

Okot P' Bitek's Song of Lawino: Singing About the Right Of Present African Women

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Abstract

This paper visualizes Okot p'Bitek's Song of Lawino using the 'femafricanist' critical methodology in critical analysis. This work probes pungently into Ogundipe-Leslie's swipe on Song of Lawino and its author faulting the basis upon which her views were made. Song of Lawino delineates a socio-political pre-occupation in the emerging African nations, with recourse to its trends and prognosis. Lawino is projected as the true image of the oppressed African woman who has been deprived for centuries by her male counterpart. Consequently, Lawino is seen as being in the same shoes with Ramatoulaye and Aissatou in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* and Nnu Ego in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*. The major achievement of p'Bitek in the poem is his ability to portray the level of deprivation of the African woman and her seemingly endless struggles to free herself from her bondage.

Keywords: 'Femafricanist', Okot p'Bitek, 'Song of Lawino', pumpkin in the homestead

1. Introduction

In a celebrated paper entitled "The female writer and her commitment" which appeared in *African Literature Today*, Ogundipe-Leslie (1987:7) argued that Lawino is an impossible and unlikely image of the rural African woman. She did not however, go further to throw more light on her view. The crucial questions which any critic that is reading Song of Lawino for the first time must not fail to answer are: to what extent is Ogundipe-Leslie's view true? Is Lawino an unrealized impossible character in African literature? Is it true that in the immediate post-independence era in East Africa, there were no characters like Lawino? Without wasting time, we will like to state from the outset that Ogundipe-Leslie's comment cannot be substantiated at all. It is a comment that is coming from someone who is looking at p'Bitek's achievement in Song of Lawino with a prejudiced eye. Lawino is a highly realized character who has over the years emerged as an archetype in African literature. In the introduction to Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol, G.A. Heron writes:

In some circles in East Africa, the words Lawino and Ocol have become common nouns. You will hear the 'Ocols' and the 'Lawinos' of Africa praised or condemned in many arguments. The two characters have become prototypes of two opposing approaches to the cultural future of Africa (Song of Lawino, 1972: 2).

If Lawino were 'an impossible' and 'unlikely image' of the African woman as Ogundipe-Leslie would have us believe, certainly her figure would not have been widely accepted in East Africa as Heron informs us in his comment quoted above. Historically, there were uneducated women in the immediate post independence Africa some of whom happened to marry educated men. Unfortunately, some of these men gradually drifted away from the reach of their women through the process of acculturation. Lawino happens to be one of such unfortunate women. The reality of p'Bitek's story therefore, cannot be doubted.

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Continuing on her tirade, Ogundipe-Leslie adds, “In fact, this writer would like to submit that *Song of Lawino* is one of the most critically neglected works in African literature” (1987:7). In bringing up such a heavy charge against this literary text, one would have expected Ogundipe-Leslie to at least, give us the statistics upon which her judgment is based. One would, for instance, like to know how many critics that could address their critical essays to a particular literary work before we can say that such a literary work is not “critically neglected”. Unfortunately, we are not given such information.

The truth of the matter is that just like her other comment which is dismissed earlier; this particular statement is entirely untrue. Even before the publication of her critical tirade against p’Bitek in *African Literature Today*, No 15, 1987, *Song of Lawino* had enjoyed over twenty years of illuminating critical attention. As early as 1976, a full length book by G.A Heron had been devoted to the poetry of Okot p’Bitek which of course, includes *Song of Lawino*. In fact, even earlier in 1969, Ngugi wa Thiong’o had in a paper presented at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana praised p’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino*. In the paper which later appeared in his collection of essays *Homecoming*, Ngugi commended the poem which he said is “read everywhere, arousing heated debates” (1972:75). Similarly, the authors of *Toward the decolonization of African literature* had written glowingly on the achievement of p’Bitek in *Song of Lawino*:

...Okot’s songs- *Song of Lawino* [...] deal illuminatingly and well with matters of central importance for contemporary Africa. And they do so using authentic African imagery, proverbs, laments, invocations, and curses, thereby successfully rooting the modern in the traditional (1980:195).

