



## YORUBA WOMEN: IGNORANT AND SUBJECT TO MALE-DOMINANCE IN WOLE SOYINKA'S *THE LION AND THE JEWEL*

FARHANA KHAN

Lecturer, Department of English, City University, Dhaka, Bangladesh



FARHANA KHAN

Article Received: 26/01/2020

Article Accepted: 16/02/2020

Published online: 20/02/2020

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.8.1.263](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.8.1.263)

### Abstract

Without the light of education, the ignorant women in a male-centric society accept the life of servitude. Women are bound to take white poison and polluted air of the patriarchal society as if they were born to accept the domination of the male-dominated society. So there is no place for women to breathe and take free oxygen from nature. Things become worse when they live in a colonized one. Sidi, Sadiku and other women in *The Lion and the Jewel* are the representatives of this kind. They are entrapped by the tradition of Yoruba society. The aim of this paper is to find out the position of these ignorant women in the colonized society of Yoruba, and how they are trapped in-between tradition and modernity. The paper has followed the analytical based research method. It also traces how and why the ignorant women consider the traditional system perfect for them and reject modernity for the sake of tradition

**Key words:** Yoruba, ignorant, male-centric, tradition, modernity, colonized.

### Introduction

In *The Lion and the Jewel*, like other Yoruba women, Sidi and Sadiku are victimized by the traditionally male-dominated society where they are considered as personal properties of males. They can be bought, hoarded and sold like products. Even the touch of modernism cannot change Sidi's mind from not getting married to Baroka the 'Bale' of Ilujinle. The only representative of modern society is Lakunle, the school teacher, who also fails to overcome his deep-rooted traditional norms and values as he is only semi-literate. He tries to change his society but he can do nothing more than to advocate the white patriarchal system. He, actually, though unintentionally, works as the spokesperson of the male-dominated white colonizers while thinking that he is a revolutionary modernist, and fails to dislodge his typical traditional male mentality trapped in his modern attire. Therefore, how could we expect that Sidi or Sadiku would protest against

the traditional norms and values of the society where no one is trying to push a female to achieve the value of being a woman?

Sidi, the village belle, being brought up in an uneducated ignorant family is a female full of conflicts and ignorant of his true worth as a woman. Sometimes, she protests against the patriarchy round her. When Lakunle criticizes her dress and suggests her to wear something modest so that she does not attract "the bad names, the lewd jokes, the tongue-licking noises" (Soyinka 11), putting the patriarchal norms aside, as a female, Sidi rebukes him and defends her honour. This looks exceptionally peculiar in view that she is an uneducated ignorant woman. This sudden reaction of Sidi is also not acceptable to the white male common sense. Here Lakunle like the white male furiously tells to Sidi that her thinking is "a natural feeling, arising out of envy; / For, as a

woman, you have a smaller brain / Than mine” (Soyinka 12).

This the incident proves that Lakunle is a perfect example of a truly colonized modern male in a colonized society if we consider the play within the colonial context. As Colonisers think that the tradition of the colonized is inferior to that of the Colonizers, the colonized should adopt the colonizers’ tradition and culture. Lakunle represents this same idea by telling Sidi to change her clothes to modest ones. Hence, in this male-centric colonized society women cannot find any escape into modernity.

Again, Lakunle, like the colonisers, tries to prove that he is right, as his ideas about women are like as he said,

The scientists have proved it. It’s in my books.

Women have a smaller brain than men

That’s why they are called the weaker sex (Soyinka 13).

To threaten Lakunle on the idea of the weaker sex, Sidi is uncompromising enough and asks him,

The weaker sex, is it?

Is it a weaker breed who pounds the yam

Or bends all day to plant the millet

With a child strapped to her back? (Soyinka 13)

Here Sidi’s thoughts are no sign of independence, but rather a mere reverberation of what she had been inculcated by the tradition of the society. Women’s role in farming, and in bearing and rearing children has become her honour and pride as a woman. In any case, she is unconscious of the truth that she is burdened by the tradition with both the roles inside and outside of the house. In fact, she does not really try to free from these obligations determined by the males. On the opposite, she has submitted herself to this tradition. From this point of view, it is additionally clear that women are colonized even by the male-dominated colonized society and that makes them doubly colonized.

To meet with the sexual needs of the males of the society, wifehood, in addition to motherhood, is a gender role that is assigned by the male-controlled system. Katrak says,

The sexual dimensions of a female role such as that of a wife are mystified often into a purely social dimension because doing so suits a patriarchal authority that under the guise of protection controls and defines female sexuality (xvii).

