

# Contemporary human manners as reflected in East African Poetry: A tri- model characters in Okot p' Bitek's *Song of Lawino*

Bazimaziki Gabriel

University of Rwanda- College of Education, School of Education, Department of Humanities and Language Education P.O Box 55 Rwamagana

**Abstract**— “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye”, (Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*). This study consists of literary criticism in East African poetry with particular interest in Okot p' Bitek's *Song of Lawino* under feminist approach. The study has explored the theme of oppression, women right violation specifically because of human nature of weaknesses coupled with wickedness geared by ignorance for self-destruction in favour of the outsider, modernity being at the heart of the problem. It has been found that Lawino's husband, Ocol, over-civilised until he now rejected his tradition. Clementine won totally Ocol to the detriment of Lawino, a traditional woman, whose accusations to the clansmen is revealing the role of the clan in the settlement of the house conflict in African tradition. The study showed how human society is paved with temptations and traps coupled with attractions that may lead to family destruction by the outsiders depicted in the image of Clementine as a modern beautiful wife. Since Feminist theory posits that women should be free from men- the oppressors, that women can become what they want if given their right, this paper ranges among the foundation laid for human rights respect for the sake of the oppressed among different societies.

**Keywords**— Literature, tradition, human society, characters, mirror, liberal feminism, modernity, conservatism, women oppression.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Antoine de Saint Exupéry said “Life has taught us that love does not consist in gazing at each other but in looking outwards towards together in the same direction. According to Andre Gide, *Autumn Leaves*, “It is better to be hated for what you are than to be loved for what you are not”. I choose these words to introduce this study as they are teaching on how human beings should stand and behave rightly. According to Bazimaziki (2017) literary forms come to us in

various forms and each of them conveys important messages that help human being cope with the life difficulties they encounter. Thus Literature mirrors man and the world around him. When people read literary genres, they know about the ills and mores of human beings over their fellow human creatures. Literature also conveys the messages about how human beings behaved triumphantly in difficult times and overcame challenges. Such messages motivate readers and cause them not to cut moral as they feel there are people who suffered more than them as revealed by what happened to characters they have already read. Elsewhere, some other literary genres affect people in case the latter feel sympathetic when they are exposed to such messages. This is why literature is considered as a didactic tool since it reflects reality and depicts human beings and the world around them. Man coping with the ills and mores of life, man as oppressor on the one hand and victim on the other hand, human being coming to their fellow human beings' help, thus the pros and cons of life are depicted in various writings, literary genres in particular be they fiction or nonfiction. Poetry is one of these literary genres whose origins had been grounded on the instinct of imitation which is natural to man. The Genesis (2:21-22 ) tells how God made a deep sleep to fall on man (Adam), took one of his ribs, closed up the flesh in its place and used that rib taken from man to make a woman, and brought her to the man. The latter concluded that that woman is a bone of his, a flesh of his flesh. However, what happens in some corners of the world reflects that man is an enemy of himself. Okot p' Bitek is one of the leading East African writers who best illustrates the extent to which a man is a wolf of himself. Although his work of art *Song of Lawino* was published in the 1960s, it still has an impact on the current society. Truth to tell, *song of Lawino* is a didactic tool to people in different corners as it mirrors some of contemporary human societies by mirroring what is happening here and there in Africa and even beyond.

## II. BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE

Literature depicts human beings and the world around them. It is a mirror of society. Shakeel et al. (2015) contend that poetry tackles the problem of women oppression in many dimensions such as political, social, cultural and religious levels. The same idea is echoed by Moorthi (2015) that woman has been the focus of many literary works down the centuries. One cannot easily ignore the Indian woman in an age of alienation and identity crisis. With their characteristics different ages, classes, and spheres in their varied roles as daughter, wife, grandmother, and breadwinner of the family. Frye (1971:120) posits that poetry imitates human action as total ritual, and so imitates the action of an omnipotent human society that contains all the powers of nature within itself. Through a literary work, readers can know about how other people in other settings lived coping with the ills of life. Africans are some of these people among others. To illustrate, Moorthi (2015) discussed Fertility in Indian womanhood in the fictional world of Bharati Mukherjee as concentrated on the emotional sphere of women and their responses to the world around them. He advocates that as women are caught between tradition and modernity, they need to redefine themselves and their place in the family and the society. Okot's literary works are mainly concerned with African values and the conflicts of cultures i.e. how western manners impacted greatly Africans. According to Heron's view, as cited in Wanambisi (1981) Okot's literary works convey the message that the nations of Africa should be built on African not European foundations. Initially written in Acholi, one of the Luo dialects in northern Uganda and later given an English translation by its author, *Song of Lawino* is a long poem about a husband wife conflict centering on tradition versus modernity and many other themes affecting characters we can meet in our daily life. In his review of the book, Odoo contends that after the poem was published, it was quickly translated into other languages and has become one of the most widely read literary works originating from Sub-Saharan Africa, and is more known for its scathing display of how African society was being destroyed by the colonization of Africa. The same view was echoed in Wanambisi (1981: 27) that in his poetry, Okot is concerned with portraying the positive values of African traditional society. He is also concerned with some common changes that took place as a result of Western colonization of Africa including the harmful effects of western values on the Africans as well raised in *Song of Lawino*, and self-hatred as a major harmful effect in *Song of Ocol*.

