

Matriarchy versus Patriarchy: Redefining Womanhood in Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*

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Abstract

Matriarchy gives central role of political leadership and moral authority to women. It is a society where the woman is given a role which is much beyond her role as a mother figure in the community. Historically the term patriarchy was used to refer to autocratic rule by the male head of the family however in modern times it more generally refers to social system in which power is primarily held by an adult man. The paper aims to give a brief glimpse of different societies of the world & further gives us a better understanding of the conflict that has ever been prevalent in different cultures of the world. The paper puts into picture different matriarchies that still exist today which proves the fact that patriarchy has neither at all times nor ever been the only form of society. At the same time, the existence of matriarchal societies in our time or survival within the patriarchies point towards the danger of continuous patriarchalization of still existing or newly formed matriarchal social relations. The paper presents the path of resistance adopted by the women in so called patriarchal set up, where she instead of accepting the things, questions, demands and fights for her own self rather than facing multiple oppressions with particular reference to Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*.

Patriarchy is characterized by current and historical unequal power relations between women and men where women are systematically disadvantaged and oppressed & the minority groups face multiple oppressions. The whole approach of the patriarchal society has been highly biased against the feminine gender. In most of the so called main stream patriarchal societies the role of women & their activities are considered less important. In this way there is a clear demarcation of male supremacy over females. The patriarchal order has always imposed silence on women as it was considered the most desirable virtue for women. Jasbir Jain's observation on the perception of women which has existed since ages, where she describes women as equally important as men and women's revolt against the menfolk, but in terms of solidarity with her indigenous culture.

A fairly prevalent perception of woman across cultures, has framed them as matter & as such subordinate. Their physical beauty, role in the procreative process and use as objects of pleasure and sexual satisfaction has thrown their other faculties into the background. Culture role models, as they have percolated down the ages, have emphasized this depriving the women of agency. But as have seen in the creation myth, one without the other is incomplete. If the male is the vital breath and the

female is the speech, apparently each is essential to the existence of the other.
(24)

There is a large section of intelligentsia which dismissed the whole notion of matriarchy. They claim that matriarchy never existed in history. This kind of sweeping judgement and universal rejection of real possibility of existence of an ancient matriarchal order shows the typical male bias or Eurocentric biased society which exists from thousands of years. This is a typical linear thinking which only accepts a patriarchal form of society. This view supports the claim that the male is bound to rule in any type of social set up and male dominance, is but natural.

The conflict between matriarchy and patriarchy has existed since ancient times since once has always taken precedence over the other. There are several myths which explain the conflict between matriarchy & patriarchy. Patriarchy must be understood as a process which continually extends its borders & which at the same time, goes deeper & deeper. This process obviously tends towards becoming a system but as basically never ending. Matriarchy is taken as a “second culture” within patriarchy. Patriarchy is not just a system of domination, especially of that of men over women. It has an objective which goes far beyond that of domination.

PATRIARCHY V/S MATRIARCHY: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Patriarchal set up has always been predominant imposing challenges on matriarchal set up. In the early period of history, Indian women enjoyed much freedom. She participated in religious rites, received education, was an enlightened member of society. But mostly, women remained confined to homes-though they enjoyed the right to choose their life partners. The ‘swayamvara’ granted them an authority in choice of their husbands. The matrimonial bond was sacred. The mythological stories of Sita, Savitri and Anusuya were so deeply ingrained and engrossed into the psyche of Indian women that husband was never considered a tyrant. Gender construction in India has its roots in Sita’s agnipariksha, Draupadi’s chirharan and Damayanti’s adherence to the pavitrata code. What concerns us here is not only how women have been portrayed in them but also how men have been projected in the patriarchal roles as well as in their masculinity.

If we go back to the ancient times the Aryans who represent the patriarchy have always suppressed the women, may it be a goddess or women. Gita Thandani, an Indian lesbian, in her book ‘Sakiyani’ has given numerous accounts where feminine of the original Sanskrit has been translated to masculine. She gives the references of various temples where the goddess have been mutilated & either replaced by or turned into masculine god. One of the attempts to rewrite goddess mythology concerns goddess Kali. There is many of artwork showing the fierce Kali standing on the corpse of Shiva with her tongue hanging out of mouth. In the Shaivita and Shakti traditions the exposed tongue represents her fierce, defiant aspect & the iconography is about her dominance of Shiva. But in the Aryan retelling, the tongue is said to represent shame- Kali is showing remorse for accidentally stepping on her ‘husband’ Shiva.

In the Aryan ideology a woman is made to realize that her husband is in all ways her master and guru. The condition of women under the Aryan was brutal and dehumanizing.

Aryan ideology holds that a woman is worth half a man. This further depicts that how women even in India were not allowed to live a life of privilege.

