

## Research Article

### THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE LION AND THE JEWEL BY WOLE SOYINKA: BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY

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#### ABSTRACT

This study explores the representation of women in *The Lion and the Jewel* by Wole Soyinka by analyzing the interaction between traditional Yoruba culture and modernity. By examining the characters of Sidi and Sadiku, the study explores the complexity of gender roles, resistance strategies, and the negotiation of power within patriarchal systems. Drawing on postcolonial and African feminist frameworks, the article demonstrates how Soyinka's work offers a nuanced perspective on the socio-cultural tensions in postcolonial Nigeria and contributes to the discourse on gender and modernity.

**Keywords:** Gender, Resistance, Tradition, Modernity, Postcolonialism.

#### INTRODUCTION

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.

This study seeks to answer the following question: How does Soyinka represent women in a context of tensions between tradition and modernity, and to what extent do his female characters embody the complexity of the sociocultural issues in postcolonial Nigeria? To address this question, our analysis is based on postcolonial feminist theories, particularly the works of Chandra Mohanty, who critiques the universalism of Western feminism and emphasizes the importance of specific cultural contexts; Gayatri Spivak, whose concept of the "subaltern" allows for an examination of women's voices and agency in postcolonial contexts; and African feminist theorists such as Oyèrónkẹ Oyèwùmí, who challenge the direct application of Western feminist concepts to African contexts. This study is structured into four main parts. The first part examines the roles of women in traditional Yoruba society through the character of Sadiku, the chief Baroka's first wife. The second part analyses the conflict between modernity and tradition as represented by Baroka and Lakunle, with Sidi as the central figure of this conflict. The third section focuses on the strategies of resistance and affirmation employed by the female characters against patriarchal structures. The fourth part assesses the contemporary relevance of this feminist analysis and its contribution to understanding gender issues in African literature.

This study aims to demonstrate how Soyinka, through his female characters, reveals the complexities and contradictions inherent in the processes of modernization in the African postcolonial context. This analysis will also shed light on how women negotiate their identity and power at the intersection of traditional and modern systems.

#### TRADITIONAL SOCIETY AND FEMALE REPRESENTATION

In the traditional Yoruba society depicted by Soyinka, women's positions reveal a complexity that defies conventional Western feminist interpretations. This complexity is particularly evident in the character of Sadiku, whose traditional role illustrates what Oyèwùmí (1997) describes as "multidimensional social hierarchies."

Sadiku's assertion of authority as the first wife is eloquently expressed when she declares to Sidi: "I have been fooled by a stronger woman than you [...] I who have led a lion by the nose, I, Sadiku, first among the wives" (*The Lion and the Jewel*, p. 37). This statement is rich in symbolism and implications. The metaphor of the lion, echoing the play's title, is particularly significant: by claiming to have "led the lion by the nose," Sadiku asserts power over the masculine, represented by the lion/Baroka. The repetition of "I" and its final positioning, "I, Sadiku," underscores her affirmation of a strong identity. However, this authority remains paradoxically defined by her status as a wife ("first among the wives"), illustrating the limits of her power within the patriarchal system.

This paradox is confirmed when she explains her role to Sidi: "It is the practice. The eldest wife always brings the message to the new bride. I did it for all the others" (p. 24). The use of the terms "practice" and "always" highlights the ritualized and institutionalized nature of her role. The phrase "I did it for all the others" reveals the cyclical dimension of this practice, wherein Sadiku perpetuates a system that both imprisons her and grants her power. This ambivalence corresponds to what Steady (1981) identifies as the "hierarchical complementarity" of gender roles in traditional African societies.

The ritual dimension of female power reaches its peak in the victory dance scene. Sadiku exclaims: "Dance with me Sidi. Tonight we dance the dance of the strong breeds [...] The lion has lost his teeth" (p. 46). This scene is particularly revealing in its symbolism. The reference to "strong breeds" suggests a lineage of strong women, creating a feminine genealogy of resistance. The metaphor of the toothless lion symbolizes the symbolic castration of male power. The dance itself becomes an act of codified subversion, which Nnaemeka (1994) identifies as a "negotiation space" where women can express

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their resistance while remaining within culturally acceptable boundaries.

This collective and intergenerational dimension of female power is also evident in the transmission of knowledge. When Sadiku advises Sidi: "Listen to me, child. I was a bride myself and I know a thing or two about men [...] The wisdom of years is not worn like a necklace of cowries" (p. 29), her speech reveals multiple levels of meaning. The use of the term "child" establishes a hierarchy based on age and experience, distinct from the patriarchal hierarchy. The comparison with the "necklace of cowries" suggests that feminine wisdom is deeper than outward symbols of status. This transmission of knowledge constitutes, according to Amadiume (1987), a "parallel system of power" that allows women to maintain a form of autonomy.

