

## The African Literary Text *'The Lion and the Jewel'* by Wole Soyinka From Feminist Perspectives

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### Abstract

The portrayal of women in African literature continues to be a subject of active attention in the field of literary criticism. This paper aims to analyse the representation of African women in *The Lion and The Jewel* by Wole Soyinka. The study adopts a feminist criticism approach to explore the increasingly gender-sensitive perspective depicted in this literary work. The primary objective is to highlight the inaccurate depiction of women in male writing and how they are striving to draw images of women and their agency in society. Findings showed the gap between genders by presenting them as unequal in all spheres of life. The prevalence of male supremacy and sovereignty is still a reality in some of the African patriarchal societies and women still suffer at the expense of men, as patriarchy still exists especially in rural areas where some cultural practices marginalise women.

**Keywords;** African literature, gender perspective, literary criticism, patriarchy, Women's portrayal.

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## Introduction

Patriarchal institutions, in which women are subordinate to men and their opinions are not given the same weight, are a common practice in African nations. Nigerian women encounter gender stereotypes due to their gender alone, as they were nurtured in a patriarchal nation. Many well-known writers and playwrights' historical and literary works exhibit these prejudices. The writings of authors frequently reflect their own social classes. The writers' political consciousness and class interests inform their viewpoints. Therefore, the writer's philosophy and consciousness level have an impact on how women are portrayed in African literature. African literature, frequently depicts the demands that society places on women by a society that is predominantly controlled by men. Hence, each writer's view of women varies based on their political consciousness at the time of writing. Through his engagement with a wide range of literary works, man is shown as having experienced every facet of life, including participating in a multitude of activities and coming across both the good and terrible elements. Wole Soyinka is one playwright who best demonstrates this; her plays portray women in stereotyped ways that mirror the pervasive sexism in Nigerian society. Consequently, the primary goal of this study is to shed light on Soyinka's play *The Lion and the Jewel* in order to investigate how male writers attempt to depict women and their agency in society through their portrayal of women in their works. The research question raised here is what is the portrayal of women in Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*? It is supposed that sexism is apparent in his plays due to the presence of discriminating language that portrays women as inferior.

### 1. Literature review

According to Darweesh & Ghayadh (2016) it is despite fiction's attempts to universalize transitivity, male and female characters are typically portrayed as having control over their own circumstances and fate, with the female character being helpless and passive and determined by fate and unavoidable. Through his engagement with a wide range of literary works, man is shown as having experienced every facet of life, including participating in a multitude of activities and coming across both the good and terrible elements. Likewise, Darweesh & Ghayadh (2016) state that even though literature attempts to universalize transitivity, men and women are typically portrayed as the masculine. African novelists and poets claim that men stand for strength, judgment, and control over women in order to authentically convey their feelings about the restrictions placed on women's lives. It should come as no surprise that a lot of literary stereotypes of women display some common traits, like passivity, subordination, lack of defined shape, selflessness, and character narrowness.

Africa's most renowned playwright, Akinwande Oluwole Soyinka, won the book prize for literature in 1986. Before moving to Nigeria, Soyinka worked on a variety of projects in Britain. The most renowned playwright in Africa, Haninde Oluwole Soyinka won the book prize for literature in 1986. Before moving to Nigeria, Soyinka worked on a variety of projects in Britain. He has been asked to write a play commemorating the country's 1960 independence. Soyinka has consistently highlighted his African ancestry and customs. He was involved in politics throughout the Nigerian Civil War from the start. He was placed in solitary confinement for two years because he was not anti-Biefra enough to accept the government; he was only liberated following a significant and successful worldwide campaign. Soyinka is a modern dramatist Gibbs (1981) declares that he was influenced by a Western occasion in 1950s; he has an international audience. His techniques are that of a satirical. He criticizes many aspects of his society. As McDowill's opinion, "*Soyinka makes use of fascinating devices in his own experimentalist plays: dancing, singing, speeches in verse (poetry), flashbacks and characters from the spirit world*". He implies techniques similar to Nigerian festivals and utilizes any poetic methods which re-enforce the emotional and intellectual impact of his drama. Among his plays *The Lion and The Jewel* that includes different themes.