However, in Africa, matriarchy has been dominant in some parts. For West Africa, one aspect remains consistent, the African people have a very different approach to power among women than the traditional western conception implies. In traditional West African culture, power actually lies in the dynamic differences between the roles of men and women. This analysis of the power of women, concentrates primarily on the culture of Benin and the widespread Yoruba people. They are the women who have reached one of the highest positions of power. One of the primary examples of the female power is the “Queen Mother”. Queen Mother has sovereign power over their own courts, and help the King’s in making decisions regarding the ruling of the kingdom. The queen mother is like a high ranking chief.

However in other parts of the country, matriarchy has been at the lowest ebb. African women have been struggling to attain recognition as prophets, decisions makers, heroines, martyrs & challengers of the status quo. They stand on their own, rather than in the shadows of men with whom they share the literary stage. These women shake off their emotional and economic dependence on men to become self-aware, confident and politically conscious: be it because of hunger, war, destitution, physical exploitation or mental and economic oppression. African writers have created role models who are authentic throw backs on their fore mothers.

The colonized woman, did not accept her situation without devising strategies to combat and subvert her loss of status, as housewives, combatants, traders, prostitutes, ordinary women, their everyday lives offering no great opportunities for heroism, discover that the seeds of rebellion which have been lying dormant in them, are activated under conditions of political and economic stress. They then react by actively dismantling the structure of their oppression. The women in Sembene Ousmane’s “God’s bits of wood” allow hunger and thirst to change their roles. They switch their roles to become bread winners, their closed domestic space expanding to encompass other activities outside house. Sembene Ousmane ably demonstrates the resilience and the power of women even under the most difficult forms of oppression. The pressures are tremendous but these women find themselves equal to the task, because they have inherited a tradition of womanhood that is strong and supportive. Many of these power mechanisms surface in times of crisis, shedding the demeanor of submissiveness, extricating other modes by which African women have an access to power. “Failure” in one aspect of their lives does not disempower them or render them dysfunctional in the society. It is this ability to quickly take in hand one’s own life and live it in the way one wants. She is not the one who can be exploited or who needs to be rescued. She looks like a Jaguar. Hence, she is called Jagua. “She holds her victims in her clutches; none can resist her, in the art of seduction she is incomparable.” (24)

Among the galaxy of African writers, Wole Soyinka holds a prominent place and has portrayed women in more powerful and poignant way. The prime concern of Soyinka has been to fight for dignity, his fight for justice meted out to the common man; this makes him one of the most powerful writers of the 21st century. Soyinka portrays a woman who has the aptitude and capacity to win over men, women who are enjoying varying degrees of

economic independence, despite social and cultural norms that put them under the patriarchal authority. Wole Soyinka, a celebrated African writer has shown the failure of imperialist efforts to uproot the natives from environment which lies in their custom and which is Barbaric and uncivilized. My paper attempts to analyze the matriarchal versus patriarchal set up of African societies as depicted in Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* in which woman stands out as a bold voice despite in a patriarchal set up. The paper aims to put into picture the women characters who can be regarded as the champion of feminism in view of his projection of "independent" as well as feminine women". Soyinka does not depict his women characters in fettering stereotypic images of the "queen's looking glass" but they are in fact projected as powerful voices.

REJOICING WOMANHOOD: Sidi in *The Lion and the Jewel*

One of the most significant themes in the plays of Wole Soyinka is struggle for power between men and women and traditionalism versus modernity. His plays on one hand depict the conflict between the traditional and the modern and on the other powerfully project women as embodiments of great strength to shape the destiny of Nigerian nation which had to undergo the pangs of colonialism, which shook the very basis of Nigerian society. Soyinka portrays women as a vibrant blend of modern versus traditional values. Women in his plays possess the capacity and aptitude to outwit men, thereby showing their potential not only to win over the hearts but also the state of affairs.

In one of his early plays *The Lion and the Jewel* which was written during his stay at the university of Leeds in 1958 when the Nigerian nation was simmering. He has portrayed his heroine as the one who rejoices at her womanhood and plays a significant role in the development of the plot by conveying the vision of the dramatist by choosing the firmly grounded Baroka than the half-ripened school-teacher, Lakunle. The plot centers around a beautiful young girl named Sidi & her experiences. Sidi believes that herself worth is above & beyond others, including Baroka, the most powerful man in the village. She says: "If that is true, then I am more esteemed than Baroka, the lion of Ilujinle, this means I'm greater than the fox of the undergrowth, the living God among men" (25)

