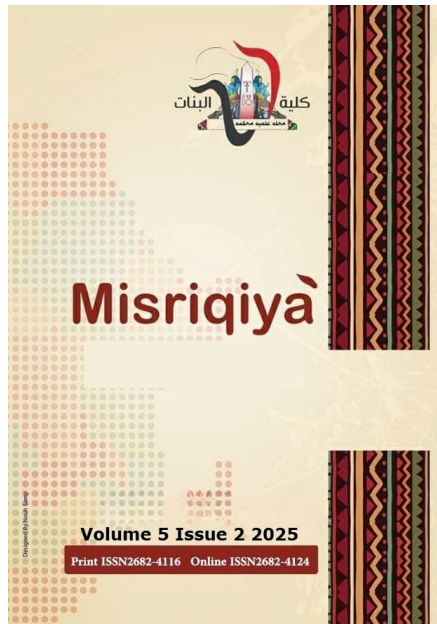




Postcolonial Re-reading of Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*

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Abstract

This study provides a postcolonial re-reading of Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, emphasizing the ideological tensions between traditional African values and imposed Western modernity. Using a library-based methodology, the research critically analyzed the primary text through the lens of postcolonial theory, with emphasis on concepts such as hybridity, cultural identity, subalternity, and resistance. Set in the Yoruba village of Ilujinle, the play stages a symbolic conflict between Baroka, who embodies traditional African leadership, and Lakunle, a Western-educated teacher who rejects indigenous customs as primitive. Sidi, the titular "jewel," becomes a contested figure, representing the struggle of postcolonial subjects, particularly women, for autonomy and identity within a culture disrupted by colonialism. Soyinka uses satire, indigenous performance elements, and cultural symbolism to critique the uncritical adoption of Western ideals and to valorize African traditions. The analysis showed how the rejection of bride price, the conflict over railway construction, and the characters' differing views on gender roles illustrate broader postcolonial concerns about cultural displacement, power dynamics, and identity formation. The study found that neither culture should dominate; rather, a nuanced integration of both is necessary, a position aligned with Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity. Soyinka's portrayal of cultural conflict, resistance to imperialism, and the search for identity reinforced the role of African literature in challenging colonial narratives and reconstructing authentic voices. It was concluded that *The Lion and the Jewel* is not merely a satire of modernity but a profound commentary on the complexities of cultural negotiation in postcolonial Africa.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Hybridity, Resistance

Introduction

Records abound that the intellectual foundation for postcolonial theory and criticism was first shaped by the Negritude movement, led by Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Frantz Fanon, whose ideas were later articulated in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). However, other evidence suggests that the colonial experience, when viewed from the perspective of the colonized, can be traced as far back as the Elizabethan era. Hence, scholars have critically examined issues of slavery, racial identity, and gender equity in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, interpreting them as reflections of early colonial encounters and social hierarchies. The twentieth century has nonetheless ushered in a new intellectual and artistic awakening aimed at dismantling the systems of oppression imposed on colonized nations. It is within this context that the present study undertakes a postcolonial reading of Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, offering an in-depth analysis of the text through the lens of postcolonial theory. It explores how Soyinka's characters confront and resist colonial ideologies, embodying struggles for autonomy, self-determination, and empowerment, thus reflecting the broader postcolonial quest for identity and liberation.

Theoretical Review

Broadly, postcolonialism concerns itself with the experiences, consequences, and cultural expressions that arise from colonization. It encompasses literature produced by writers from Britain's former colonies in regions such as the Caribbean, Africa, and India. According to Lye (1998), postcolonial writers often use the English language to explore shared themes like the struggle for independence, migration, national identity, allegiance, and the complexities of cultural memory. Postcolonial theory, therefore, examines artistic works created by both colonized and colonizing nations, seeking to reposition African identity against Western-imposed belief systems. Historically, colonizers constructed distorted representations of the colonized, portraying them as inferior or lacking intellect, as reflected in Western works like Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Cary's *The African Witch* and *Mister Johnson*, and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Such depictions contributed to the intellectual and cultural degradation of Africa. In response, African writers like Chinua Achebe, through his seminal essay, *An Image*

of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, challenged these stereotypes, reclaiming African dignity and redefining their own narratives.

