

A Study of Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* from the Black Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

Black feminism is one of the most followed and argued feministic terms in the last four decades. The black woman's oppression was the result of a double bind i.e. of being woman and being black. This feminist movement emphasises the issues of class and labour, society and tradition, sisterhood of black women, and differences in terms of class and sexual preferences. Black Feminism is always associated with African American women's writings. This approach is suitable to analyse Okot p'Bitek's poetry to disclose feministic and social issues and tendencies of the post-colonial African society. *Song of Lawino* is an Epic Poem deals with the domestic life of Lawino, a traditional African woman and her husband, Ocol. Conflict between the indigenous culture and Western way of life is explored in the work.

Feminism, a political stance and a theory, was emerged out to emancipate women folk by determining and providing space for females in every section of the society. The simple movement was raised after the European women felt a tremor created by Industrial and French Revolution in the continent. Evolution over years, in the 20th century, the movement covers all females and the men and matters related to them, under various terms. All the variations and divisions are formed to build the prima factor of the movement, the Universal Womanhood / Sisterhood.

Black feminism is one of the most followed and argued feministic terms in the last four decades. The black woman's oppression was the result of a double bind i.e. of being woman and being black. The black feminism emerges to question: "the masculinist-patriarchal ideologies of the black movement and the racism in the feminist movement" (Nayar, 110). This feminist movement emphasises the issues of class and labour, society and tradition, sisterhood of black women, and differences in terms of class and sexual preferences (Nayar, 111). Black Feminism is always associated with African American women's writings. This approach is suitable to analyse Okot p'Bitek's poetry to disclose feministic and social issues and tendencies of the post-colonial African society.

In the 20th century poetry, Okot p'Bitek (1931-1982) is considered as the most vigorous voice in African Literature and one of the most notable poets of African continent. The Ugandan poet belonged to Luo community of North Uganda. He was much inspired by his parents and native oral literature, – tales, proverbs and songs of Acholi folklore – which moulded him to produce great literary master pieces. Much influenced by his mother's teaching, from her name Lacwaa Cerina, he entitled his great epic poem, *Song of Lawino* (1966). It was originally written in the language Luo and later it was translated by the poet himself. About the translation he said: "rendered the sharp edges of the warrior's sword rusty and blunt, and also murdered rhythm and rhyme" (Liukkonen). But the much acclaimed epic work brought him great laurels, wide acclamation and international recognition. In 2001, Taban lo Liyong published a new translation of the poem, *The Defense of Lawino*, which is more faithful to the Acholi original. *Song of Ocol*, *Song of Prisoner* and *Song of Malaya* are his other major writings published between 1970 and 1972.

Song of Lawino is an Epic Poem deals with the domestic life of Lawino, a traditional African woman and her husband, Ocol. The story of the couple is presented in the form of narration, which is narrated by Lawino. The long poem is in thirteen sections, around 5000 lines. There are divisions in every section with titles. They seem to be individual poems in the form of dramatic monologue. Lawino, a rural, uneducated, civilized African wife, is the speaker of the poem laments over Ocol's anglophilic attitude and behaviour. He devaluates African tradition and wants to westernize its culture, and land.

Ocol, is a born African but is fascinated by the western type of education, and despises his land, people, customs and culture in name of western mode of civilization. He adapts western values and longs for a European way of life, as Soyinka's Lakunle, in *The Lion and the Jewel*, who discards his society and always fascinates for the illusionary world of the West. Probably, Ocol is an imitation of Lakunle in *The Lion and the Jewel*, which is published and popularised over Europe and Africa, just before a year of publication of *Song of Lawino*.

Ocol calls himself a modern, progressive, civilised man, who has read extensively and widely. Being under the service of British ruling, the newly learned language English and its power over the continent make him to feel proud of it. He regards English language as a subject of knowledge not as a language. It is a very common attitude of the people of the colonized countries towards ideas and matters of colonisers. It is apt to call him a manifestation of the attitude of the educated second and third generations of the post-colonial Third-World countries. But he uses the coloniser's language to abuse his wife and own people.

Ocol considers Black people are primitive and uncivilised, so their religions and rituals are primitive and harmful. Moreover, dance of the people in rituals are seen as the "mortal sin".