## III. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The critical study of literature provides a basic way "to produce, out of the society we have to live in, a vision of the society we want to live in" (Frye qtd in Bazimaziki, 2017). Human beings are living in a world paved with a lot of temptations that may drive them to various bad deeds if no particular attention is paid. Currently, human society paved with betrayal and unfaithfulness led by the sweet and attractive world which shines as though it were gold yet it is the bitter and poisonous present. The latter are without any doubt the root cause of conflicts among couples faced with the leading pitfalls that are often times at the center of family destruction. As literature mirrors the world around us, I thought that the message conveyed through the characters in Okot P'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* involve sbut is not limited to the rampant problem in many corners of Africa and even beyond. While a woman in many societies is married based mostly on human worth and love, the problem stands that women and /or men are being deprived of their fundamental rights and as such oppression and mostly dehumanization dominated. One can hear or read it in media that so and so has killed his/her partner due to misunderstanding between them on a particular issue in this world driven by technological advancement to the detriment of tradition. Of course, people should not remain traditional without going with time so that they could not still backward or behind the curtains. However, one said that "A man without his past is like a tree without roots" similar to the common Swahili saying which goes like "Usiache mbachao kwa msala upitao" meaning that people should not forget their originality. In *Song of Lawino*, the house conflict or more specifically the husband wife conflict centered on the tradition versus modernity is a result of over civilization. In fact, modernization is good but too civilization leads to serious effects. While *Song of Lawino* has undergone a lot of studies in terms of literary criticism, little attention has been directed to characters who are the mirror of the society we often time have in different settings. In this regard, this study analyses critically the world today through the characters of *Lawino*, *Ocol* and *Clementine*. I considered each of these characters as a symbolic character standing for a group of people that are often times encountered in many places.

## IV. STUDY OBJECTIVES

The leading objective of this study was to find out the level to which Literature depicts human beings and the world around them. The specific objectives were: To critically analyse the role that Okot P'Bitek's work of art holds in East African Literature; to demonstrate that characters in *Song of*

Lawino depict people in the current human society and to find out the message that is conveyed through the characters in *Song of Lawino*

### Study questions

This study sought to answer the following questions:

What is the role that Okot p' Bitek's *Song of Lawino* holds in African Literature?

To what extent do the characters in *Song of Lawino* depict people in the world today?

What is the message does Okot convey through the three characters in *Song of Lawino*?

### Scope and theoretical consideration

African Literature, especially poetry, was the main focus in this study. The researcher critically analysed Okot p' Bitek's long poem basing on Simone De Beauvoir's leading view and advocacy for women rights that women can become what they want to be if men give them freedom. I discussed characters and themes affecting them as two interwoven literary generic elements. Since literature cannot be disconnected from human being as a product of society, about society for society, the researcher attempted to depict human manners based on some of the poem lines. According to Aristotle, verbal arts holds educative value. He adds that an art is to be praised or blamed, only in its relation to the whole human being of whom it is both the instrument and the reflection, a tool to understanding of the world. As such, this paper was basically framed on Frye's belief that anagogic perspective is not to be confined only to works that seem to take in everything, for the principle of anagogy is not simply that everything is the subject of poetry, but that anything may be the subject of a poem. As Literary studies in most cases base on the primary and secondary sources, *Song of Lawino* was the corpus considered as a primary sources. Secondary sources were studies and criticism by various scholars in the realm of African literature and in other literatures.