Postcolonial theory revolves around the interconnected ideas of otherness and resistance. Gaining prominence in the 1970s, it was largely shaped by Edward Said's influential work *Orientalism*, which argued that the West ("the Occident") constructed the East ("the Orient") through a process of "Othering" that relied on language and representation to enforce cultural and racial hierarchies. Othering served to position Africans and other colonized peoples as alien, primitive, and inferior, reinforcing Western dominance and legitimizing imperial control. Said (1995) contends that the relationship between the Occident and Orient is sustained through systems of power, hegemony, and ideological control that transcend mere geography, extending into political, academic, moral, and cultural spheres. For Said, Orientalism is not only a discourse of domination but also an enduring framework that distorts how the West perceives and interacts with non-Western societies. His critique exposes the persistence of Eurocentric worldviews and underscores the need for postcolonial voices to challenge and redefine the narratives that have historically marginalized them.

Another postcolonial practitioner, an Indian-born, Homi Bhabha, identifies what is called Hybridity in his book, *The Location of Culture* (1994). He derives his conceptual ideas from cultural and literary theories. He used the "Hybridity" to clarify the cultural differences between the colonised and the coloniser. To him, Hybridity means mixture which implies the positive consequences of having two or more forms for cultures coming together. The use of Hybridity was to completely reject the Western superiority and its hegemonic inclination. This means that, although he accepts the reality of the cultural identities and differences of the Western and African worlds, he do not allow a particular culture to override another. Homi Bhabha creates a synergy that negates the ironical notion marked by superiority and separation as previously noted in Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Lastly, an Indian critic, Spivak, in his essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" enumerates the issues of race, gender and class in the construction of the postcolonial literature and how this may necessarily be used to categorised individuals. The methodology employed for this study is a library-based activity. The research data is collected through a literature review of the theoretical framework and analysis of the primary text, *Lion and the Jewel* by Wole Soyinka.

Panwar's (2024) study meaningfully advances postcolonial scholarship by reaffirming literature's enduring role as a site of resistance, identity reconstruction, and cultural reclamation. Building upon foundational theories by Said, Bhabha, and Spivak, who interrogate Orientalism, hybridity, and subalternity. Panwar extends this intellectual lineage by illustrating how postcolonial texts serve as counter-narratives that critique imperial ideologies while reclaiming indigenous voices. Through her analysis of narrative strategies, symbolism, and linguistic reclamation, she demonstrates literature's capacity not merely to reflect colonized experiences but to actively participate in decolonization, emphasizing themes of displacement, hybridity, and the negotiation between Western and native traditions. Similarly, Vindya's (2024) research explores the intersections of gender and identity in postcolonial English novels from Africa, South Asia, and the Caribbean, showing how these narratives deconstruct colonial power while reconstructing selfhood within intersecting structures of race, class, and gender. Drawing on Fanon's insights into colonial trauma and Spivak's critique of the silencing of colonized women, Vindya foregrounds intersectionality as central to understanding postcolonial identity formation and resistance, reaffirming the genre's continued relevance in global gender and identity politics. Complementing these perspectives, Kwofie and Daniels (2023) provide a postcolonial reading of Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, interpreting the play as a metaphorical critique of imperialism that simultaneously celebrates African traditions and advocates cultural coexistence. Their analysis situates Soyinka's dramatic techniques, setting, characterization, and linguistic style, within broader postcolonial discourse, highlighting the tension between adaptation and resistance. However, the present study diverges from their interpretive scope by offering a more focused close reading of Soyinka's text through the lens of postcolonial resistance, centering on the characters' direct acts of defiance, assertions of autonomy, and expressions of indigenous agency, thereby deepening the understanding of literature as a transformative and resistive force in postcolonial identity formation.

