



# Center Holds... Things Cannot Fall Apart: The Status of Women in Wole Soyinka's 'The Lion and the Jewel'

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The play *The Lion and the Jewel*, written by Wole Soyinka depicts the Yoruba culture of Nigerian society. The play is about the African community, its cultural and custom richness. Many ceremonies, traditional festivals and customs are presented in the play that is rich with proverbs, metaphors, legends, myths, and taboos. The play mainly speaks about the roles of women. Most of the society in Africa is patriarchal. They give more importance and roles on the male much more than the female. Women had to struggle with the notion of double colonization. Double colonization is coined by Ketu Katrak, referring to the notion that women in formerly colonized societies were doubly colonized by both imperial and patriarchal ideologies became a catch-phrase of postcolonial and feminist discourses in the 1980s (in Ashcroft, 1996:240). This condition leads to the more complex, struggle and movement of women. Women have been suppressed, harassed and exploited by male dominated society. The playwright brings the pathetic condition of women of Nigerian society on the stage. Their Each and every attempt to escape from the clutches of male supremacy ends in vain. Men, the center of the society holds all power. They treat women as things and never let them enjoy their freedom. This paper is an attempt to discuss the status of subjugated women as depicted in the play.

**Key Words:** Yoruba culture, myths, patriarchal, colonization, Nigerian society, supremacy, freedom

In the surface reading, *The Lion and the Jewel* (1959) is a comedy filled with joyous excitement. It is crafted with the problems and impacts of colonialism in the Third World countries especially Nigeria. In the play, a European young West-educated and oriented school teacher, Lakunle, spreads and nurses colonial civilization mostly on female figures like Sidi and Sadiku. Sidi becomes a complete victim of patriarchy. So also Sadiku has become at the hands of Baroka, a patriarchal representative figure.

Sidi and Sadiku are major female characters in the play and are the independent subjects of the post-colonial Nigeria. But they are victimized by Lakunle and Baroka. Lakunle, desired to win the heart of Sidi, a beautiful lady of the same age. He praises her beauty and intelligence so as to arouse the sense of need of a superior figure. Baroka, an old Bale of Ilujinle of 62, has a tendency of having multiple wives, intentionally seduces Sidi, and ultimately compels her to become his wife. At the same time the society celebrates this monstrous act according to their rituals. Patriarchal and male supremacy of their tradition was manifested as the abuse of female rights and sexuality.

After a great political change and freedom of Nigeria from colonial power, women of Nigeria have more pathetic situation about their sexuality and other social rights. The culture of domination shifts from the hand of colonialism to patriarchy. It shows that the official announcement of European independence of Nigeria, does not completely end at colonial principles. Since there is no direct presence of colonial agent after decolonization, the culture to oppress women remains patriarchal

Baroka's furious remark describes how male cannot bear the words of their being old from a young girl:

*"She says ... that I am old that I am much too old? Did a slight unripened girl say this of me?" (26).*

These words of Sidi become very powerful as it does not match with the wild aspiration of masculinity. He weaves a snare, pretending of being lost in complete disappointment of his waning virility or climacteric physics and uses his wife Sadiku to play a role. Baroka clarifies why he has been so despondent and implies that he failed to carry on his sexual roles and responsibility.

The Lion and the Jewel presents traditional dependence of female figure, Sidi, a young beautiful girl (the Jewel), on the tradition. It also presents Lakunle, a follower of colonial principles; and Baroka, an icon of patriarchy. Baroka, the Bale of 63 of Ilujinle society, even after his unjust and unlawful seduction of Sidi boastfully presents himself as respected personality in the society. Both of them show their consent to the tradition of Ilujinle society by keeping mum against Baroka's forceful seduction. The whole society too authenticates the patriarchal normativity by holding a ceremony in favour of Baroka. It shows how the females were exploited in post-colonial Nigeria as a colonial refuge to patriarchy

Sadiku to consol Sidi, as:

*"Too late for prayers. Cheer up. It happens to the best of us" (53).*

These words pronounce how weak are the women of that society to take any action against Baroka's vicious act of Seduction. Law and religion formed to protect rights of common people but they are used to benefit for a certain powerful people. Lakunle wants to take advantage of the victim of patriarchy by showing the fear that Sidi is no longer a virgin to be paid bride-price. It means he can marry her without bride-price but when situation comes in his favor he expresses his dilemma to postpone it as:

*"Surely she can wait a day or two at least. There is the asking to be done, and then I have to hire a praise-singer, and such a number of ceremonies must firstly be performed" (55).*

By now he is paying no heed towards the victimized to protect her from being insulted in the society. It means Lakunle also wanted to have only a sexual relation with her. But after the break down of her virginity he no longer wantsto marry her. After all, Sidi makes her mind to wed Baroka. From the analysis of the text, it is to claim that the playwright advocates his tradition and culture of the past.

Marginalization of women as mere property is one of the major themes in The Lion and the Jewel. This theme begins to unfold from the conversation between modern Lakunle and Sidi as the play begins. Lukunley 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 shorten her neck. Lakunle tries hard to convince Sidi that he does not *"seek a wife to fetch and carry, to cook and scrub and to bring forth children by the gross"* (The Lion and the Jewel, 7 & 8); rather he seeks *"a life companion"*, *"a friend in need"* and *"an equal partner in [his] race of life"* (The Lion and the Jewel, 8). Lakunle further says that he wants to marry and treat her *"just like the Lagos couples I have seen"* (The Lion and the Jewel, 9).