Sidi, the African protagonist holds her African traditions despite being barraged by the western ideals suggested by Lakunle, the school teacher. Although Sidi was featured in a western magazine, she still held true to her culture & society. The conflict between Sidi & Baroka depicts that the strong & young Sidi was threat to Baroka's traditional, male dominant society. Soyinka portrays Sidi as independent, feminine, quick witted and decisive. Sidi is the jewel, the village belle whose beauty has been captured by a photographer & published in a magazine. As a result she sees herself as above anyone in the village. Sidi's refusal to marry Lakunle until he pays the bride price & ultimately marrying Baroka, not only depicts the victory of traditional values over western ones but describes the ability of women to take decisions concerning her life. Sidi is shown as the one who rejoices her womanhood. Sidi is quite happy when she is informed by Sadiku that Baroka is no longer a man, since he has lost his manhood. Hearing this, Sidi longs to go to Baroka's palace to see him thwarted. Moreover, Sidi refuses to attend a small feast in her honour at Baroka's palace since she gets suspicious of Baroka's intentions. She knows that a woman who has supped with him one night becomes his wife or concubine the next. The most relevant theme in the play is the marginalization of women as property in Nigerian

society. Traditionally, women were seen as property that could be bought, sold or accumulated. Even the modern Lakunle falls victim to this, by looking down on Sidi for having a smaller brain & later by wanting to marry her after she has lost her virginity since, no dowry was required in such a situation, but to his surprise he is rejected and eventually she goes for Baroka, the village chief. This further depicts her ability to take decisions & her adherence to the traditional values, which she regards as far better than the modern values. Sidi after defeating the lion with her strength feels immensely happy. Soyinka describes a woman who reduces men to nothing. "Oh! High and mighty lion, we really scotched you, we women undid you in the end. I killed him with my strength" (42)

The wrestling match in Baroka's bedroom is of course a metaphor for the power struggle which is about to take place between himself and Sidi. Sidi's zest for life makes her not only an individual but an individualist. Soyinka has advanced the process of individual assertiveness one step further, to Sidi her own personal values are what matters, "she never compromises". Sadiku, another woman character, is Baroksa's main wife and his betrayer. She betrays him and is utterly satisfied when she hears that the most powerful man has become impotent and tries to gain something out of the situation. She asks Sidi to go to his place, make use of her bashful looks to win him first and then destroy him and torment him until he weeps, "you'll have to match fox's cunning...torment him until he weeps" (53). She even sets out to celebrate though she had promised not to say a word to anyone. In her celebrations, through through songs she tells Sidi about what happened & how great women are. She represents a part of human who finds pleasure in betraying others in some way or the other. Sadiku's glee at Baroka's impotence may be partly based on resentment at having long been abandoned by him as a lover.

As a woman in polygamous society, Sadiku has been trained to put with many things which may hurt her self-respect as an individual. She has not merely to put up with the favorites which his husband has been choosing from time to time, but also invite the woman on whom his fancy falls to marry. On the surface, she is loyal to her husband, as Baroka calls her "faithful lizard." But Soyinka portrays her individuality in revealing to us her long standing resentment at sharing her husband with many women. Her stifled self-respect asserts itself in her dance of triumphs at the supposed loss of manhood by Baroka. Baroka and Sadiku both lay a trap in which village belle Sidi is caught. Sadiku lies to Sidi about Baroka's impotence; that Baroka is no longer a man, as he has lost his manhood. Sidi falls to Sadiku's lies. She asks Sidi to go to Baroka's palace and goad him, taunt him, torment him and enjoy seeing him thwarted as it was a good opportunity to mock at the devil, but unknown to Sidi that she was caught in a trap laid by both of them she falls into it. Further Sidi's desire to go to the palace to see Baroka's wretched condition describes her curiousness to see a man thwarted and defeated and her wish wish to enjoy his state of discomfort and distress. This depicts the cunning and clever attitude of women. Soyinka depicts his woman characters as the one who have the ability to destroy men with their strength and who at the same time feel proud of being a woman with all their feminine qualities which makes them supreme. Sadiku's boldness as a woman is depicted in the very lines when she tells Baroka that it was she who killed great Okiki with her strength and warns Baroka that it is the women only who has always consumed men, destroyed them and she will destroy him too.

Soyinka portrays both Sidi and Sadiku as women who enjoy their womanhood. The idea that woman were simply beings to be kept and used was not acceptable. Woman had particular sensibilities and needed to be wooed not just claimed. Women are described as important as men and Soyinka equates his women characters with men infact elevates them above men. They make men work at their whims, being powerful and bold. Soyinka depicts his women characters not only as beings but as the ones who hold a special position in the society. The same has been depicted through his women characters that have the capability and control to rule over men.

At our whims we make you dance; like the foolish top you think the world revolves around you...fools! Fools! ... It is you who run giddy while we stand still and watch and draw your frail thread from you, slowly turning till nothing is left but a rusty old stick. Take warnings, my master, we'll scotch you in the end. (56)

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