He says Black People are primitive
And their ways are utterly harmful,
Their dances are mortal sins

They are ignorant, poor and diseased! ("My Husband's..." 23-26)

The dance and rituals are part and parcel of the lives of African people. To them they are not merely dances for entertainment or time pass; instead they are linkers between the man and god, man and nature, born and dead, and physical and metaphysical world. The Western education never provides any space to understand such a deep ideas and core philosophies of African tradition. The west always believes that they are the supreme masters of the world, and it is their burden to educate and civilize the colonised. Once, the South African Nobel laureate Desmond Tutu said, "When the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said 'Let us pray.' We closed our eyes. When we opened them we had the Bible and they had the land". The foremost intention of many European preachers' is not just spreading their religion but to occupy their land and wealth by calling the religion of the colonised as pagan religion, their methods of worships are sins, and for their sins, death is imminent to them. It is the most condemnable attitude of the west that considering their religion as holy, which makes its followers to reach heaven and "others's" as unholy, which takes its followers to hell. Out of fear, they converted the people and made them to speak and act against their own native religion. Ocol is a victim of such preaching, so he says that the natives are "ignorant, poor and diseased". Here "ignorant" means the natives could not distinguish the real redeeming religion of the colonisers and pseudo religions of the colonized. Therefore, Ocol, the representation of the colonisers' mentality, feels sorry for the natives, who are cursed to death for not following the religion of new preachers.

Ocol is fascinated by the Western life style. He expects his wife to follow the new mode of life. Contrastingly, Lawino is a traditional African woman, who is strong in her perspective, like the roots of big trees. He rejects the "thing" for being a village woman, uneducated – in the sense, she does not know English language – "it" cannot distinguish between good and bad, old type, and among all the reasons, "it" is no longer attractive. In the peak of male chauvinistic attitude, he treats her as a thing in his life. Because, she is not a modern girl like, his new girl friend, Clementine.

But my husband despised me,
He laughs at me,
He says he is too good
To be my husband. ("The Woman..." 148-151)

In the previous section, he humiliates Lawino by calling her a "thing". In this section, he despises her and gives a self-appraisal that he is too good to be her husband. He adds more reasons for his rejection that she is too old and has not been to school. Here Lawino is doubly oppressed; one for being woman and another for being black woman. Ocol ill treats his wife as a stereotype, male-chauvinistic, African male. But the most disgustful thing is he rejects her for not possessing the qualities of a white woman.

Black feminism is applicable to a literary work, in which a female character undergoes lot of troubles and turmoil not only by the male chauvinistic attitude of her male society but also by the ill treatment of the white society. In *Song of Lawino*, the oppression of the colonisers is not represented by any white characters, but by the character of Ocol. Being a woman of the land, Lawino is discarded by her husband. The reasons for his discarding are his acquisition with the language of the coloniser and his growth under the education system of the west; both moulded him as a modern, progressive and civilised. But illogically he expects his wife should possess these qualities. When she does not, she becomes the matter of rejection.

Lawino a doubly suppressed woman is taken as a central subject and mouthpiece of Okot. In the beginning of the poem, "My Husband's Tongue is Bitter", she cries and complaints to her clansmen about her husband's attitude towards her: "My clansmen, I cry / ... The Insults of my man / Are painful beyond

bearing” (“My Husband’s...” 1-5). She cries that he abuses and scorns her and her people in English. Here Lawino scornfully compares his attitude of abusing his own people in English, with a hen that “eats its own eggs” and with Nile Perch. It is a freshwater food and game fish, which feeds on fish including his own species. Ocol’s attitude is same as the fish, that, he abuses his own people but hunted by his white masters for fun. Like “mad hyena”, chiefly feeds on carrion, he does not know the value of great things of his soil, but runs for dead and infertile.

For his love of western way of life and Clementine, Ocol discards his language, religion, society and also his wife, for being primitive and “no longer attractive” (34). Lawino compares his new lady love’s beauty with some disgusting things: lips with wild cat “has dipped its mouth in blood,” mouth with open ulcer, “face looks pale like wizard,” “body resembles/ The ugly coat of the hyena” and her physique “looks as if she has been struck/ By lightning” (“My Husband’s...” 44-61).