Although Soyinka drew inspiration from traditional theater, he also used Yoruba mythology for his content. "I come from a society that is very rich in theoretical tradition, and I saw the traditional forms of theater from a young age, so it became a logical means of expressing some of my most deeply felt intuitions," the man stated. This play is divided into three parts, in the first part there is a conflict between two ways of living progress and modernity represented by Lakunle, the schoolteacher, and tradition represented by Sidi the village belle. There is an assuming struggle between the young Lakunle and the Bale; both wanted Sidi. Wole Soyinka is not against progress, but he is criticising the false notion of progress and civilization because Lakunle was attracted by Western way of life. He wants to turn Sidi into a sophisticated lady, for instance, by using the red lip-stick and wearing high shoes. tion are taken from books and not based on experience. He is like a parrot, just repeating words taken from many books including Bible. The Bale, Baroka is polygamous, illiterate, he has much privilege, and he is not silly. At the Lakunle is going to be defeated by the Bale. Throughout the play Soyinka wanted to say the superficial progress leads to confusion. Sidi is mature, her actions are based on experience, contrary to Lakunle.

### ***1.1 The structure of the novel***

The structure of the first part 'morning', the first part is divided into two parts. It is from page one to page eleven, there is discussion between Sid and Lakunle, then the girls and drummers enter the scene. Here, we notice Soyinka's punctilious interest in music sounds and rhythm as it's shown in this part. It also gives a description of both characters Sidi and Lakunle. Lakunle is always represented like a laughing stock everybody makes fun of him (In relation to his way of dressing) as he is described as a parrot because he repeats words from books ; he lacks maturity and experience whereas Sidi is different, mature and her actions are based on experience. The second part 'noon', in this part, Sadiku, Baroka's headwife, tells Sidi that the Bale ants her as a wife. She said to her that the Bale invited her to have dinner with him. Baroka refuses change because the latter destroys his on privilege and traditions; he stresses that progress is confusion. In this part there is the use of mime and singing. Also, Sidi did not consider Lakunle as a man (p. 2); her attitude did not change though Lakunle is kind with her. Lakunle is an unlucky person and he is rejected by everybody. The third part of the play 'Night', Baroka pretends should be at ease and ignores what Sidi comes for, but deep in down he is looking forward for her coming. The victory dance was meant for omen (Baroka's wives) \_ Lakunle is described as lacking experience (When he speaks about the mixed stories) it is impossible to take Lakunle as a prophet of real progress.

### ***1.2 African Feminist Theory Criticism***

The goal of feminist literary critique is to promote female awareness and understanding by questioning how female identity and experiences are portrayed from masculine perspectives. Feminists founded this revolutionary movement. In this essay, Gilbert and Gubar (1979) address the historical marginalization and suppression of women authors' voices in "The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination." It looks at how women are portrayed in classic literature. A framework for analysing literary texts from a gender perspective and creating interview questions is provided by feminist theory. Feminist critique, according to Tyson (2006), is the study of how other cultural works and literature either uphold or contradict the political, social, economic, and psychological oppression of women (p.83).

According to a number of academics, feminist critique looks at how women are portrayed in works authored by men. With an emphasis on women as readers, it entails the political and argumentative study of masculine culture and literature from a feminist standpoint. It helps scholars and readers examine literature from a different angle. The works of literature we studied

implement feminism's tenets and points of view. Gender roles in literary works are often analysed using feminist criticism to see how they either reflect or contradict traditional gender norms. Feminist scholars utilize this theory to augment our understanding of women's experiences, both past and present, and to cultivate our acknowledgement of women's importance in society (p.119). The analysis of the relationships between men and women and their varying social statuses is at the heart of feminist literary theory. Feminist literary theory mostly reflects patriarchal ideology, which takes many forms in the writing of literary texts and attempts to draw attention to the inequality that exists between men and women in society.