This analysis of the interactions between Sadiku and Sidi thus reveals the complexity of the traditional Yoruba system in its management of gender relations. While the framework remains fundamentally patriarchal, it provides spaces for female power and expression, whether ritual, social, or related to the transmission of knowledge. These spaces allow women to negotiate their positions and maintain a form of agency, even if limited. This complex system is profoundly disrupted by the advent of modernity, creating new tensions but also new opportunities for the female characters.

## TRADITIONAL SOCIETY AND FEMALE REPRESENTATION

The conflict between modernity and tradition in *The Lion and the Jewel* crystallizes particularly around the character of Sidi, whose body and identity become the battleground where two worldviews clash. This tension first manifests through the episode of the photographs in the foreign magazine, which profoundly transforms Sidi's status in her community.

When Sidi discovers her photo in the magazine, her reaction is revealing: "I know I am more beautiful than the cover of Life magazine [...] My face adorns the city more than the Bale's own. More than his work on the prison and the railways" (p. 17). This declaration warrants a thorough analysis. The comparative phrase ("more than") establishes a new hierarchy where feminine beauty competes with traditional male political power. The contrast between her face and the symbols of colonial modernity (prison, railways) suggests an alternative form of power. However, as Mohanty (1984) notes, this new form of recognition remains problematic because it relies on the objectification of the female body through the Western gaze.

The tension between tradition and modernity becomes even more explicit in the confrontations between Lakunle and Sidi regarding the bride price. Lakunle vehemently declares: "A savage custom, barbaric, outdated, rejected, denounced, accursed, excommunicated, archaic, degrading, humiliating, unspeaking, redundant, retrogressive, remarkable, unpalatable" (p. 7). The accumulation of derogatory adjectives reveals the violence of the colonial modernizing discourse. Sidi's response is particularly significant: "They will say I was no virgin that had to be locked away. For who will pay the price of a woman worthless? If you make me a laughing stock, if you do that to me, Lakunle, I will run away from your house" (p. 9). This reply shows how the bride price, far from being merely a marker of oppression, constitutes for Sidi a marker of social value and respectability, illustrating what Nnaemeka (1994) calls the "strategic negotiation" of women with traditional practices.

The conflict reaches its climax during the confrontation between Sidi and Lakunle over the nature of modern marriage. Lakunle proposes his vision: "In a year or two, you will have machines that will do your

pounding, your cooking, your washing [...] We shall buy them all. I shall install electricity [...] No wife of mine shall eat wood ash and sit on the floor" (p. 31). This promise of technological modernity conceals another form of domination, where the woman remains defined by her domestic tasks, even if these are mechanized. Sidi's ironic response: "Are you really sure you want a wife? I think you only want a kitchen maid" (p. 32) exposes the persistence of patriarchal structures beneath the veneer of modernity. This tension between tradition and modernity becomes even more complex in the interactions between Sidi and Baroka. The Bale, although a representative of tradition, demonstrates a more subtle understanding of power dynamics. During their final confrontation, he declares: "I do not fight progress, Sidi. But like a tortoise, I bring my house with me" (p. 53). This metaphor of the tortoise is particularly revealing: it suggests an adaptation that preserves cultural essence, unlike the radical break advocated by Lakunle. Baroka's attitude toward modernity is strategic, as illustrated by his monologue about the printing press: "I want to print my stamps [...] Before the stranger can learn to speak Yoruba, I want to speak his language" (p. 47). This approach, as Biodun Jeyifo (2004) notes, represents a form of "negotiated modernity" that contrasts with Lakunle's superficial modernism.

Sidi's reaction to these two male models reveals the complexity of her position. When she confronts Baroka, she declares: "The school teacher may be a fool, but he speaks the truth about you. You are the serpent in the tree of life, waiting to strike the unwary" (p. 51). The use of biblical imagery is significant: it shows how Sidi navigates different cultural registers—traditional and modern—in her resistance. This ability to navigate between different systems of reference corresponds to what Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) calls the "hyphenated identity" of women in postcolonial contexts.

The conflict reaches its culmination in Sidi's final decision to marry Baroka after being seduced, provoking this reaction from Lakunle: "Ignorant girl, can you not understand? To preserve the tribal heritage... But to preserve the past is to ensure decay" (p. 63). Sidi's response is revealing: "You did not miss your target, Bale. But neither did you hit it. The game is yours, but the score is mine" (p. 64). This complex statement suggests a form of victory within apparent defeat. As Carole Boyce Davies (1986) analyzes, Sidi's decision can be interpreted not as mere submission to tradition but as a strategic choice in a context where options for emancipation remain limited.