Furthermore, Taban lo Liyong, a fellow tribesman of p’Bitek in *The Last Word* published in 1969 had spent time reacting to some of the issues raised by p’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino*. All these are in addition to numerous papers in scholarly journals that focus their attention on p’Bitek’s poetry. How then can any critic worth his salt dismiss such a work as ‘one of the most critically neglected works in African literature?’ In fact, Ogundipe-Leslie’s tantrums remind one of the proverbial saying that a literary critic is an impatient judge who makes up his mind to hang anyone brought before him for trial even before hearing the case!

Our aim in this paper is not to expend our energy answering what does not in fact, require an answer, but to read *Song of Lawino* using ‘femaffricanism’, a new critical methodology which is the emerging paradigm in African literary discourse. ‘Femaffricanism’ which was mooted by Femi Ojo-Ade in his book *Being Black Being Human* published in 1996 is the counterpoint of feminism. Unlike the Eurocentric and individualistic stance of feminism, ‘femaffricanism’ is Afrocentric and takes due cognizance of the communal nature of African societies. Such African cultural realities as marriage and family life, the subjugation of the African woman through religious and cultural myths etc as well as the struggle of the African woman to free herself from the oppressive tendencies by her male counterpart are all encapsulated in ‘femaffricanism’. In short, ‘femaffricanism’ captures the whole essence of being a woman in the African socio-cultural environment. When viewed against this background, one can easily see that *Lawino* is a woman whose rights are unjustly trampled upon by her husband who uses western myths to achieve his aim. She on the other hand, appeals to culture and tradition in a bid to win back the love of her husband and to hold her place in the society.

2. A ‘Femaffricanist’ Perspective of *Song of Lawino*

Song of Lawino was first published in 1966. Since then, it has been re-published and reprinted several times. The central focus of this poem is *Lawino*, a woman whose husband has gradually slipped through her fingers after his long sojourn in the courts of cultural imperialism through western education. This was a peculiar social problem in the immediate post independence era when there were a few western educated African men. Many such men felt alienated from their cultural roots and ipso facto sought to live out their borrowed values in African societies. G.A. Heron in the introduction to *Song of Lawino* posits that:

The poem is based on a real social problem, very common in rural areas in East Africa. Many wives have seen their husbands move out of the range of their education and experience through travel. Many 'Ocols' return home with nothing but contempt for their wives (1972:12).

It is this conflict of two divergent cultures and values and its implication on the African woman who is at the receiving end that lead Lawino to repeatedly warn Ocol her husband not to "uproot the pumpkin in the old homestead". According to Maduka and Eyoh (2000), 'pumpkin' is used here to symbolize the values of African civilization which are being desecrated by Western-trained African intellectuals (51). Lawino, thus, emerges as a strong defender of African cultural values just like Okwudiba in Ezeigbo's *House of Symbols*. Like Lawino her predecessor, Okwudiba queries those Africans who are deserting their cultural heritage in preference for Western cultural values:

I have a question for all those who have deserted our tradition: If you throw away the stone with which you cracked palm nuts in the season of famine, do you have a guarantee there will be no other famine in the days to come? Perhaps the senseless ones should count their teeth with their tongues and puzzle out another question: If a hen abandons her clucking sounds, with what would she gather and nurture her chicks? (*House of Symbols*, 82).

Song of Lawino is actually a lament. This is because the poem affords Lawino the opportunity to lament the series of losses that she (note that she is the image of Africa in the poem) has incurred through Western imperialism. First among her losses is the loss of the love of her husband Ocol who used to die for her in the past before his immersion in western cultural values through the acquisition of western education. Ezeigbo in her *House of Symbols*, to mention another African writer who has written on this, has blamed this loss on the colonial educational policy which favoured men more than women. McDonnell (2003:8) sees it in the same way:

Westernization and colonialism robbed them (women) of the right, as western capitalism relegated women's traditional roles to social and domestic categories and increased their dependency on husbands, fathers, and sons.

With the empowerment which acquisition of western education gives, men began to see themselves as superior. This is just what happens in the case of Ocol:

Ocol says he is a modern man,
A progressive and civilized man,
He says he has read extensively and widely
And he can no longer live with a thing like me
Who cannot distinguish between good and bad.
He says I am just a village woman,
I am of the old type,
And no longer attractive... (36).