The poet uses the literary form, dramatic monologue effectively to portray the impact of the West in the African soil. Regarding this, Ramazani says “When Okot p’Bitek assumes the agitated voice of a village woman who excoriates her Westernized husband as a slave to ‘white men’s ways’, he hybridizes Acholi songs of abuse with Western dramatic monologue” (Ramazani, 607). As Chinua Achebe said in the context of postcolonial criticism, it is one of the ways of turning their (white) own weapon (English language) against them (white). Okot p’Bitek uses a technique of dramatic monologue that the speaker answers the questions which a reader or listeners likes to ask her/him. In these poems, Lawino describes her rival, Clementine’s beauty with the most horrible images. A Reader or listener may think that she rebukes her rival out of jealousy. She answers them, “I do not deny... / But when you see the beautiful woman ... / You feel a little pity for her!” (“The Woman...” 86-96). Then in the most sardonic way she describes the nature of woman that she makes up her dry skinny breasts with cotton and cow-hide and pretends as young girl. As she goes on portray her, she gets furious and vehemently says:

How many kids
Has this woman sucked?
The empty bags on her chest
Are completely flattened, dried.
Perhaps she has aborted many!
Perhaps she has thrown her twins
In the pit latrine! (“The Woman...” 114-121)

Here the poet expresses anger of his people against the whites for their long period of domination and spread of their culture, in the name of modernity. It maddens the young generation and degrades the future. Clementine’s imitation of the west not only spoils her physical beauty by following foods, diets and the way of living, but also makes her infertile. It echoes the lines of T.S. Eliot in *The Wasteland* “Here is no water but only rock” (“What the Thunder Said” 10).

The beautiful one is dead dry
Like a stump,
She is meatless
Like a shell
On the dry river bed. (“The Woman...” 143-7)

Though he is unfair to her, Lawino explicates him, what is love, and how a familial structure should be built. She does not consider Clementine as her rival because a man’s love for another woman is natural it is only on the superficial level of physical relationship. From the context of black feminism, she is a self sustained woman, who is not at all depending on her husband at any time. But she wants to save the roots of her family, which is the base of the society like African. When it is weakened, the structure of society falls down and it will make them to move to the periphery, where centre will be occupied by colonizer or their slaves. She protests to save her society for the future generation. She firmly believes that it is the responsibility of every one in the society to take her/his indigenous tradition, customs, and civilization to future.

Towards the end of the both sections, she discards the customs of foreigners, which is followed by the people like, Ocol. As she does not belong to it, she regards nothing for it. It is apt to quote the words of Ngugi wa Thiong, who writes in *Homecoming* that “Lawino is the voice of the peasantry and her ridicule and scorn is aimed at the class basis of Ocol’s behaviour” (75). She asks Ocol to preserve the tradition, if he could not, at least he should not be the destroyer of the tradition.

I do not understand
The way of foreigners

But I do not despise their customs.
 Why should you despise yours?
 Listen, my husband,
 You are the son of the chief.
 The pumpkin in the old homestead
 Must not be uprooted. (“The Woman...” 233-40)

In these poems, an evolution can be seen in the character of Lawino. At the beginning she cries and laments, then ridicules all subjects relates to the West, at last she asserts the values and prominence of indigenous culture and tradition and insists him that as he is son of the land, it is his responsibility to patronize and protect the roots of identity.

Okot p’Bitek is a real voice of African Society. He is a representation of his generation, who were torn between the ideologies of coloniser and colonised. The double suppression of Lawino – as a woman and as a black – makes his reader to concern for women folk and also the roots and identity of his society. Here the black feminist ideals are acted as a catalyst to bring out the predicaments of women society and ability of the black women to preserve their tradition and culture from hegemony of the West and their ideologies. He might have believed that a traditional African woman character like, Lawino, is suitable to express the degradation of traditional society under the cultural dominance of west. Lawino is a traditional African woman, like most of the Indian females, she knows to cry, laments over her problems, bares all situations, seeks solutions and at last stands resolute to create a better world for future generations. He puts his trust on women and considers this evolution in women will save the society and its entities like tradition and culture from the western hegemony. Okot p’Bitek is clear in this point that women are the principle force of a society. Even though they are in periphery, they have the ability to convert a house to home; those homes are the foundation of every society; those well-built societies form a better nation; and those nations create a better world for all, without any manmade discrimination on earth.

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