Therefore, polygamy prevails in Yoruba culture. Baroka has many wives and sixty-three children. He marries whenever and whomever he wants. He is sixty-two and now planning on marrying Sidi the jewel of the village. He is the wealthiest man in the village. He is known as both the lion and the fox for his power and cunningness. He exploits the tradition of bride-price.

In an interview with James Gibbs, Soyinka expressed how Baroka came into existence-

Charlie Chaplin... a man of nearly sixty has taken to wife Oona O’Neill” who was then about 17 something like that. ... from Charlie Chaplin, and again thinking of the old man I knew in my society who at 70 plus, 80, would still take some new young wives – and always seemed perfectly capable of coping with the onerous tasks which such activity demanded of them! I just sat down and that’s how Baroka came into existence (“Soyinka in Zimbabwe” 82).

Hence, Baroka becomes the true representative of male-centric Yoruba culture. In this culture, the bride-price is considered more important to a woman than anything else to prove her worth and chastity as well. Katrak states, “in spite of woman’s productive and reproductive labour, she is considered less worthy than a man and hence a dowry is needed ‘to make up the difference’” (10). He also states,

‘Traditions’, most oppressive to women is located within the arena of female sexuality—not only the glaringly violent ones such as sati, but other more normative forms of objectification in customs like dowry, multiple childbearing, as well as in fulfilling

traditionally expected roles as daughter, wife, mother (11).

Therefore, the tradition of Yoruba demeans women. It objectifies them as mere products to be bought and sold. Even the bride-price varies in terms of their chastity. So women are oppressed and exploited throughout their lives in the name of tradition.

### Trapped in-between Tradition and Modernity

The major theme, as Oyin Ogunba states, of *The Lion and the Jewel* is the "choice between the rival worlds of tradition and modernism" (32). Two central male characters, Baroka and Lakunle, stand in these two extremes. Baroka is deeply absorbed in and takes full advantage of his tradition, whereas Lakunle is yet to apprehend the true spirit of modernism. On the other hand, the two female characters, Sidi and Sadiku, ignorantly succumb to and upholds the traditional norms and values rejecting the modernity.

Soyinka's representation of these characters in the dramatic environment depicting African life is exceptionally precise and genuine to life. In this African rustic life, any idea of change requires a psychological change. The custom of polygamy and bride-price is challenged.

The action of the play takes in Ilujinle a commonplace Nigerian village, in the territory of Yoruba people. The bale Baroka, Soyinka's emotional creation, the traditional lion of the town, is the embodiment of both the good and bad side of tradition. He is the center of power of the village and has a harem full of the foremost lovely women within his reach. He is good at conversation, persuasion and cunning strategies. He is also physically strong even at the age of sixty-two. He uses his cunning strategies and his power to get the "jewel" of the village.

On the other hand, Lakunle considers himself to be the agent of modernity and thinks that it is his moral duty to oppose the bale and the filthy tradition to bring a revolutionary change in his village. He wears an old-style English suit. As he wants to bring progressive changes, he begins with his love Sidi. He recites poetry to her, praises her

beauty and instructs her which clothes to wear and what job to do. However, all these thoughts of his are new and strange to Sidi, although she has a soft corner for him. When he proposes her for marriage, she demands her bride-price for her beauty and chastity.

Polygamy can be found in different cultures throughout the world. It is a supreme example of male domination. The main reason behind marrying multiple wives is an economic advantage in agrarian production, especially in the African polygamous society. Having many wives is the criteria for power and wealth.

Toyin Falola, in his book *Culture and Customs of Nigeria*, states regarding polygamy, "A large farm requires many hands to tend; so, too, does food processing. There are duties at home and in the village, and social expenses to meet. The most secure way for a man to obtain more labour is to have many children, produced and raised by many women. This is closely associated with the function of the family as an economic unit of production" (125). He also states, "Although the statistics cannot be confirmed, almost one-third of the married population in Nigeria is polygamous" (125). He adds more that this practice also ensures that the widow along with her children has social and economic security by marrying the brother of her deceased husband. (58)

Besides these social and economic reasons, this tradition gives the scope to men to fulfil their sexual desires by marrying any beautiful young woman at any age of their lives. They can marry whoever and whenever they want to be provided they have the wealth to pay the bride-price. It is like buying a commodity from the market whenever a wealthy man wants to fulfil his desires.