From the foregoing, we can easily trace the root of Lawino's abandonment to her husband's acquisition of western education and by implication, western cultural values. After many years of being married to Lawino, Ocol suddenly realizes after his sojourn in the courts of western imperialism that she is 'of the old type/ And no longer attractive'. He equates her with an object and thus he refers to her as a 'thing'. He proceeds to oppress her psychologically by trying to kill her spirit through saying a lot of unsavoury things about her and her parents. Emotionally, he stops relating to her sexually as a husband. Furthermore, he brings home another wife, Clementina, whom he thinks fits his new status and satisfies his new concept of a beautiful woman. The point however, is that Ocol could still have married Clementina without creating a rift

between Lawino and himself. As an African woman and a defender of African traditions, Lawino understands that her husband could marry a second or third wife if he so chooses and so she has no ill feeling about Ocol's second marriage. Although, with the incursion of Christianity into Africa men are gradually sticking to one wife, those that stick to African traditions have no qualms about marrying more than one wife. What seems to baffle Lawino in this case is Ocol's choice of Clementina, a woman who by all standards is much older than she herself judging by her physical appearance:

But when you see the beautiful woman
With whom I share my husband
You feel a little pity for her!
Her breasts are completely shrivelled up,
They are all folded dry skins [...] (39).

Suffice it to say that in Africa, men that marry more than one wife do so with reasons. It could be that the first wife is childless or did not bear male children, or maybe not educated. It may also be for religious reasons as in Islam or other socio-economic reasons like bearing more children to assist in farm work etc. Essentially, the man marries a woman that is younger and even more beautiful than the first one. But none of these seems to be the reason behind Ocol's choice. What could have led Ocol into such a chimerical choice? If he was looking for an educated woman, why did he not go for a much younger woman? Or is Clementina the only educated African woman within his reach? An attempt to answer these nagging questions would strike at the root of the cause of the conflict in Ocol's first marriage.

In the poem we see Lawino making several references to sexual imagery for instance, while reflecting on traditional medicines, she says:

Medicines for leprosy and yaws,
For difficult childbirth and barrenness
For men whose spears
Refuse to stand up,
Lazy spears
That sleep on their bellies
Like earthworms! (96).

Obviously, the imagery of spear employed here is a sexual imagery referring to the male sex organ. Lawino is simply talking about a particular medicine that could cure impotence in men. Thus we can gather that sexual impotence is a real social problem in her society. She attributes this to curses inflicted on a man by his mother when he unjustifiably offends her just as Ocol is guilty of:

A mother's anger is bitter,
It is fierce like lightning
And boils like thunder.
If you make her angry
She will strike below her belly button,[...]
Your vitality will go,
You will behave
As if you were a half-wit,
Your manhood will disappear

And like a castrated bullock
Women will be perfectly safe with you! (99).

It is obvious that Ocol has a mother's curse hanging on him (recall when he tried to cut down the tree in his late father's shrine) and this perhaps has led to loss of his manhood. His loss of manhood is perhaps at the root of his rejection of the sexually active Lawino whom he can no longer satisfy. This explains his marriage to Clementina who by all standards is a hag. Much later in the poem, Lawino counsels him to seek peace with his mother and other family members whom he had offended when he was trying to abolish everything African from their ancestral homestead so that his vitality would be restored:

Beg forgiveness from them
And ask them to give you
A new spear
A new spear with a sharp and hard point.
A spear that will crack the rock.
Ask for a spear that you will trust
One that does not bend easily
Like the earthworm.
Ask them to restore your manhood!
For I am sick
Of sharing a bed with a woman! (119).

Therein is the crux of the matter. But be that as it may, there are other pertinent issues which Lawino raises in her lamentation. Apart from the connubial tenderness that no longer exists between them, she is worried that her husband has abandoned the communal ethos of African societies and embraced wholesale western individualism. He no longer welcomes visitors to his house. Even his own relatives including his mother are no longer welcomed in his house:

And when visitors have arrived
My husband's face darkens,
He never asks you in,
And for greeting
He says
'What can I do for you?' (68).