Modernity, as embodied by Lakunle, thus proves to be a false promise of emancipation. His progressive rhetoric conceals a still-patriarchal vision of gender relations, as revealed by his final reaction to Sidi's "fall": "Now I can marry you. We shall be equals then" (p. 63). The irony of this statement is biting: it is precisely the loss of her virginity that, according to Lakunle, renders Sidi "equal," thus exposing the prejudices underpinning his purported modernity. This critique aligns with Gayatri Spivak's (1988) analysis of how colonial modernizing discourse can reproduce the structures of oppression it claims to combat.

## RESISTANCE AND FEMALE ASSERTION

In *The Lion and the Jewel*, female resistance manifests through complex and often subtle strategies. The female characters, particularly Sidi and Sadiku, develop what Patricia Hill Collins (1990) calls "everyday survival strategies" that allow them to negotiate their power within the patriarchal system.

Sidi's initial refusal of advances from her two suitors illustrates a first form of direct resistance. When Lakunle attempts to kiss her, she reacts sharply: "Stop it! Do you hear? My bride-price must first be paid... Or do you think that Sidi is just another of your dance-and-

romping village girls?" (p. 8). This assertion warrants a deeper analysis. The use of the third person ("Sidi") to refer to herself suggests an acute awareness of her social status. The reference to "dance-and-romping village girls" establishes a social hierarchy that Sidi strategically uses to assert her value. As Obioma Nnaemeka (1997) highlights, this insistence on the bride price does not merely represent adherence to tradition but a conscious use of social norms as a tool for negotiation.

Resistance is also evident in the strategic use of language and irony. When Sidi confronts Baroka, she employs particularly incisive discourse: "The Fox of the Undergrowth, The Lion of the Long Grass. Does the leader of the hunt not need strong teeth?" (p. 48). The use of Baroka's honorific titles in a mocking context constitutes what James C. Scott (1990) identifies as a "hidden form of resistance." The play on animal metaphors traditionally associated with male power allows Sidi to subvert the symbols of authority while remaining within the boundaries of acceptable discourse.

The ritual dance scene between Sadiku and Sidi represents a crucial moment of female solidarity and collective resistance. Their celebration of Baroka's supposed impotence takes on a carnivalesque dimension:

"Sadiku: [Dancing] The lion himself, more torpid than a tree... Sidi: [Joining in] Like a python when he's fed... Sadiku: No strength left in his teeth... Both: [Circling together] The lion has lost his claws!" (p. 46)

This performance illustrates what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the "carnavalesque," a moment when social hierarchies are temporarily overturned. The collective use of animal metaphors ("lion," "python") and the imagery of masculine impotence create a temporary space of liberation. As Florence Stratton (1994) analyzes, these moments of female festivity represent "temporary zones of autonomy" where women can express resistance through culturally sanctioned forms. This resistance also manifests through the conscious manipulation of social codes. Sidi's reaction to her own image in the magazine illustrates a sophisticated form of negotiation with modernity: "These images you can see, they are mine... They are me, and not just the flat paper-thinness which you foreigners have brought" (p. 20). This statement is significant on multiple levels. By claiming ownership of her images ("they are mine"), Sidi refuses to be merely objectified by the Western gaze. The distinction she establishes between her real self and the "paper-thinness" demonstrates what Chandra Mohanty (1991) identifies as a critical awareness of colonial representation.

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" (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.

Resistance also takes on a collective dimension through intergenerational female solidarity. The exchange between Sadiku and Sidi about male weaknesses reveals this aspect:

"Sadiku: Men are all the same. They take, they take, but they never know when to stop. Sidi: Even the Bale? Sadiku: Especially the Bale. I have seen four generations of his kind" (p. 42).

This transmission of female knowledge constitutes what Amadiume (1987) describes as a "parallel knowledge system," enabling women

to maintain a form of autonomy within the patriarchal system. The reference to "four generations" underscores the historical depth of this female resistance.

Finally, Sidi's decision to marry Baroka, far from being a simple defeat, can be read as a complex form of strategic resistance. Her final statement is revealing: "Why did you not tell me it was so sweet? Now I know why women take lovers... Now I have tasted..." (p. 63). By openly claiming her sexual pleasure, Sidi subverts expectations of female modesty. As Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) argues, this assertion of female sexuality represents a form of resistance to patriarchal norms that seek to control the female body.

## CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF FEMINIST ANALYSIS

The feminist analysis of *The Lion and the Jewel* remains remarkably relevant for understanding contemporary gender dynamics in Africa and beyond. The complexity of Soyinka's female characters offers a particularly effective lens for examining current challenges to female emancipation in postcolonial societies.