Critical Analysis

This section is devoted to the analysis of Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*. It focuses on various ideological underpinnings of postcolonialism, such as the instruments of subversion and the reversal of imperialistic values; race, ethnicity, class, language, and cultural identity; the representation of colonialism

and its consequences; the role of the writer in resisting the European view of Africa and reconstructing the continent's image; and the interpretation of Othering, Hybridity, and Subalternity as integral parts of the drama text *The Lion and the Jewel* by Wole Soyinka.

Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* is set in a typical Yoruba village called Ilunjinle and revolves around four major characters who represent the dichotomy between European and African cultures. These characters, Sidi (the Jewel), Lakunle (a young teacher), Baroka (the Bale of the village), and his wife Sadiku, play important roles in presenting the issues of colonialism and its consequent effects on countries, particularly Nigeria.

The play reveals that Baroka, who is referred to as a "fox" by Lakunle, is the current village head of Ilunjinle. He is known for his self-centered interests and rejects the proposal for a railway to be built in the village. He marries many wives and considers it acceptable to do so since the traditions of the town permit it. Although he is impotent, he manages to prevent his wife from revealing this secret to anyone.

The first instrument of subversion in the play occurs when plans are made to construct a railway in the town. Baroka, who symbolizes the typical traditional village authority, finds a way to bribe the white surveyor who came to measure the land to be used. Many consider his actions selfish, as the railway could have brought prospects such as trade, travel, and tourism to modernize the town. Lakunle and Sidi condemn Baroka, accusing him of hindering their progress by preventing the construction of the railway:

LAKUNLE: His wiliness is known even in the larger towns. Did you never hear Of how he foiled the Public Works attempt To build the railway through Ilujinle.

SADIKU: Nobody knows the truth of that. It is all hearsay.

SIDI: I love hearsays. Lakunle, tell me all.

LAKUNLE: Did you not know it? Well sit down and listen. My father told me, before he died. And few men know of this trick -- oh he's a die-hard rogue Sworn against our progress... yes... it was...somewhere here The track should have been laid just along The outskirts. Well, the workers came, in fact It was prisoners who were brought to do The harder part... to break the jungle's back... (p. 23-24)

The construction of the railway may lead to the demoralization of the values and beliefs of the people living in Ilunjinle. Therefore, Baroka bribes the builders to move the railroad to another location, in order to safeguard traditional values and ensure their unabashed continuity. The introduction of the railway might expose Ilunjinle to external influences, potentially resulting in the erosion of their cultural practices. Baroka embodies the resistance of postcolonial society toward the acceptance of imperialistic values. The preservation of the village's traditions necessitates the rejection of Western ideas and concepts.

A closer examination of *The Lion and the Jewel* shows that the tenets of the postcolonial era are clearly identifiable in the text. Race and ethnicity, for example, are evident as characters represent different cultures and belief systems. It is widely accepted that culture represents the shared values, beliefs, symbols, and behaviors of a people. Culture guides decisions and actions and serves as a tool that unites people and facilitates effective communication. Moawad (2016:181) cites Madzingira (2001), who describes culture as the totality of human endeavors in a given time and place. Furthermore, culture encompasses a society's religion, habits, norms, and other practices.

Having established that culture is a tool for dignity and identity, it is evident that Wole Soyinka intentionally juxtaposes African and European cultures in the play. The conflict between traditional and Western values points to the ambivalence that distinguishes these cultures. Traditional poetry, music, and dance are used by Soyinka to emphasize the beauty of African customs in contrast to European ways, creating a powerful impression of cultural conflict. Lakunle, a young schoolteacher educated in Lagos at a British school, does not appreciate the traditions of the people of Ilunjinle. Although he desires to marry Sidi, his Western sensibilities often dominate his perspective. He views village life and customs as primitive and even instructs Sidi not to overexert herself:

LAKUNLE: No. I have told you not to carry loads On your head. But you are as stubborn As an illiterate goat. It is bad for the spine. And it shortens your neck, so that very soon. You will have no neck at all. Do you wish to look Squashed like my pupils' drawings? (p. 2)

LAKUNLE: You could wear something. Most modest women do. But you, no. You must run about naked in the streets. Does it not worry you the bad

names, The lewd jokes, the tongue-licking noises Which girls, uncovered like you, Draw after them?