## V. DISCUSSION

Ofuani (1985) advocates that as with all aspects of life, there are bound to be overlaps, and this kind of overlap cannot be any more expected than in the work of a poet with the diverse kinds of experiences of p' Bitek. In this discussion, I considered that though *Song of Lawino* was published in the 1960s, it is still impacting the current human community here and there on socio-cultural, economic and political level as well. More so, in his introduction, Frye (1971) noted that it is generally accepted that a critic is a better judge of the value of a poem than its creator, but there is still a lingering notion that it is somehow ridiculous to regard the critic as the final judge of its meaning, even though in practice it is clear that

he must be. The reason for this is an inability to distinguish literature from the descriptive or assertive writing which derives from the active will and the conscious mind, and which is primarily concerned to "say" something. In this discussion, I concur with his view and believe that what I will be saying here should not be taken as the last judgement. Rather, it is my understanding and contribution to literary criticism that may enlighten the human community on how the world is wicked in the sense that it is full of mysteries, temptations and traps that change human being into a victimizer to his fellow human beings, hence human values rejection. Truth to tell, my discussion will principally frame on the famous saying that "human was nice but nature changed him". Shall we blame the nature or the human who manifested that weaknesses and accepted to be changed? The idea is; characters in *Song of Lawino*, should help readers answer this question. Throughout the poem, Lawino is a victim of nature that changed her husband. She is addressing the clansmen accusing her husband, Ocol, of having forgotten his identity, of having rejected his home and been attracted by the "all glitters that is not gold". We are told that Lawino's husband's tongue is bitter which reflects a kind of attack of patriarchy where men are authoritarian; the center of authority and power as Sigh (2016: 17) put it that

*Authoritarianism in men remains the sole responsible factor to destroy marital peace and harmony and subject a woman to be confined to the invisible and unnoticed world of tears and miseries, drudgery and boredom. This sense of possessiveness and dictatorial attitude is natural for a man in the patriarchal system, according to Kate Millett. "The father nearly has ownership over the wife or wives and children including the powers of physical abuse and often and even those of murder and sale."*

The opening lines of the poem, *Song of Lawino*, in part one entitled "My husband's tongue is bitter" reflect the point made here:

Husband now you despise me  
 Now you treat me with spite  
 And say I have inherited the stupidity of my aunt  
 Son of the Chief,  
 Now you compare me with the rubbish in the rubbish pit  
 You say you no longer want me  
 Because I am like the things left behind  
 In the deserted homestead.  
 [ .... ]  
 Stop treating me like salt-less ashes  
 (p'Bitek, p.34)

Gupta & Rajni (2015) noted that a woman only accepts the patriarchal structures and is always oppressed by a man. A woman is always oppressed as she is considered as 'weaker sex' or 'Inferior sex'. Lawino is oppressed beyond that level. Actually, Lawino's words in the above lines show that her husband now changed to the extent that he dehumanizes her. Saying that someone is like the thing left behind in the deserted homestead is to show nothing but hatred to a higher extent. Treating someone with spit, too, and comparing her to the rubbish, is depriving her of her human rights to life, the rights to being a human, rights to belonging to human society. Spitting to someone voluntarily is a sign of more than disrespecting them as well. Further, in many parts of African culture, the role of the aunt to a daughter is very significant in that she is the one to coach and train the daughter about the house matters and manners as well. So, as a brother-in-law, paying respect to your partner's parents would be mandatory. Insulting them in any single way, however, would be going against African values. Anyone can understand how being stupid is beyond not being humanity. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines stupid as lacking intelligence or common sense i.e. dazed and unable to think. Inherently, when Lawino's husband says she's inherited the aunt's stupidity, the idea is she's not educated at all as the one who would have done so lacks common sense and was unable to think, meaning she was also inanimate but not a human being. When Lawino tells her husband to stop treating her like a salt-less ash, she wanted to tell him that she is still a worth woman, that she is not like the useless salt-less ash on which people tread as it is thrown on the pathway. The question now is: Does this behaviour fit for people on this earth? I don't think so. We are hearing it on radio and read it in newspapers, and are told it through various public media that so and so killed their partners or children and/or parents. Do they do it because they don't know that the victims are human creatures like them? Is it because the world is cast to fully experience the ills of life? This is how the world today is and as human beings, should we strive for the saying that "Do not do as you wouldn't like to be done by", peace would take place and the wickedness would decrease if not cease completely. I believe it is hard but not impossible as where there is a will, there is way. Human weaknesses cannot allow it but commitment can make it possible much as all the progress and development are a result of human efforts. Elsewhere, as human beings, people need make efforts and cope with the world around them, by avoiding being attracted by the modernity and completely reject their identity, their past often holding tradition, their originality. Lawino falls victim of this situation as her

husband is accusing her of illiteracy and lack of civilization, thus a kind of backwardness. In the lines below, Lawino says:

You say I do not know the letter A

Because I have not been to school

And I have not been baptized,

[...]

He says I am rubbish,

He no longer wants me

He says I am primitive

Because I cannot play the guitar,

He says my eyes are dead

And I cannot read.

