's status to a bare object that can be consumed, accumulated, used, and indeed distributed by others. Thus the magazine becomes a symbol of

women's actuality and their real value in Ilujinle; indeed when they believe they are gaining power, they are still treated just as objects which can be consumed and controlled by others.

Lakunle is looking down on women by saying that women have smaller brains than men. This implies that women's thinking capabilities are lower and limited. He says he got it from his books and scientists proved it. The statement is biased as all people's brains are equal regardless of the person's sex. He continues by saying that, because he believed that women have smaller brains and this made them to be called the weaker sex. That notion has been embedded in society for the longest time and it affects women negatively, especially in holding high and leading positions and decision-making even in their households. It is believed that only men can hold high positions and make great decisions in their families. In *The Lion and The Jewel*, men are associated with the most important jobs compared to their female counterparts who are described and associated with stereotypical jobs. The males are discussed in terms of their strength and trustworthiness.

Conclusion

The women in the play are presented as predominantly passive, second-class, and man-dependent, beset by rural backwardness, and endowed with little intellectual or agency power. They are largely confined to the traditional roles of caretakers and small traders, since men occupy seats of authority, decision-making, and intellectual leadership. Such a gendered division reflects a more pervasive societal structuring that prioritizes masculine authority and maintains female voices marginalized. In the play, *The Lion and The Jewel*, Lakunle considers himself superior due to his education in Western countries. He harbours a condescending attitude towards female characters, particularly Sidi and Sadiku. He considers them to be primitive because they lack education and continue to uphold traditional customs such as bride-prices, which he views as barbarous and characteristic of uncivilized societies. He desires to alter Sidi's attire and intends for Sadiku to attend school at the age of seventy. This demonstrates that women are represented through men's ideologies. Patriarchal ideologies in different societies in the world have fuelled the crisis of stereotyping women through their literary texts. Therefore, women are mostly affected because society deems them inferior. Furthermore, it is found that women are depicted in a negative and objectifying

manner compared to men. Sidi's beauty is likened to the radiance of sunlight and the delicate freshness of morning dew. Sidi's journey highlights the intersection of tradition, gender, and power, revealing how women's roles are constructed and constrained within cultural and colonial legacies.

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