SIDI: This is too much. Is it you, LAKUNLE, Telling me that I make myself common talk? When the whole world knows of the madman Of Ilunjinle, who calls himself a teacher! Is it SIDI who makes the men choke In their cups, or you, with your big loud words And no meaning? You and your ragged books Dragging your feet to every threshold And rushing them out again as curses Greet you instead of welcome. Is it Sidi They call a fool -- even the children -Or you with your fine airs and little sense!

LAKUNLE: For that, what is a jewel to pigs? If now I am misunderstood by you And your race of savages, I rise above taunts And remain unruffled. (p. 3)

As mentioned previously, Lakunle wishes to marry Sidi, yet he is unwilling to conform to the practices of Ilunjinle. His choice of expressions, such as “sit on the table,” “eat with knives, forks and breakable plates” (p. 8), underscores his desire for a wife grounded in Western lifestyles. Being educated, he is attracted to the idea of “walking side by side with her, arm in arm just like the Lagos couples,” “to have put on high-heeled shoes, red paint on her lips,” and “her hair stretched like a magazine photo” (p. 9). This highlights Lakunle as a representative of modernization, advocating a vision of marriage in which husband and wife are equal partners. In contrast, Baroka, Sidi, and Sadiku adhere to traditional values. Their understanding of gender roles, marriage, and social conduct differs markedly from Lakunle’s Westernized perspective, reflecting a functional and nostalgic attachment to cultural norms. From the standpoint of gender, Lakunle’s worldview promotes equality, seeking to free his wife from traditional burdens. Yet in Ilunjinle, gender roles remain rigid: women handle domestic duties, while men occupy positions of authority. Sidi herself acknowledges male supremacy within the traditional hierarchy: “If that is true, then I am more esteemed / Than Bale Baroka, The Lion of Ilunjinle / This means that I am greater than The Fox of the Undergrowth, The living god among men” (p. 11). This societal structure explains why Baroka, at sixty-two, has married numerous wives and maintained a host of concubines. His authoritative power, coupled with the status it confers, positions

him to claim Sidi as his latest “favourite,” thereby compelling her acceptance of his proposal.

The tension between tradition and modernity further manifests in Sidi’s insistence that Lakunle pay her bride price, a cultural requirement. Despite his affection for Sidi, Lakunle refuses, deeming the custom “a savage custom, barbaric, outdated, rejected, denounced, accursed, excommunicated, archaic, degrading, humiliating, unspeakable, redundant, retrogressive, remarkable, unpalatable” (p. 7). The extensive list of synonyms demonstrates his linguistic precision and underscores his educated perspective. Language, however, is not merely expressive; it signals social identity. Speech patterns reveal class, age, gender, and sometimes ethnicity. For instance, in Nigerian vernacular, the pronunciation of plosive /p/ as fricative /f/ (e.g., ‘people’ pronounced as /fi:fl/) marks regional identity. Similarly, Baroka’s greeting “Guru morin guru morin” instead of “Good morning” reinforces his embodiment of traditional values.

Self-identity and Control as Postcolonial Legacy

struggle for self-identity, autonomy, and control is central to postcolonial literature. In the play, Sidi navigates a dilemma between Lakunle, representing modernization, and Baroka, embodying tradition. Her pride in a photograph taken by an unknown Western man, featured in an international magazine, hints at a latent alignment with Western ideals. Yet Sidi is ultimately traditional: she refuses Lakunle’s help with her burdens, arguing that culturally, women are expected to carry their loads and might be mocked otherwise.

Sidi’s decision to marry Baroka can be read through multiple interpretive lenses, revealing tensions between agency, tradition, and modernity. On one hand, her choice appears to illustrate a form of hybridity, as theorized by Homi Bhabha. Hybridity involves the negotiation and blending of differing cultural logics to create a space that is neither entirely traditional nor fully modern. By consenting to marry Baroka, Sidi navigates between the strictures of Yoruba patriarchal norms and the emerging values of modernity represented by Lakunle. She exercises a subtle form of agency by negotiating the terms of her social identity within these frameworks, using her intelligence and charm to carve a position of influence even within an ostensibly constraining arrangement. In this sense, her marriage can be viewed as a strategic alignment that balances individual desire, societal expectation, and cultural continuity.