There are many different types of feminist literary theory. Some feminist scholars place emphasis on examining language and symbols, particularly their "gendered" aspects. Some investigate how the gender of the author affects their writing and analyse the differences in the writings of men and women. Feminist critics typically examine how characters are portrayed in literary works. According to Dhanya (2014) the text explores the analysis of images and stereotypes of women in literature, focusing on how women have been excluded and misinterpreted in the context of literary history. In addition, feminist literary theory posits that the gender of the reader frequently influences our reactions to a work. Tyson (2006) outlines that feminist thought revolves around a set of common inquiries:

In what way is the interaction between men and women portrayed in media?

How do men and women (or characters adopting male/female roles) interact in terms of power?

What does it mean to be a man or a woman?

What features and attributes are connected to masculinity and femininity?

In what ways do characters personify or exhibit these qualities?

Do characters display traits usually attributed to the opposite gender? Would you kindly elaborate or provide more information?

What effect does this change have on how other people react to them? What new understandings about the economic, political, social, or psychological elements of patriarchy does the study offer?

What does the work say about the possibility of using sisterhood to challenge patriarchy?

The idea of women's creativity is explored in the work. What lessons can we learn about how patriarchy operates from the way the work was received historically by the general audience critics? What role does the work play in the literary tradition and history of women writers?

Similarly, Price and Shildrick (1995) propound: Why should the primary, but by no means exclusive, location of regulatory activities be the gendered female body rather than the male body?

Women's bodies and sex are inherently different for them, not in the sense that these differences constitute the foundation of inflexible truths, but rather in the sense that women's and men's lived experiences often overlap but never truly identify (389) Therefore, to analyse a literary text from a feminist standpoint, it is important to consider the following questions: the gender of the author, the gender of the narrator, the portrayal of women's roles in the text, the gender of the protagonist, the presence of any stereotypes of women, the attitudes of male characters towards women, the influence of the author's attitude towards women in society and culture, the prevalence of feminine imagery in the text, and any differences in speech between female and male characters (Bressler, 2007). According to this theory, Soyinka's literary text *The Lion and The Jewel* will be analysed and examined using the textual analysis approach to explore the gender issues it portrays.

## **2. Methodology**

This research study was carried out employing a qualitative approach to analyse the characters' representation through a feminist lens to explore gender stereotypes and identify characteristic features of gender. The researcher has taken the text *The Lion and The Jewel* of Soyinka as a primary source of data for the qualitative research; and the postcolonial feminism has been used as a theoretical tool for the analysis of the text. To collect data textual analysis of

the play *The Lion and The Jewel* was used as a primary data source to explore the portrayal of women by analysing the characters and all the gender issues addressed in the play through analyzing specific scenes, dialogues, and character interactions related to women.

### 3. Results

Women, as shown in the play, suffer from the negative consequences of both their sexual and national identities, while men symbolise masculine power and the perpetuation of the male-dominated system.

#### 3.1. Women are shown as subservient and inferior individuals in society, with limited agency and decision-making power.

The central conflict of *The Lion and the Jewel* revolves around the clash between traditional values and modernity. Soyinka's drama was written during a period of profound discord between proponents of Westernisation and modernization in Nigeria, and those who advocated for the preservation of traditional values. The conflicts between Baroka and Lakunle manifest in their conflict over Sidi, as both men aspire to marry her without regard for her wishes or emotions. Despite their contrasting ideologies, Baroka and Lakunle hold similar perspectives on women, despite Baroka being a traditionalist and Lakunle being heavily influenced by Western culture. Both of them hold the belief that women are incapable of having autonomous lives and must instead rely on their spouses. Neither Sidi nor any other woman entertains the notion of pursuing her own endeavours.