He says my ears are broken

And cannot hear a single foreign word,

That I cannot count the coins

(p. 34-35)

Through her work *The Second Sex*, Simone De Beauvoir believes that this secondary position imposed on women is by strong environmental forces of social traditions and education which have been under the control of man. Man considers himself "Subject" and "Absolute" and woman is the "Other". (Beauvoir as qtd in Gupta & 2015). The above lines best illustrate what Beauvoir says. The letter A, the guitar, being baptised, counting the coins and hearing a single foreign word are all the signs of modernity of advancement as opposed to tradition, to primitive life. In fact, Lawino is accused of backwardness reflected in her illiteracy, her ignorance of modern world, and her being affected by the tradition. Her husband should be right if he were willing to show her how things are done in a "right" modern world. Instead, he oppresses her stressing that, in connection to having dehumanized her as discussed earlier, he no longer wants her. Of course, rubbish should not couple with smart people. However, Lawino is a human being but not a rubbish. Although there are things she doesn't know, such factor cannot exclude her from human beings. Not all people can modernize at the same pace. Some are lucky to adapt themselves and go with modernity as quickly as possible. Others are slow and adapt progressively while there are others who are very slow, others resist change not because change is bad because they are still strongly attached to their past so that they can hardly ape the modern manners. While illiteracy is an enemy to human being, in some corners of Africa, it is still stagnant and is bearing serious consequences linked with backwardness, poverty and the like. In the same token, not hearing any single foreign word implies that one is affected by lack of communication skills hence communication barrier between them and others who use that language. Lacking the guitar knowledge, similarly, means



having some gaps as regard human being progress given that traditional musical instruments are superseded by modern ones. However, what should be the role of a modernized or civilized companion? Is it to blame those who are still traditionalist or they should come to their help and coach them so that they can hold together and marsh together at a closer footstep? Take for example the world today geared by rapid advancement of science and technology. Not all people are able at to adapt at the same with the speed of technology that is pulling the sharpest while pushing the shiest and slowest individuals. Despite the situation, people help each other and grapple with the current changing world that is technologically driven. People get success in what they are doing not because they are all good at technology but because they are acting as one holding and helping one another as “two heads are better than one”. What if Lawino’s husband thought in the view that women can be more than what they are if men give them freedom (Beauvoir, 1952). To put it simply, human beings pretend to reject their wives on the ground that the latter are not the beauty of the present time. Not only husbands but also some women are copying Ocol’s manners and leave their husbands for others often time coming as a destroyer of the house. Some of the causes of this destruction are either the riches that attract human beings and some other unfounded reasons linked with prostitution as shown in the poem with the interference of Clementine the outsider, the stranger who attracted the husband Ocol to the expense of the first wife, Lawino. While it is said that “a man without his past is like a tree without roots”, it is not the case for Ocol. He is accused by Lawino to have uprooted the pumpkins. Part two of the poem entitled “The woman with whom I share my husband” tells more:

Ocol reject the old type  
 He is in love with a modern woman  
 Who speaks English.  
 But only recently  
 We would sit close together  
 Only recently I would play  
 On my bow –harp  
 Singing praises to my beloved  
 Only recently he promised  
 That he trusted me completely  
 He is in no longer in love with the old type  
 He is in love with a modern girl.  
 The name of the beautiful one  
 Is Clementine  
 [...]  
 Her lips are red-hot  
 Like growing charcoal.

She resembles he wild cat  
 That has dipped its mouth in blood  
 Her mouth is like raw yaws  
 It looks like ulcer (p. 36-37)

Clementine depicts the ill doers, women and/or men whose will to destroy others’ families are rampant. She is the destroyer and harmful agent. She stands for people who are not happy of the next door’s happiness and interferes not as a go-between but as cause of destruction. Although she is the symbol of Western manners, western culture to Africans - the modernity which is pulling people to the extent that they reject their tradition, their culture, their identity, their originality and their home values, she mirrors some people in human society. Actually, the author wanted to point out both men and women whose attraction to their next door’s partners bears serious consequences. In the poem, Clementine won the hands of someone’s husband. The latter accepted to reject her traditional woman in favour of a red lips woman. Symbolically, Ocol rejected his past and favours the present. The message here is, couples should be faithful to each other without betraying among themselves as one’s husband wife is not yours.