In case of the chieftain of a tribe or village, the chieftain marries the last wife of the previous chieftain. The last wife of the dead chieftain becomes the first and chief wife of the new bale. She receives all respect among all the wives. In this tradition, the bale can have as many wives as he wants. But he has to treat all the wives equally, distribute all facilities equally to all wives and

children and avoid any discrimination among them (Falola 59).

Therefore, in this male-dominated polygamous tradition, the lives of women, their desires, hope, happiness and everything good and bad solely depend on the hands of the males. The same thing can be found in *The Lion and the Jewel*. Baroka, the bale, possess many wives. His harem is full of wives from Sadiku to his latest favourite Aliatu. Still, he wants more wives. After seeing Sidi's photo on a magazine cover, he becomes obsessed with her beauty and charm. He immediately orders his chief wife Sadiku to woo Sidi for him. Actually, it is the tradition that the chief wife has to persuade the girl of her husband's liking and make the girl marry her husband. It is a part of her obligation to her husband.

Sadiku is no exception here. She happily carries out her husband's wish as she has done before in the case of other wives of Baroka. She is the perfect and resourceful agent of this tradition. While pursuing Sidi for Baroka, she narrates good sides of the polygamous tradition of Yoruba culture. She says,

Sidi, have you considered what a life of bliss awaits you? Baroka swears to take no other wife after you.

Do you know what it is to be the Bale's last wife?

I'll tell you. When he dies—and that should not be long; even the Lion has to die sometime- well, when he does, it means that you will have the honour of being the senior wife of the new Bale. And just think, until Baroka dies, you shall be his favourite. No living in the outhouses for you, my girl. Your place will always be in the palace; first as the latest bride, and afterwards, as the head of the new harem ... It is a rich life, Sidi. I know. I have been in that position for forty one years (Soyinka 31).

She is in that position for forty-one years, and yet she is proud of it. She is so ignorant of herself as a woman that lives in servitude seems to her a life of fortune. She even lures Sidi telling the advantages of

it. When Baroka, after Sidi's rejection, tricks her to make her believe in his impotency, Sadiku tells that she also witnessed Baroka's father Okiki's impotency, and she was the last and youngest wife of his father. She says, "I was there when it happened to your father, the great Okiki. I did for him, I, the youngest and freshest of the wives" (Soyinka 30). This means the tradition is when the son of the dead bale becomes the new bale, he marries his step-mother, the last wife of the deceased bale. Actually, it is the sheer example of extreme male domination over female.

This custom indicates that the women are inherited by the sons from the fathers, they are handed over to one male to another just like properties. Moreover, wives always have to comply with their husbands' desires and do anything to please their husband. This tradition is absolutely natural to females as it is deeply rooted in the minds of the females of this society. That is why Una Maclean calls the play a "Nigerian bedroom farce" for its convention of polygamy (51).

Surprisingly, the environment of Yoruba tradition supports the seduction of Sidi by Baroka. Whenever Baroka likes a girl, he invites her to dinner and seduces her. Then he marries her. When Sadiku invites Sidi to supper at Baroka's house, Sidi tells that she knows 'the tales of Baroka's little suppers. Sadiku denies the fact and Sidi replies,

Can you deny that

Every women who has supped with him one night,

Becomes his wife or concubine (Soyinka 34).

Therefore, everybody knows that, but nobody raises voice against it. Every woman seduced by Baroka did not raise a voice against him. Rather they succumbed to the tradition. Even Sidi, after seduction, agrees to marry him at the end without even mentioning the bride-price. Before the seduction, situation was not like that. Sidi was boastful of her beauty and chastity. She says,

Sadiku, I am young and brimming; he is spent.

I am the twinkle of a jewel

But he is the hind quarters of a lion! (Soyinka 33)

She knows her worth but the worth is attributed by the male-centric society on her chastity. Therefore, when her chastity is violated, she surrenders herself to Baroka. It is not the seduction rather the concept of chastity deeply rooted in her mind that makes her capitulate to her seducer.

After the seduction of Sidi, Lakunle promptly proposes her for marriage because, now, he does not have to pay the bride-price. He says

... it is only fair

That we forget the bride-price totally

Since you no longer can be called a maid (Soyinka 75).

However, she chooses Baroka over Lakunle. The concept of chastity is vital in this tradition. The rigid tradition of the society compels her to choose her seducer Baroka. She replies to Lakunle saying,

Marry who ...? You thought ...

Did you really think that you, and I...