This is completely un-African. Apart from Ocol's individualism, he rejects everything African: food, clothing, music, hairstyle, customs, etc. Ocol's hatred for African values is so intense that it baffles Lawino who wonders how an African brought up in African ethos could spit fire against such ethos. She wonders why an African could substitute his ways of life with that of another race. In her view, the ways of the white folks are valid and serve them well while the ways of the black folks are valid and also serve them well. If no white folk would desire to be an African, why should an African desire to be a white folk? This is a question which the Ocols and Clementinas of Africa should answer.

3. The Image of Lawino in the Poem

Lawino is a perfect image of the oppressed African woman whose rights are trampled upon by her male counterpart. There are many women in Africa today whose lots are not different from that of Lawino; women whose rights are undermined by their male counterparts. Expectedly, this has been the subject of discussions

in feminine circles. In African literary works, there are other women that share similar fate with Lawino. Ramatoulaye and Aissatou in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* are good examples. Similarly, Nnu Ego in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* is another example among others. While Nnu Ego leaves her first husband's house and remarries because of the ill treatment she receives from him; Aissatou leaves Mawdo Ba for similar reasons but with a firm resolve not to remarry. But Ramatoulaye and Lawino remain firm in their belief in the sanctity of matrimony, thus refusing to quit. This is not an indication of their backwardness or weakness but an acknowledgement of the simple fact that true African women do not believe on escapism as a solution to matrimonial problems. They prefer to stay and seek solutions to their problems. Commenting on this attitude of the African woman, Ezeigbo (2012) argues:

Women have to really negotiate with men to have a stake ... because our society is very patriarchal and women don't really have many chances to make progress if they don't have the co-operation of men.

No wonder Lawino urges her husband to seek peace with his people and ancestors so that his former estate might be restored.

Furthermore, contrary to Ogundipe-Leslie's insinuations, Lawino (although a rural illiterate woman) manifests a firm understanding of the real issues such as widespread poverty, illiteracy, poor health care delivery system, food insecurity etc which leaders of the emerging African nations should be expending their energies on instead of fighting one another as is the case with Ocol and his younger brother:

And while the pythons of sickness
Swallow the children
And the buffaloes of poverty
Knock the people down
And ignorance stands there
Like an elephant,
The war leaders
Are tightly locked in bloody feuds,
Eating each other's liver [...] (111).

Lawino is bothered that political independence has brought disunity and feud in African nations instead of peace, progress and prosperity. Tribal hatred and ethnic consciousness are the order of the day. Religious extremism such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, Tuareg rebels in Mali, Alshabab militants in East Africa etc are daily decimating the population of the continent. Such situation does not augur well for the newly independent states. In the light of the above, Lawino wonders:

Where is the peace of uhuru?
Where the unity of independence? (107)

It is therefore surprising that a woman that shows this level of awareness is disparaged just because she is not educated in the narrow western sense and does not know how to use new gadgets and appliances coming from overseas. Too bad!

4. Conclusion

Song of Lawino is a very prominent work in African literature because of its afrocentric stand on various issues that affect life in Africa. P'Bitek's achievement in the poem lies in his vivid portrayal of the level of victimization and subjugation of the African woman. It also lies in his portrayal of the African woman's effort to free herself from her bondage within socially accepted framework such as negotiating with her counterpart instead of nagging and organizing bra-burning campaigns. This is where 'femafricanism' comes into play. As earlier noted, 'femafricanism' focuses on African women's struggle to free themselves

from age long subjugation. This struggle is carried out bearing in mind that those things which are good in African culture should not be uprooted but rather upheld hence, Lawino's persistent cry that the pumpkin in the old homestead should not be uprooted. It is not a struggle of women against men, but women and men against negative and harmful cultural practices. Along this line, Song of Lawino could be viewed from the same perspective like other African literary works that express similar concern about the plight of women in Africa like So Long a Letter. Lawino may not be educated in the narrow western conception of education, however, she is a woman that is intensely aware and is concerned about the restoration of sanity in her home and the society at large. This is where the usefulness of Song of Lawino as a literary work lies.

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