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.

Based on the destiny of Sidi, it may be concluded that the prospects for Nigerian women are quite bleak. The drama gives the notion that both traditionalism and modernism primarily serve the interests of males rather than women. This situation leaves women, including strong and independent-minded individuals like Sidi, largely vulnerable to the dominance and regulation of a patriarchal culture, whether it is traditional or modern, which marginalises and exercises control over them.

#### 3. 2. Women are regarded as subordinate to males, fundamentally destined to fulfil the role of serving them.

Contrary to the majority of males in his community, Lakunle desires a woman to be his lifelong companion, not solely based on her domestic skills such as cooking, cleaning, and fetching water. Lakunle opposes Sidi carrying the pail of water on her head due to his awareness that it is detrimental to the spine. He is concerned that it might cause her neck to become shorter. Lakunle endeavours to persuade Sidi that he does not desire a spouse solely for domestic chores and childbearing, but rather seeks a life companion, a supportive friend, and an equal partner in their journey through life. Lakunle expresses his desire to marry and treat her in a manner similar to the couples he has observed in Lagos (*The Lion and the Jewel*, 9). However, the dominant ideology in Ilujinley relegates women to a subordinate position in their male-dominated culture, despite their limited awareness of this reality. Sidi, being a product of that mentality, is unaware that she is inadvertently promoting male chauvinism in Ilujinley. This is seen when she hastily

takes the bucket from Lakunle upon seeing a group of young people and drummers approaching, fearing that they could mock her. Sidi dismisses Lakunle's modern worldview, which promotes the idea that marriage may bring about equality, as she views him as insane. Sidi refuses to marry Lakunle because he refuses to pay the "bride-price," which is a compulsory requirement in their traditional beliefs. In addition, contemporary Lakunle cannot help but insinuate that males possess greater physical strength and girls are comparatively weaker, as evidenced by his condescending attitude towards Sidi due to her perceived intellectual inferiority.

### **3.3. Women's depiction ignorant and traditional.**

Soyinka depicts women, as exemplified by the character of Sidi, as lacking knowledge and adhering to outdated customs. Sidi adheres strongly to traditional values and maintains that any marriage can take place as long as the dowry is paid. Despite Lakunle's education and civility, she refuses his romantic overtures. Lakunle: Uninformed girl, are you unable of comprehending? To bear the cost would be to purchase a young female bovine from a market booth. Also, Lakunle intends to "civilise" Sidi by marrying her, disregarding her wishes and emotions. Women such as Sidi demonstrate enthusiasm, power, and independence, but ultimately conform to traditional cultural norms. Sidi finds it disgraceful that Lakunle refuses to pay the dowry for her.

### **3.4. Women are objectified and regarded as inferior to men.**

During a village performance, the women embody the roles of the wheels of the car, while Lakunle assumes the role of the driver, further exemplifying the inferior status of women in this community. Both Baroka and Lakunle perceive Sidi as an exquisite treasure that they both desire to possess. To those individuals, Sidi is merely perceived as a gem, a precious item that can arouse their passions, but ultimately nothing more than an inanimate object. Lakunle, for example, asserts his unchallenged authority at the beginning of the play by advising Sidi against displaying excessive cleavage or carrying a pail on her head. Lakunle desires Sidi because he feels she has the potential to embody a modern wife, characterised by wearing high heels and lipstick, which he believes will enhance his ability to embrace modernity. Additionally, he displays his control by informing her that her intellectual capacity is inferior to that of a man. Following an unappealing start, he confesses his love for her. Baroka desires Sidi to uphold the ancient Yoruba ideals, specifically by maintaining his reputation through polygamy and procreation.