Why, did you think that after him,

I could endure the touch of another man? (Soyinka 78)

Although she declares that it is Baroka's manliness that makes her decide to marry him, it is quite evident that the chastity is the only reason to refuse Lakunle's offer for marriage. Here she is trapped in her tradition because of her ignorance of her true worth as a woman. She becomes the true representative of her tradition. R. Sethuraman comments on her decision at end, "Sidi in *The Lion and the Jewel* is fleetingly metamorphosed into the glittering girl of the magazine by the Western photographer, although common sense prevails on her in the end" (224).

This concept of chastity is closely linked with the concept of bride-price. Encyclopedia Britannica says regarding the bride-price, "the practice is common in most parts of the globe in one form or another, but it is perhaps most prevalent in Africa." According to Wikipedia, "Bride

price, bridewealth, or bride token, is money, property, or other form of wealth paid by a groom or his family to the family of the woman he will be married to or is just about to marry."

In Yoruba tradition, bride-price is considered important to prove the bride's chastity. It is a matter of honour for a woman. In case a young lady weds without the bride-price, it is assumed that she is not a virgin or she is not worth to wed. Therefore, women do not want to violate the tradition for their honour.

At the very beginning of the play, Lakunle proposes his love for Sidi and asks her for marriage. Sidi, like other conventional Yoruba young girl, who is ignorant of the modern thoughts and culture boastfully demands the bride-price to Lakunle,

I have told you, and I say it again

I shall marry you today, next week

Or any day you name.

But my bride-price must first be paid.

But I tell you, Lakunle, I must have

The full bride-price. Will you make me

A laughing-stock? Well, do as you please.

But Sidi will not make herself

A cheap bowl for the village spit (Soyinka 15).

She goes on to say,

They will say I was no virgin

That I was forced to sell my shame

And marry you without a price (Soyinka 16).

Sidi expects that Lakunle will pay more bride-price for her beauty and virginity. But Lakunle, is not likely to follow this tradition partly because of his modern thinking and partly because of having no money at all to pay the bride-price.

He attacks the conventional African tradition of bride-price. He calls it "A savage custom, barbaric, out-dated ... unpalatable" (Soyinka 16). He believes that this custom demeans women and it is a disgrace to them. It lowers them to the level of animals to be bought and sold. He says Sidi addressing her as

ignorant girl, "To pay the price would be / To buy a heifer off the market stall" (Soyinka 17).

In this instance, Lakunle is right. But he with his hollow-bookish modernity fails to provide any ray of hope to Sidi. Although at the end he agrees to marry Sidi after she is seduced by Baroka, he does nothing significant as he is not a man of action. He always criticizes the tradition but never presents himself to be a revolutionary. He makes himself a laughing stock in front of Sidi. He mocks child bearing of his tradition that Sidi cannot apprehend. Child bearing is considered as ultimate gift to a female in this tradition. Bearing and rearing child is one of the main purposes of marriage of every tradition of the world. And Yoruba is no exception. Lakunle does not think it as necessary in a marriage. He says,

Sidi, I do not seek a wife

To fetch and carry,

To cook and scrub,

To bring forth children by the gross ...  
(Soyinka 16).

Sidi cannot apprehend the meaning of his modernism. She is astonished how anyone could condemn child bearing in marriage. Lauretta Ngcobo writes about this:

As elsewhere, marriage amongst Africans is mainly an institution for the control of procreation. Every woman is encouraged to marry and get children in order to express her womanhood to the full. The basis of marriage among Africans implies the transfer of a woman's fertility to the husband's family group (141).

Especially, in this polygamous society, fertile women are considered worth marrying. The concept is that women are born to be mothers. Therefore, it limits their potentiality to explore themselves as women.

### Conclusion

In the end, Sidi hands over the book to Lakunle and chooses to marry Baroka her seducer. She says about the book,

A present from Sidi.

I tried to tear it up

But my fingers were too frail  
(Soyinka 78).