Yet, the hybridity reading is complicated by the deeply patriarchal context of Ilunjinle. Baroka's overt demonstration of power—symbolized by presenting Sidi with the stamp maker—asserts his dominance and underscores her constrained agency. Here, Sidi's decision risks being interpreted as a capitulation to patriarchal cunning. She is objectified as the village “jewel,” and her apparent choice is orchestrated by the male figures around her, particularly Baroka, who manipulates her admiration and curiosity. While Sidi may exert some degree of influence within this relationship, the structural imbalance remains undeniable: her ultimate compliance with Baroka's proposal can be seen as acquiescence to a system that privileges male authority under the guise of charm and benevolence.

The duality of Sidi's position highlights the broader postcolonial tension between preserving cultural identity and embracing social transformation. Lakunle represents a modernizing force that challenges tradition, emphasizing education and romantic ideals, whereas Baroka embodies continuity with indigenous structures and values. Sidi's decision thus becomes emblematic of the negotiation that postcolonial societies undergo, retaining essential cultural elements while adapting selectively to modern pressures. By marrying Baroka, Sidi does not entirely reject modernity; rather, she synthesizes elements of both worlds, suggesting that hybridity does not necessarily imply complete emancipation but a pragmatic accommodation to reality.

Sidi's choice shows the ambivalence inherent in female agency within patriarchal structures. While she navigates complex social expectations and personal desires, her autonomy is circumscribed by the ingenuity of male power and societal norms. Whether her decision is read as an act of resistance through hybrid negotiation or a surrender to patriarchal cunning depends largely on the interpretive emphasis: the former emphasizes her adaptive intelligence, the latter her structural vulnerability. In either reading, Sidi's character remains a poignant exploration of the intersection between gender, power, and cultural negotiation in postcolonial African literature. However, Baroka exemplifies Homi Bhabha's concept of Hybridity, merging traditional authority with subtle concessions to modern influence, illustrating the complex negotiation between continuity and change in postcolonial societies:

BAROKA: The old must flow into the new, Sidi, Not blind itself or stand foolishly Apart. A girl like you must inherit Miracles which age alone reveals. Is this not so?

SIDI: Everything you say, Bale, Seems wise to me. (p. 54)

In light of the above, Baroka rejects Western superiority and its hegemonic tendencies, demonstrating that the old and new generations must learn from each other. Similarly, Sidi returns the book of photographs to Lakunle, admitting that she had tried to destroy it but her fingers were too weak. This gesture signifies that no culture is inherently superior to another, reflecting the concept of Hybridity. In other words, we must acknowledge the reality of cultural identities and differences between the Western and African worlds, without allowing one to dominate the other. The message of the playwright, Wole Soyinka, is clear. That the characters ultimately do not embrace Lakunle's Westernized lifestyle in matters of love and marriage underscores Soyinka's affirmation of Yoruba culture as ethical, enduring, and deeply rooted. The play offers an alternative perspective to Western claims of superiority over Africans, celebrating the aesthetics, values, and wisdom embedded in African traditions. Its purpose is both to highlight the consequences of colonialism and to promote a respectful appreciation of indigenous culture.

Conclusion

The Lion and the Jewel by Wole Soyinka vividly portrays the clash of cultures between European and African values. Termed an amusing play, it employs satire to reveal the follies and idiosyncrasies of its characters, while offering keen insight into modern life. The work reflects Soyinka's profound understanding and reverence for Yoruba traditions, emphasizing that true progress or modernity need not entail abandoning one's roots. Rather, genuine growth arises from a careful negotiation between tradition and innovation, where cultural heritage informs contemporary life without being overshadowed. Through the interplay of characters and their choices, Soyinka underscores that African traditions are not obstacles but vital foundations for identity, dignity, and social cohesion. The play thus stands as a celebration of cultural authenticity, a critique of colonial influence, and a timeless reminder of the value of remaining connected to one's heritage while engaging with the broader world.

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