

# A Study of Wole Soyinka's play from the Feminist Point of View

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## Abstract

*This paper is focused on the exploration of female exploitation in Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* in the context of postcolonial Nigeria. This paper tries to explore how Wole Soyinka posits feminist rebellion in his play. It also focuses on different kinds of injustice and harassments women undergo in the non- Western world. The text shows how the female suppression and exploitation continues even after the abolition of colonial rule in Nigeria. The original text of *The Lion and the Jewel* of Soyinka has been taken as a primary source of data for the qualitative research and feminism has been used as a theoretical tool for the analysis of the text.*

**Keywords:** *Suppression, Feminism, identity crisis and domination.*

## Introduction

Wole Soyinka, born in 1934 in Abeokuta, Nigeria, is a towering figure in the world of African literature. He is renowned for his powerful works that engage with complex issues surrounding identity, politics, and culture, particularly in the context of postcolonial Africa. As a playwright, poet, essayist, and activist, Soyinka has made significant contributions to the global literary scene. His diverse body of work addresses the intersections of African tradition and modernity, often critiquing both indigenous leadership and colonial legacies. Soyinka's works explore themes of power, individual freedom, social justice, and the complexities of postcolonial identity. He is celebrated for his ability to blend traditional African storytelling with modern forms of theater, and his works often reflect his critical stance against oppressive regimes.

In 1986, Soyinka became the first African laureate to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, a recognition of his contribution to literature and his courageous activism. Among his most influential works are plays like *A Dance of the Forests* (1960), *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), and *The Man Died: Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka* (1972). One of his most notable works, *The Lion and the Jewel*, first performed in 1959, reflects the cultural tensions of postcolonial Nigeria and offers an incisive commentary on gender, power, and societal expectations.

*The Lion and the Jewel* is a comedic play by Wole Soyinka that takes place in the village of Ilujinle, Nigeria. The central conflict revolves around the competition for the affections of Sidi, a young woman whose beauty has made her the subject of attention. The two primary male characters vying for Sidi's hand are Lakunle, a Western-educated schoolteacher who represents modernity and progress, and Baroka, the traditional and manipulative Bale (village chief), who represents the old ways.

Lakunle, the modernist, seeks to marry Sidi and "civilize" her, hoping to transform her into a woman who embraces Western notions of modernity, such as wearing high heels and using cosmetics. In contrast, Baroka, the traditional leader, desires to marry Sidi to uphold the cultural values of the village, including polygamy and the patriarchal system. Sidi initially rejects Baroka's advances, attracted instead to Lakunle's vision of modernity. However, as the play progresses, Sidi finds herself entangled in Baroka's scheming, ultimately yielding to his manipulation. The play highlights the tension between tradition and modernity, gender dynamics, and the commodification of women as objects to be won and controlled.

The female characters in the play, especially Sidi, are positioned at the crossroads of these conflicting ideologies. Sidi's evolving relationship with Lakunle and Baroka represents the internal struggle faced by many women in postcolonial societies, where traditional values and modern ideals often clash.

### **Defining the Title: The Lion and the Jewel**

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.

The title, therefore, encapsulates the key themes of the play: the objectification of women, the power struggle between traditional and modern systems, and the commodification of Sidi as a "prize" to be claimed. It also speaks to the tension between external appearances (symbolized by Sidi's beauty) and the deeper power dynamics at play, where women are caught between competing forces that seek to define and control them.

### **Feminist Perspectives in *The Lion and the Jewel***

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" (*The Lion and the Jewel* 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" (*The Lion and the Jewel*, 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 harborage 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 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.

## Conclusion

Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* presents a nuanced exploration of gender, power, and the societal constraints placed on women. Through the characters of Sidi, Lakunle, and Baroka, Soyinka critiques the commodification of women in a patriarchal society, illustrating how women are often valued based on their physical appearance and their ability to conform to male ideals.

The play offers a powerful feminist critique, showing how both traditional and modern systems of power continue to restrict women's autonomy, even in the aftermath of colonial rule. By highlighting the tension between tradition and modernity, Soyinka challenges us to reconsider the ways in which gender inequality persists, regardless of the ideological frameworks in place. *The Lion and the Jewel* remains a relevant and insightful work that continues to speak to the struggles of women in contemporary societies.

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