Then she invites Lakunle to her wedding. By this act, she rejects modernism and the western way of life presented by Lakunle. But she could not tear up the book because of her physical weakness. It indicates that she rejects but cannot fully obliterate modernity. It is her weakness that she chooses tradition over modernity. Some readers might say that, in the end, Tradition prevails over Modernity. Actually it is the weakness of women that fails themselves to come out of their cocoons. Sidi, sometimes, presents herself as an independent woman whenever she rejects Lakunle's proposal, even this realization of self-worth is thoroughly imposed by the male-centric society. Tradition trains their minds from the very beginning of their lives in such a manner that they disparage themselves. They think they are born to be mothers as, in the end, Sadiku invokes the fertile god and Sidi expects children of the lion stock (Soyinka 79). They are married to do all sorts of menial jobs like pounding the yam or bending all day to plant the millet (Soyinka 13), or fetching and carrying, cooking and scrubbing, and bearing children (Soyinka 16), or even plucking armpit hair like Aliatu does to Baroka (Soyinka 37). Without being the chief wife or the favourite wife, they cannot even stay at the house. The outhouse is their place. They have to do all sorts of the job to make their husbands happy. Busy doing all these, they forget themselves as women. They only recognize their true worth when it comes to their body and chastity. Sidi and Sadiku both ignorantly boast of their beauty and chastity. Sidi demands bride-price on account of her beauty and chastity. Sadiku takes pride in her that it was her flame of youth that made Okiki impotent. This concept is imposed by males because they only value their worth as suitable sexual objects. That is why they are bought and sold in the name of bride-price and the price varies in terms of chastity. It shows that tradition never gives respect to women. They are inferior to men and are bound to choose whatever the male-dominated tradition inculcates

from the very beginning of their lives.

On the other hand, the champion of modernity and feminism, Lakunle cannot unfasten Sidi from the tradition. Soyinka portrays him as a foolish teacher who never gets any respect from anyone, not even from Sidi. Sidi mocks him saying,

You and your ragged books  
Dragging your feet to every threshold  
And rushing them out aging as cruses  
Greet you instead of welcome....

They call you fool-even the children- (Soyinka 11-12)

He lives in illusion. Onwueme expresses that Soyinka made "a mild satire against Baroka's ruthless leadership and brutal force in society" (64). Whereas Eldred Jones considers Lakunle as "the half-baked Westernized African" (24). "Lakunle represents not western culture but only hallow Westernization, not real but only the image" (Ramchandran 201). Although he advocates the right of women and the freedom of women and he calls them ignorant, still he treats Sidi, in his tradition, as "weaker sex". It shows that even he cannot free himself from the male-dominated values of his tradition. If Lakunle had thought that women are equal to men, he never would have discriminated women. In the end, indeed, he remains as the representative of the hollow-modernity that cannot reach the core of the tradition to turn it around. Nevertheless, his hollow-modernism shows the rigidity of the society.

Last but not the least, taking everything into account, it is quite evident, that Soyinka approved neither tradition nor modernity (White 130). Both tradition and modernity have colonized the women both psychologically and sexually. These ignorant women are entrapped by the male-dominated system, and they act as the guardian of this tradition. They are too much involved in their gender roles, custom, culture and tradition of the patriarchal society that they cannot find their own paths to the fulfilment of their lives as human beings.

#### Works Cited

- "Bride Price" *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 24 Sept. 2019 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bride\\_price](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bride_price)
- Falola, Toyin. *Culture and Customs of Nigeria*. Westport: Greenwood Press. 2001
- Gibbs, James. "Soyinka in Zimbabwe: A Question and Answer Session". *Conversation with Wole Soyinka*. Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2001, pp. 72-115.
- Gibbs, James. *Notes on 'The Lion and the Jewel'*. Essex: Longman York Press, 1982.
- Katrak, K. H. *Politics of the Female Body: Postcolonial Women Writers of the Third World*. USA: Rutgers University Press. 2006.
- Maclean, Una. "Wole Soyinka: Soyinka's International Drama". *Black Orpheus*, Vol. 15, 1964, pp. 46-51.
- Ngcob, Lauretta. "African Motherhood – Myth and Reality". *Criticism and Ideology, Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Uppsala*. 1988, pp. 140-147.
- Ogunba, Oyin. *The Movement of Transition: A Study of the Plays of Soyinka*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press. 1975
- Onwueme, Tess Akaeke. "Visions of Myth in Nigerian Drama: Femi Osofisan versus Wole Soyinka". *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 25, 199, pp. 58-69.
- Ramchandran, C. N. "Structure within Structure: An Analysis of Wole Soyinka's The Lion and the Jewel". *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. 25, 1990 pp. 199-203.
- Sethuraman, R. "The Role of Women in the Plays of Wole Soyinka", *World Literature Written in English*, Vol. 25, 1985, pp. 222-227.
- Soyinka, Wole. *The Lion and the Jewel*. Print Foundation. 2019
- The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Bridewealth". *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. March 05, 2014. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/bridewealth>
- White, Anthony Graham. *The Drama of Black Africa*. London: Samuel French INC. 1974