Kamla Markandaya is intensely aware of the impact of socio-economic forces on contemporary woman. In her novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rukmani the protagonist is presented as a ‘Woman of Sorrow’ barely managing to survive in a south Indian village (Singh, 2016: 15). Concerning Lawino, the victim of modernity and acculturation, one could let her know that going with change is necessary provided that you hold your values. Why not civilize? Is civilization bad in all sides? She ought to comply with change so that she could not be affected by the common saying that “if you don’t change, change will change you”. Being too conservative could not let her survive in the modern world. Rather, she ought to integrate the new culture as her husband was already too influenced by modern ways of life. Women of this kind do bear serious consequences. While they should learn their husbands’ new manners and try to act accordingly, failure in that case leads to conflict and later separation. This is the world today that pities nobody who make any single mistakes, any single error of judgement often times termed as flaw in literary term. Thus, Lawino is betrayed by the modern manners which she was not able to integrate as she stuck to traditional culture as spoken in her words below:

Listen Ocol, my old friend,  
 The ways of your ancestors are good,  
 Their customs are solid  
 And not hollow  
 They are not thin, not easily breakable

They cannot be blown away  
 By the winds  
 Because their roots reach deep into the soil.  
 I do not understand  
 The ways of foreigners  
 But I do not despise their custom  
 Why should you despise yours?  
 Listen my husband,  
 You are the son of a Chief  
 The pumpkin in the old homestead  
 Must not be uprooted  
 It is true  
 I am ignorant of the dances of foreigners  
 And how they dress  
 I do not know  
 Their games I cannot play  
 I only know the dances of our people  
 I cannot dance the rumba  
 My mother taught me  
 The beautiful dances of Acholi  
 I do not know the dances of White people  
 (P'Bitek 1966, 41-42)

Lawino's emphasis to ancestors' customs and their ways that are solid, strong and that cannot be blown away by the wind, and unbreakable as they are rooted deep into the soil reflect a strong attachment to the home culture, to the tradition. Indirectly, Lawino is telling Ocol that his tradition is still firm and cannot be intruded by modernity that she is judging weaker (the wind) in comparison to their tradition. Stressing that she does not know the dances of white people but can dance those taught by her mother, the Acholi beautiful dances, dances of her people, she means that her culture, her way of life fits her. She is giving the husband the message that there is no best culture like her home culture meaning that she is inviting vainly Ocol to come back as she says: "The pumpkin in the old homestead must not be uprooted". Importantly, Lawino accepts her ignorance of western way of doing things like playing, dressing and dancing. This means that there is a gap that needs be filled so that she could not lose her husband already conquered by a modern girl. The idea is that tradition could not still rampant without welcoming some modern way of life as integrating with new ways can be beneficial if done carefully.

## VI. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This study discussed the image of the current human beings through the three characters in Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*. In some parts of the globe, husband- wife conflict may result from a number of things. Either, it is caused by

inattention, carelessness or lack of faith on either side. Ocol betrayed his wife. He rejected her in favour of Clementine. The latter stands for women or men who destroy their next doors' families due to the weaknesses of one among partners. Lawino represents those women whose tears of sorrow are reflecting the way they are victims caught between tradition and modernity. Sticking to their culture is a good thing but integrating new aspects of modernity can help them cope with their husbands' accusations that could lead to family destruction. Thus far, the poem leaves the reader with some lessons that can be a guiding principle to grapple with the life challenges. I would say that modernizing is good but over-civilisation leads to serious effects. People should civilize but not forget their home culture, their identity, and their past. As the poem says, they should not "uproot the pumpkins". Being too conservative and resistant to change is not always profitable. People should not resist change to grapple with the world challenges but should not reject totally their identity, tradition, culture and their originality. Rather, draw some important aspects of a new culture and include them into their own can be a good way of integrating the two worlds, tradition and modernity. Faith among partners is an important message too. As Frye (1971) wrote that there is no way of preventing the critic from being, for better or worse, the pioneer of education and the shaper of cultural tradition, the point he made reflects that literature is a didactic tool that reflects reality of how human beings are coping with the world around them. African poetry conveys messages on how people live and behave in their places. Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* translates the husband wife conflict triggered by the ills of the interference of Western culture into traditional Africa. Through the characters Lawino, Ocol and Clementine, I attempted to critically analyse human manners and how the mismatch between different cultures often times leads to destruction. It was concluded that civilization is beneficial when it integrates the elements of both cultures without favouring one to the expense of another. In other words, over-civilisation can lead to values destruction including but not limited to rejection of one's originality, one's identity. Thus, this study can enlighten people to avoid misconduct that can result in their home destruction. Elsewhere, the present paper concentrates on characterization with particular interest in characters and themes affecting them as two interrelated literary generic elements. For the most, the poem characters mirror the world in which human beings live. Literary works can be studied at different levels using different approaches. It is the reason why further studies to bridge the gaps that may be perceived on any side in this study can deal with psychological

approach to the literary analysis of P'Bitek's poem. Studying imagery or symbolism in that poem can be another interesting literary study.

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