The question of cultural authenticity in the face of modernization, central to the play, resonates strongly with contemporary feminist debates. This is evident in Sidi's confrontation with the different value systems seeking to define her: "You and your good! Your good is not my good. If you like the good, go, marry it. Leave me to choose my own good" (p. 33). This assertion of autonomy in value choice aligns with what Oyèwùmí (2003) identifies as the central challenge of contemporary African feminism: the necessity of defining female emancipation in culturally relevant terms.

The critique of the false dichotomy between oppressive tradition and liberating modernity remains particularly pertinent. Sidi's sophisticated manipulation of different power systems illustrates what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2014) describes in *We Should All Be Feminists*: "Culture does not make people. People make culture. If it is true that the full humanity of women is not our culture, then we can and must make it our culture." This perspective is evident in Sidi's response to Lakunle regarding Western education:

"What are books? What is the profit in them if they will not tell me how to handle a man, how to guard my fame, my pride, my new-found power?" (p. 40).

This question about the practical utility of Western knowledge in addressing women's daily realities remains relevant to debates on education and female emancipation in Africa.

The resistance strategies deployed by the female characters also provide relevant models for contemporary feminist activism. Sadiku's ability to use traditional structures to create spaces of resistance illustrates what Patricia McFadden (2005) calls the "radicalization of traditional spaces." This is particularly evident in her manipulation of ritual: "The women's dance is not for men's eyes. It is sacred to us" (p. 47). This claim to exclusively female spaces as sites of resistance remains an important strategy in current feminist movements.

The contemporary relevance of the play is further reflected in its representation of intergenerational tensions within African feminism. The dialogue between Sadiku and Sidi anticipates current debates on the transmission of female knowledge: "What can you teach me? The world has changed. What served you might have me laughed out of the village" (p. 38). This statement by Sidi illustrates what Amina Mama (2001) identifies as the "generational conflict of African feminism," where young women negotiate between the legacy of their elders and new forms of emancipation.

The modern critical reception of the work continues to evolve, particularly through the lens of new African feminist movements. The ambiguity of Sidi's character in facing her available choices finds particular resonance in what Pumla Dineo Gqola (2021) calls the "constant negotiation of female agency." This complexity is evident in Sidi's declaration: "Let me be. The time of my choosing is not yours. My wish was to wait, to let the news spread throughout the land. To let the world know my worth" (p. 52). This assertion of temporal autonomy resonates with contemporary discussions on "feminist time" and resistance to social pressures.

The play's influence on contemporary African feminist literature is evident in its nuanced portrayal of power dynamics. Sidi's subtle manipulation of male expectations: "You thought I was but a foolish village girl, someone to be fooled and toyed with... See how the tables have turned" (p. 58), anticipates what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie describes as the "strategic performance of gender" in contemporary patriarchal societies.

The relevance of the work also extends to debates on intersectionality in the African context. Sidi's navigation between different forms of oppression—traditional, colonial, and gendered—illustrates what Sylvia Tamale (2020) calls the "complex matrix of African oppressions." This complexity is evident in her confrontation with Lakunle: "Your good is not my good. Your school-knowledge proves itself worthless before the wisdom of our elders" (p. 43). This critique of Western universalism remains central to contemporary African feminist debates.

Finally, the play continues to contribute to discussions on African modernity and the role of women in its definition. Sidi's final reflection on her choice illustrates this complexity: "The old must flow into the new, Lakunle. The new is not always better, just as the old is not always wise" (p. 61). This nuanced perspective on social change resonates with recent feminist scholarship on rethinking African modernity through the lens of gender.

The representation of women in *The Lion and the Jewel* continues to offer a relevant framework for analyzing contemporary challenges in African feminism, from negotiating power to defining a culturally anchored modernity.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of women's representation in *The Lion and the Jewel* by Wole Soyinka reveals a complexity that transcends the simple dichotomy between tradition and modernity. Through the characters of Sidi and Sadiku, Soyinka presents a nuanced vision of female resistance and affirmation strategies in a postcolonial context. The women in the play are neither passive victims of tradition nor unconditional receptacles of Western modernity but active agents who strategically negotiate their social positions.

The persistence of the questions raised by the work testifies to its continued relevance to contemporary feminist debates in Africa. The play invites us to rethink the modalities of female emancipation by taking into account cultural specificities and the diverse forms of resistance possible. It suggests that the real issue is not so much the choice between tradition and modernity but the ability of women to define the terms of their liberation themselves.

## Competing interests

"The Author has declared that no competing interests exist."

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