But the prevailing ideology in Ilujinley is such that it makes the women next to servants in their male dominated society, though they are hardly aware of it. Sidi, as the product of that ideology, does not even know that she is actually serving the male chauvinism in Ilujinley when she—after seeing a crowd of youths and drummers approaching—snatches the pail from Lakunle and says, *"Jewel or they will jeer"* (The Lion and the, 10). Lakunle's modern ideology consisting of the equalizing effect of marriage is of no use to Sidi who considers Lakunle mad. Sidi will not marry Lakunle because the latter refuses to pay the "bride-price", a mandatory requirement existing in their traditional ideology. The idea of "bride-price" makes it clear that women in Ilujinley are traditionally seen as mere property which can be bought or sold, accumulated or consumed. Even the modern Lakunle is not free from this constricting ideology when he thinks that it will be easier for him now to marry Sidi once she has lost her virginity, since no "bride-price" is required in such a situation. So it is, as if, a matter of buying a virgin girl. Furthermore, modern Lakunle cannot restrain himself from implying that the males are stronger sex and the females are weaker sex when he looks down on Sidi for having a "smaller brain".

Furthermore, from the stage directions, it becomes clear that the statue of Baroka is wellendowed. The statue is associated with Baroka's power and virility, even though the statue does not appear in the play until Sadiku finds out that Baroka's manhood is no more. Baroka literally turns into a joke and an object as Sadiku starts to use the statue to jeer at Baroka who has supposedly lost his ability to perform sexually. Thus the women of the play seem to experience a sense of power and autonomy by looking down on Baroka. But this is a trap, because Baroka is still able to perform sexually, which he discloses when he deflowers Sidi. The statue, then, shows how the women in Yoruba society can be manipulated by the men according to their own whims. Thus the women in the play become breathing objects—they are deceived

even in their realization which is constantly formed and shaped by the men. The only time they experience power over men is when they are deceived.

Marginalization of women as mere property becomes even more transparent when, in the final scene of the play, Sadiku comes out from Baroka's palace on triumphant mood claiming, "*I was there when it happened to your father, the great Okiki. / I did for him, I, the youngest and the freshest of the wives. I / killed him with my strength*" (*The Lion and the Jewel*, 32).

Ironically enough, she does not know that her speech does carry more than she has intended it to carry. It is, as if, she is a piece of property handed down from a generation to the next one— she is a thing of inheritance that Baroka inherits from his father. More ironically, she does not even know until later that she has been deceived even in her thought that Baroka has simply used her as a tool to gain his own end— Sidi, the titular jewel. Women are deceived, manipulated, and used as a tool by men whenever they feel like in their tradition.

We must consider the position of women in a society where Baroka tries to pacify his favorite wife, Ailatu, by telling her that will be "[the] sole out-puller of my sweat-bathed hairs" (*The Lion and the Jewel*, 27) when he reveals to her his plan to take another wife.

Furthermore, the title of the play—The Lion and the Jewel—is itself significant if one looks at it from a feminist point of view. The title throws a steady light on how male chauvinism works subtly in their psychology affecting their life-style and shaping their ideology—the way they think and behave. The lion, an animal reigning in the forest, here refers to Baroka creating an image in our mind of a figure who is powerful enough to control, to rule, and to decide what and how things should be done; on the other hand, a jewel, an inanimate thing, used in ornaments for decoration, here refers to Sidi whose picture, taken by the photographer, is used as a decorative element in the magazine. The females are nothing more than the decorative elements, for they can be possessed, manipulated, and used to satisfy the desires of the males. Here we must also consider how Sadiku is manipulated by Baroka to convince Sidi so that the latter yields to Baroka's lust.

We must also note that how Sidi is trapped and finally tamed by Baroka to marry him. The language that Baroka uses to address Sidi upholds the idea that a woman is just like a 'child' supposed to be docile in the patriarchal society. We should consider how Baroka phrases his annoyance towards Ailatu, his favorite wife, when asked by Sidi what has gone wrong between them. "*Is that not enough? Why child? / what more could the woman do?*" (*The Lion and the Jewel*, 39), Baroka asks Sidi making her aware of a woman's limitations.

We should also note that the magazine brought by the stranger to Ilujinle also plays an important role 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 arrival of the magazine featuring photographs of the village and its residents, including three full pages 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 contrast between Sidi and Baroka insulting the latter by including only a small picture of him next to a latrine. Here we must note that Sidi is only more powerful than Baroka in terms of her beauty which will finally be enjoyed by Baroka himself. Thus, even though the magazine seems to suggest that Sidi is more powerful, it also lowers Sidi's status to a mere object that can be consumed, accumulated, used, and even distributed by others. Thus the magazine becomes a symbol of women's existence and their real value in Ilujinle; even when they believe they are gaining power, they still become just objects which can be consumed and controlled by others.

## Conclusion

There was the female suppression in Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*. It also shows the failure of feminist to counter colonial principles. The play depicts the picture of the postcolonial Nigeria where women even after their political independence suffer from similar harassment and sexual abuses. It also presents the problems and impacts of colonialism in African countries like Nigeria. The present study has revealed that the exploitation of patriarchy is continuing in the postcolonial phase of Nigeria.

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