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# Between Modernity and Tradition: Patriarchy and the Limits of Women's Agency in Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*

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## Abstract

The struggles for emancipation of women in postcolonial societies are still entangled in the remnants of patriarchy in modernising and traditional social systems. This tension is the theme of Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* as the conflict between Lakunle and Baroka and the conflicts of Sidi and Sadiku come to the fore. This study is based on postcolonial feminist criticism and focuses on the effects of cultural authority, gender expectations and social conventions on women's decision making. Lakunle challenges the traditionalism of his people but his modern attitude does not necessarily imply women's independence. Likewise, Baroka's traditional authority poses questions on the issue of cultural continuity and the control of the traditional system over women. Sidi and Sadiku show that women are able to assert their preferences, challenge their social roles, and assert their agency without necessarily breaking through the structures that limit them. The play thus challenges the dichotomy of modernity and tradition, and it doesn't seem to imply that either always or exclusively leads to gender equality. Emancipation of the women must be accompanied by real autonomy in social relations and institutions that affect women's lives.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial feminism, women's agency, patriarchy, modernity and tradition, Wole Soyinka

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## Introduction

Political independence does not necessarily mean that everybody in society is granted the freedom. While decolonisation may provide a chance for cultural renewal and for the development of a national identity, social hierarchies can persist as a structuring force in life. Sometimes, the constraints are felt by women even though their society professes to uphold its culture or work towards modernisation. Post colonial feminist criticism looks at these contradictions by challenging the colonial images of women and the gender disparity in post colonial societies (Mohanty, 1984). It also brings to the fore the problems of representing women whose lives are conditioned by certain cultural and historical circumstances (Spivak, 1988).

These issues can be explored in the context of literature in Wole Soyinka's The Lion and the Jewel. The play is about the clash between Lakunle, a schoolteacher educated in the West and Baroka, the village Bale, in the Yoruba village of Ilujinle. A young woman, Sidi, whose beauty is irresistible to the men, comes to the fore of their competing claims. Some of the conflicts that occur in the play between modernisation and traditional authority, questions involving the choice of women, their status and independence are highlighted through these characterisations (Soyinka, 1963).

But the conflict cannot be seen in terms of modernity versus tradition. Lakunle's opposition to some of the customs does not imply his dedication to women's freedom; and Baroka's power creates an issue of the connection between cultural practices and gendered power. The play is ripe for a postcolonial feminist interpretation because of these tensions that allow for an examination of the ways in which women's agency is affected by various systems of authority.

This paper explores how *The Lion and the Jewel* depicts the constraints of the power of women in the struggles of multiple colonial, modernising and patriarchal structures of power. It maintains that rejecting tradition and/or maintaining cultural identity does not automatically lead to the emancipation of women. The paper examines how women negotiate power in the social structures that shape their options in Sidi and Sadiku, by reading closely.

## Literature review: Postcolonial Feminism and representation of women

Post-colonial feminism looks at the connection between colonial history, gender relations and the social institutions which continue to shape women's lives today. It challenges the notion that colonialism is the only reason for oppression of women and highlights the inequalities within postcolonial society. Taking this view, political independence and cultural revival are not necessarily accompanied by gender equality. There

may be continued restraints on women based on customary, social and male dominated institutions. Mohanty (1984) calls into question notions of women from other cultures and eras as a monolithic class. Her argument is helpful for literary analysis as it leads to a focus on the specific social context in which women are empowered and negotiate their identities.

Another representation is a significant issue in postcolonial feminist criticism. Spivak (1988) explores the challenges of representing marginalised subjects, and asks whether their voices can be heard without reference to the structures of power they are contained in. The approach used in literary studies is to ask the reader, as well as the question of whether women speak or act, whether they have an impact on the results of the story. A female character can disagree or challenge male authority, and be held responsible for social structures that determine her position. Thus, a strong female character is not enough to constitute a literary text to be considered as a complete liberation of the female.

These are issues that are applicable to Wole Soyinka's The Lion and the Jewel. Using postcolonial feminist criticism, Adhikary (2020) observes the play and elaborates on the role of Baroka and Lakunle as patriarchs, and the role of Sidi and Sadiku. This reading highlights the dangers of modernity as an alternative to patriarchy by itself. It is not a given that the Western education that Lakunle received and his criticism of customary practices means his attitude towards Sidi is not bound by gendered assumptions. Likewise, the traditional leaders of Baroka raise doubts on the independence of women in a given social system.

The present paper builds on these discussions by exploring the agency of women in the context of representation, gender and contestation over cultural power. It does not presume that one tradition or one modernity provides a total answer, but rather, how tradition and modernity can limit women's options. This strategy can be used to analyse specific characters, like Sidi and Sadiku, as they interact with power outside and in the Ilujinle social structures.

**Theoretical Framework: Gender, Representation and Postcolonial Authority**

This paper applies postcolonial feminist criticism in the analysis of the work *The Lion and the Jewel* by Wole Soyinka with a view to understanding how gender and authority are manifested in the play. It is a framework that has three related issues: the representation of women, the relationship between cultural authority and gender, and the difference between expressing agency and achieving independence. These ideas share the reasons why women's freedom is not just about their capacity to speak, disagree and make individual choices.