### **3.5. Gender-based marginalisation of women**

It is important to acknowledge that Sidi's worth is only attributed to her physical attractiveness and her status as a virgin. Meanwhile, the male characters in *The Lion and the Jewel* possess the ability to assess their own worth and to be esteemed by others. Moreover, their value is determined by additional aspects, such as their past accomplishments or potential for future achievements. Lakunle, for instance, esteems himself for his erudition and his endeavour to introduce education, modernism, and Christianity to Ilujinle. Baroka, nevertheless, highly esteems himself for his position as the Bale of Ilujinle and his duty to ensure the safety of his people.

The marginalisation of women as simple possessions becomes even more evident when, in the play's last scene, Sadiku emerges from Baroka's palace in a triumphant state, proclaiming, "*I witnessed it firsthand when it occurred to your father, the esteemed Okiki.*" I performed the task for him, being the youngest and most recently married among the spouses. "*I vanquished him with my physical prowess*" (*The Lion and the Jewel*, 32). Ironically, she is unaware that her speech conveys more meaning than she intends. She is treated as an object that is passed down from one

generation to the next, like an inherited possession that Baroka receives from his father. Ironically, she remains unaware until later that she has been tricked even in her belief that Baroka has merely manipulated her as a means to achieve his own goal - Sidi, the central figure. Women are often subject to deception, manipulation, and exploitation by men at their own discretion within their cultural practices.

In evaluating the role of women in a society depicted in "The Lion and the Jewel," it is important to examine the situation where Baroka attempts to appease his favourite wife, Ailatu, by assuring her that she will be the only one who can extract his hard-earned efforts, as he discloses his intention to marry another woman. Moreover, the significance of the play's title, "The Lion and the Jewel" becomes apparent when examined through a feminist lens. The title illuminates the subtle workings of male chauvinism in the psychology of men, influencing their lifestyle and defining their ideology, including their thoughts and behaviours. The lion, a dominant creature of the forest, symbolises Baroka as a powerful figure who possesses the authority to govern and determine the course of events. Conversely, the jewel, an inanimate object used for adornment, represents Sidi, whose photograph is utilised as a decorative element in the magazine.

The ladies serve primarily as ornamental objects, as they can be owned, controlled, and exploited to fulfil the males' demands. In addition, we must also take into account the manipulation of Sadiku by Baroka in order to persuade Sidi to succumb to Baroka's desires. It is important to acknowledge the manner in which Sidi becomes ensnared and ultimately subdued by Baroka, leading to their marriage. Baroka's approach when addressing Sidi reinforces the notion that women are expected to be submissive, like children, inside a patriarchal culture. It is important to analyse Baroka's expression of irritation towards Ailatu, his preferred spouse, when questioned by Sidi about the cause of their relationship issues. In "The Lion and the Jewel" (page 39), Baroka questions Sidi, thus bringing her attention to the constraints faced by women. Ultimately, what remains is a long-standing custom, a male-dominated society in which contemporary Lakunle has little opportunity to bring about change. We are currently faced with a society that is still dominated by a patriarchal system, in which a man's decision to marry a woman is often based solely on his own personal preference or want. The Lion and the Jewel is regarded as one of Soyinka's most significant plays that explores themes of gender discrimination and imperialism. They are the originators of their conventional patriarchal worldview that assesses and rationalises the roles and worth of women in their society.

### **3.6. Wole Soyinka portrays women as lacking intelligence.**

Sidi imprudently endeavours to ridicule Baroka, but is seduced into engaging in sexual relations with the Bale after he demonstrates to her a contraption that generates stamps. Sadiku is depicted as naive due to her gullible nature, since she unquestioningly believes Baroka and propagates the unfounded rumour about his impotence. Baroka manipulates Sadiku as a pawn in his scheme to wed Sidi. Sadiku also commemorates and narrates how she defeated Okiki, Baroka's father. In addition, Lakunle's comment to Sidi, "as a woman, you possess a smaller cerebral capacity than I do," depicts women as lacking intelligence. Both Sidi and Sadiku are depicted as intellectually deficient females who are subordinate to men and regarded as mere objects for the entirety of the play.