Firstly, Representation. Mohanty (1984) asks us to consider the problem of the stereotyping of women in different societies as one and a same. This argument helps to understand Sidi and Sadiku within the context of what they said. One should not assume that all women are subject to patriarchy, and should instead look to the social relations and cultural norms that are given in the play to understand the characters' experiences. They are also of different ages: Sidi is a young woman who has many people paying attention to her beauty, Sadiku, on the other hand, is in a different position, as Baroka's senior wife and the bearer of his power.

The second issue is that of gender and power. Spivak (1988) points to the problems faced by those who are marginalised when their voices are being mediated by the dominant structures. Thus, in the play it is crucial to consider not just whether Sidi and Sadiku are able to speak, but how much impact their speech and actions have on the choices made that impact their lives. They say yes or no and that doesn't mean that they can decide the outcome.

The third is on the issue of modernity & tradition. Lakunle poses some obstacles to some of the village traditions, while Baroka embodies the existing customary powers. But, the juxtaposition of them does not necessarily create a juxtaposition of gender oppression and women's liberation. Their statements rather need to be analyzed by their attitude and behaviour to women and their expectations of women.

The play then makes use of these ideas to make the case for the agency of women in the play, but argues that it is bounded. Sidi and Sadiku react to the structures which surround them, but their ability to be independent is constrained by the gynocratic relations of Ilujinle. This framework will be used in the subsequent close reading of the texts Lakunle, Baroka, Sidi and Sadiku.

**Modernity and Tradition: Lakunle's Competing Claim to Authority**

The Lion and the Jewel: Lakunle is a type of modernity that has been shaped by Western education and European social values in the work of Wole Soyinka. He is a school teacher who critiques some of the practices in Ilujinle, and suggests that he has the ability to guide the village to a different future. Opposition to the bride-price required in marriage seems to be challenging a social practice. But his modern attitudes don't mean that he advocates women's independence. His interaction with Sidi shows that he has been in conflict with some customs and yet he has accepted women as an individual with the right to make her own decisions in life (Soyinka, 1963).

This contradiction is at the heart of Lakunle's offer to Sidi. He will not pay the bride-price, arguing that it is a "tradition" which is "outdated. However, his argument isn't solely about Sidi's wants. He often preaches about his own conception of the modern way of things, and the proper role of women in marriage. His anti-traditionalism is thus a means of asserting himself against Sidi. He does not simply take for granted the village way of life, but tries to substitute his own notion of respectable womanhood and marriage.

A contradiction is important from a postcolonial feminist view point. Mohanty (1984) warns against the uniformity of women's experiences and their isolation from their particular social context. This view would lead to a separation between the image of progress and real growth in women's options when implemented to Lakunle. His schooling and condemnation of traditionalism could imply social change, but it does not necessarily mean that he values Sidi's independence.

So, Lakunle engages in the opposition of modernity and tradition. Baroka's traditional leadership, and Lakunle's westernized perspective seem to clash, but both men want to shape Sidi's destiny. The play asks the reader to consider whether the substitution of the traditional authority by a modernising male voice is enough to bring women liberation. In Lakunle, Soyinka offers a reflection on modernity as a condition rather than an inevitable route to emancipation, and as a condition that needs to be interrogated for its beliefs regarding gender and power.

**Baroka, Customary Power and the Regulation of Women**

Baroka is a representative of the established customary authority in Ilujinle in The Lion and the Jewel. He is a village Bale, whose social status and influence enable him to mould the relationships in the village. His authority is different from that of Lakunle's, with ideas that are influenced by the West; however, this is not a direct correlation to more freedom for women. In seeking out Sidi, Baroka poses questions regarding the relationship of male authority, marriage and women's autonomy in making choices for their lives (Soyinka, 1963).

Baroka's attraction to Sidi is her beauty and her increasing fame due to her pictures being published in a magazine. With her rise to fame comes a feeling of self-worth, but also the attention of a strong older man. The contrast shows that women do not necessarily have control of the situation they live in when they are recognized socially. Sidi can become a status figure through public representation, but Baroka has the means and influence which Sidi does not have equally.

The gendered organisation of customary authority is also seen in Baroka's relations with Sadiku. Sadiku is his senior wife, and has a recognised role in his household. She also is involved in his attempts to get Sidi to marry him. Her participation does not give her enough power, but enough to have some influence and her influence is within a system, where Baroka still acts as the central authority. The role of the powerful man, in this case Sadiku, makes it difficult to draw a clear line between powerful men and powerless women—women can wield power and yet be part of the system that restricts the power of other women.

In a similar vein, Adhikary (2020) explores the patriarchal dynamic that is depicted through the characters of Baroka, Lakunle, Sidi and Sadiku. The present analysis builds upon this interpretation, which recognizes the difference between cultural authority and ethical legitimacy. Baroka is not the norm; his actions are not in and of themselves good or just for women. Also, his opposition to Lakunle is not an alternative that is based on gender equality.

Baroka's character thus provides a challenge to the notion that cultural continuity is automatically associated with the protection of women's agency. The play places customary authority as an important element in the village, and calls into question the nature of customary authority in the relationships between men and women. But it is not just about the survival of tradition, it is about whose, and how much freedom for women.

**Sidi and Sadiku: Female Agency, Resistance and Its Limits**

Sidi and Sadiku play a significant role in comprehending the existence of women in Wole Soyinka's novel The Lion and the Jewel. Both characters live in a society that is dominated by men, but they react differently to the society. Sidi's photographs feature in a magazine and now she is more confident; Sadiku now has a role in the home as Baroka's senior wife. As their experiences show, women can be active agents without having the power to control the social conditions that shape their lives generally (Soyinka, 1963).

When Lakunle proposes to her, Sidi responds to his proposal by showing her preferences. She won't do his bidding just because he says it's modern or progressive. Her reluctance to accept marriage without bride-price is related to her social perception of marriage and its significance in the village. This position may seem like it maintains a traditional practice, but it's also a sign that Sidi is not always willing to take Lakunle's idea of progress. Her choices defy the notion that a man has the authority to determine what is good for a woman, and that it comes from Western education.

But Sidi’s self-assurance does not exempt her from being influenced by the power of patriarchy. Her public exposure makes her aware of her beauty and social status, but at the same time it is a way in which Baroka approaches her. It is therefore important to have a

voice versus control over the consequences of one's decisions. Sidi can stop Lakunle but when she comes face-to-face with Baroka, she discovers the constraints of her power in the village's social economy.

Sadiku's is another type of female agency. She is not only an inactive member of Baroka's family. She becomes excited when she believes that Baroka has lost his virility, and tells Sidi and builds her up. However, Sadiku's act is still linked to the status quo of the marital system. Her influence is not a rejection of this system per se, but rather a working inside and sometimes a reproduction of these expectations.

The characters can be discussed in the light of Spivak's (1988) concept of representation and marginalised voices. They are heard and their voices are heard; they are not removed by their speech and actions the barriers of their choice. Sidi and Sadiku must then be considered neither incapable of doing anything nor totally free. Soyinka's account of female agency is of a negotiation with authority, where resistance can be made but where results are not guaranteed.

**The Ending: Marriage, Consent and the Limits of Liberation**

Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* is a play that is focused on the role of women, and its conclusion is critical to its understanding of the role of women. Eventually, Sidi decides to marry Baroka, after meeting him, and Lakunle hopes he will marry Sidi. This result makes the seemingly contradictory between modernity and tradition more complex. Lakunle challenges the conventional ways but doesn't get the marriage of his dream. Baroka, however, holds on to his seat, and gets what he wants. The end therefore is a call to the reader to think through the nature of male authority in various cultural positions (Soyinka, 1963).

Do not believe Sidi's decision to be proof that she has no agency. She tells her likes, dislikes, rejects Lakunle's proposal on her own grounds and is proud of her popularity. But her last option is set in a social context where there is unequal power relations. The crucial question isn't whether or not she decides, it's how she will be affected by the process of making her decision that will determine her options. A postcolonial feminist perspective, then, can view Sidi's ability to act and challenge the question of what this means for freedom.

The ending also goes against the belief that modernization leads to equality for women. Lakunle's Western schooling does not ensure that his ideas of Sidi are not patriarchal. Baroka's success, however, does not prove that customary authority provides more independence for women. Both the roles are not a clear example of emancipation.

It may be helpful to keep in mind Spivak's (1988) discussion of representation, which suggests that having a woman's voice does not necessarily imply that the structures which influence her position have been eliminated. When applied to the play, this distinction provides insights into the nature of Sidi's action and why it can be understood without denying the inequalities which surround it.

The conclusion maintains the conflict between personal decision and social restrictions. In Soyinka's play, the battle between modernity and tradition is not a simple one and instead questions the circumstances necessary for meaningful female autonomy. Women's liberation is not just about a change in the authority over women's lives, it's about a consideration of the power dynamics that inform women's decision-making.

**Conclusion**

In *The Lion and the Jewel*, Wole Soyinka portrays a complex dynamic in a postcolonial society between gender, cultural authority and the agency of women. The play's characters, Lakunle, Baroka, Sidi and Sadiku, challenge women's emancipation in modernity and the protection of cultural identity by tradition, which is merely accepted. The ideas of modernization and customary law are both factors that affect women's decisions, but in different ways (Soyinka, 1963).

Analysis of Sidi and Sadiku shows that women are not completely passive in these structures. They voice their wishes, adapt to situations and have an impact in their roles. Their actions, however, are not always able to end the inequalities that affect their lives. The critique of generalised representations of women by Mohanty (1984) and the discussion of marginalised voices by Spivak (1988) explain why the agency of women needs to be explored in the context of their specific social context and the power relations with which they are engaged.

In conclusion, the play explores the notion that freedom is not just about breaking away from tradition or taking up modernity. Its portrayal of women's agency illustrates the distinctions between personal options and social influence to shape women's outcomes. The structures of women's lives, however, must be taken into account as well as freedom of action and speech: a meaningful understanding of emancipation must reflect the freedom they have to live independently.

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