### **3.7. The subordinate position of women as objects of possession**

The subjugation of women is exemplified by Baroka, the lion, who has amassed numerous wives as if they were mere objects to be collected, akin to a collection of china. He informs one of his wives, while she is removing his armpit hairs, that he intends to marry another woman but will grant her the exclusive privilege of plucking his armpit hairs. This comment exhibits a combination of playful taunting and strategic manipulation (Baroka desires her to exert more force), while also highlighting the manner in which women are possessed and subjected in this particular society. The portrayal of women as objects is also seen in the practice of paying a bride-price. Sidi is depicted as an exquisite young woman who develops an arrogant attitude after

her photograph is featured in a widely circulated magazine. Sidi's self-assured demeanour alters her outlook on life, and she aspires to be esteemed within her village.

#### **4. Discussion**

Women are shown in a negative light by portraying them as submissive, inert, and authentic. The depiction of women in a negative manner suggests the presence of gender bias. They are depicted as the recipients of masculine deeds and the conduits or bearers of men's issues. Women are shown as the conduits or bearers of men's issues. In the scenario when Baroka desired a new spouse, he dispatched Sadiku, his primary wife, to inform Sidi that the village chief wants to take her as his wife. This predicament is resolved when Sidi consents to marry Baroka after succumbing to his cunning tactics. Considering the treatment of female characters by Soyinka, it clearly appears that he writes from a marked traditional ideological point of view. Mulvey (as mentioned in Gauntlet, 2002) also discovered similar findings, stating that women performers and characters are portrayed differently from men. Men typically dominate the narrative, whereas women are often seen as submissive.

In the play, *The Lion and the Jewel*, Lakunle considers himself superior due to his education in Western countries. He harbors 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 seven. 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. They are often portrayed as sexual objects, with only certain parts of their bodies, such as hands, legs, or lips, being highlighted rather than their bodies as a whole. In instances where their full bodies are shown, the images tend to be sexually provocative. Sidi's beauty is likened to the radiance of sunlight and the delicate freshness of morning dew. Similarly, Woldemariam (2018) discovered that women experience fragmentation when their bodily parts are compared to elements of nature, such as roses, sunlight, and stars. This comparison portrays women as passive, natural, and consumable. In addition, Al-Nakeeb (2018) discovered that female characters are primarily portrayed based on their physical attractiveness and sexual availability, but this is not the true for male characters.

#### **Conclusion**

The portrayal of women may be considered as sexist and discriminatory, resulting in unjust treatment as compared to men. Women are often depicted as malevolent, pessimistic, and discontented, as they are perceived to only introduce difficulties into the lives of males. Furthermore, women were also ascribed similar unfavorable characteristics, being labelled as individuals from rural areas, uncivilized, primitive, and lacking in education and social standing. Therefore, it may be inferred that the traits assigned to women indicate the subordinate position of women in relation to their male counterparts, as demonstrated by the playwright's portrayal of how men treated women in a patriarchal society. Women are shown as passive recipients of acts from men, as it is evident that men predominantly carry out the majority of actions in comparison to women. Therefore, it was concluded that males are the agents of action while females are the recipients of those activities. According to the findings of this study, it was determined that males are the ones who perform acts, while females are the ones who receive the actions. This study also found that female characters in the plays were assigned conventional roles such as housewives,



petty traders, hawkers, and child carriers, primarily responsible for taking care of their husbands and managing household affairs. In contrast, male characters were given significant roles such as schoolmasters and chiefs. Women are excluded from those roles due to patriarchal beliefs, which assume that women are incapable of fulfilling them due to their emotional nature and limited intellectual capacities. To sum up, *The Lion and The Jewel* is in many aspects a light-hearted and gentle play, but it has at its heart a reminder of the strengths of the traditional values of society and a satirical challenge to modern pragmatism. This paper tends to examine how women are represented in Soyinka's play.

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