The Voice Of The Subaltern In Okot P' Bitek's Song Of Lawino: A Postcolonial Perspective

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Abstract

This study aims to locate the voice of the native African women in Okot p' Bitek's 'Song of Lawino: The Woman with Whom I Share my Husband'. This poem gives an outlet to the feelings of a native woman named Lawino who responds to her husband influenced by Western culture and education. Lawino becomes the voice of the native African women who are treated as lesser human beings along with their men by the Western people. Okot p' Bitek is successful in situating his work in postcolonial canon by aptly establishing a counter-narrative in his work that sufficiently dismantles the Western narrative about the natives of Africa, who are colonized by the West. As it is a great challenge for the writers from the colonized world to counter the narrative of colonizers, and they cannot often do justice in giving space to the voice of the colonized. This poem has been analyzed in light of the postcolonial theory that provides a powerful tool to de-structure colonial narrative. Textual analysis has been used to analyze the poem. The study shows that Okot p’ Bitek’s Lawino defends her culture and native people to the fullest extent by meaningfully situating her response against the Western narrative. Colonial literature has often represented the natives of Africa, in the African context, and people of Asia, in the Asian context, as uncultured, uncivilized, and backward people. Such (mis) representation of the natives has been so much popular that it was deemed to be true. As Said (1978) has termed such type of representation as to be the structure of lies that is far away from reality. Postcolonial writers and readers assume the responsibility of dismantling such representation, in the colonial texts, by bringing the voice of the suppressed/oppressed people whose voice is not given space in colonial texts that predominantly keep the narrative of the colonizers intact.
Keywords: Subaltern, Voice, Colonial, Postcolonial, Representation, African, Colonised

Introduction

African writers have often made efforts to modify the languages of the European colonizers and introduce changes in their forms to give an outlet to their native ideas (Bitek, 1967). The 'negritude' poets and writers include traditional African images in their works in order to promote their native culture. Chinua Achebe, a famous English-speaking writer, employs European novel form and very carefully introduced 'Africanized' English in his works for the dialogue between the characters. In spite of numerous efforts, African writing and criticism still contain European influences. In the African community, written literature is clearly differentiated from oral literature. Fewer comparisons are drawn between African poetry and traditional songs than between African poetry and European poetry (Bitek, 1967). Song of Lawino contains several features from traditional songs in the African context. Due to the connection with the native features of a culture, this song has attained popularity in the African literary canon. Few of the African literary figures are popular with the educated elite of the society; Okot has been quite famous in the cross-section of the African community with a variety of tastes as the elite are mostly concerned with written literature and common with traditional folk songs. This success of Okot is really remarkable as a few years back before the publishers had refused to publish his poem due to its different unfamiliar form (Bitek, 1967). The fact of the matter is that the publishers were mainly familiar with European forms of literature rather than the African. It is a long song that is not very much common with the changing forms of writing poems in European literature. In European canon, long poems are known to be epic and long narrative poems describing some particular incident in a grand style, which places Bitek's 'Song of Lawino' in a different category. African literature in a postcolonial context holds a prominent space in the entire postcolonial canon.

Statement of the Problem

In colonial literary texts, the voice of the natives is omitted, which questions the agency of the natives in a vast published literary canon. This study aims to see how the voice of the African subaltern responds to the European narrative in Okot p' Bitek's 'Song of Lawino' and how it is successful in situating the agency in the selected poem.

Objective of the Study

- To explore how Okot p' Bitek gives voice to the natives to express their cultural identity in Song of Lawino
Research Question

Q.1 How does Lawino in 'Song of Lawino' voice her criticism of the European sense of cultural superiority to the African culture?

Literature Review

It reveals the hidden underpinnings in the colonial narrative that represents the native population as backward, uncultured and uncivilized. In the early twentieth-century literature, the term cannibal was mostly used when the texts would refer to the natives of Africa as they (Africans) are represented as "cannibals as black people with bones through their noses roasting missionaries in a pot" (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2007, p.29). Daniel Defoe in his famous work Robinson Crusoe, and Joseph Conrad in Heart of Darkness represented the African as cannibals. Africa has often been portrayed as Dark Continent by the explorers in their writings, as its first use is attributed to Henry Stanley who described it in his In Darkest Africa; that was to create a mysterious image of the place with its strange inhabitants (Nayar, 2015). Gayatri Spivak, a postcolonial critic, based her concept about subalterns on the work of Michel Foucault who developed his theory of knowledge that how it is formed and codified is called 'episteme', developed the concept of epistemic violence in her famous work 'Can the Subaltern Speak' (1988). She is of the opinion that framing knowledge also contains some forms of violence, especially in the case of the knowledge produced about the colonized by the colonizers. The knowledge constructed by the Western colonizers takes the value of truth that is digested by the Western readership and the natives alike. This practice of knowledge-making also known as epistemology is closely based on the violence of colonial conquest, subjugation, occupation and dispossession of the native population (Nayar, 2015). These native people were represented as mere objects of knowledge that are to be explored and categorized and called Other of the West, whereas their own knowledge about the natives and their cultural practices and norms was termed to be useless and almost irrelevant and irrational. More particularly in the case of the native women who were represented in stereotypical attributes as black and brown women in feminist writings that further reduce them to a vulnerable position by depriving them of the agency. Such lack of power to represent their culture and lifestyle is tantamount to epistemic violence that white female writers use to portray the native women as they like. Spivak also gives the notion of 'Native Informant' in her work A Critique of Postcolonial Reason that the 'Native Informant' "is at once essential and invisible, providing the 'essential' voice of native culture yet who disappears into the text of the white ethnographer" (Nayar, 2015, p. 112). She further continues that "The Native Informant is therefore complicit in the making of the Western text" (p. 112). Spivak responds to the criticism of Benita Parry that critics like her and Bhabha do not let the natives speak their voice. She sees the 'Native Informant' to be a substitute voice of the subaltern "If the subaltern did not speak, here the Native Informant does speak, but eventually disappears, leaving some traces, into textuality" (p.112).

Theoretical Framework
Postcolonialism describes the phenomenon of colonization in the context of European and non-European states. Initially, the term was used to refer to the states that obtained independence after the Second World War; which establishes its connotation in a purely chronological form (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2007). However, due to the subject-matter or thematic aspects that occupy the main space, literary critics in the 1970s started using it for analysis of the effects of colonization both at cultural and social levels. Critics were interested to know the real motives behind the European colonization of the non-European world and also to produce a counter-narrative to the European discourse that shows non-Europeans as degenerate nations.

It is interesting to note that the term 'representation' emerged as a dominant feature in colonialist discourse with the publication of Edward Said's Orientalism (1978), which is one of the great influential texts, in a number of different disciplines; such multidisciplinary nature of the work gives it a pioneering status in various field of studies that deal with colonization and its effects. It is one reason that scholars face many difficulties to define it with reference to one particular field of study and show their satisfaction by accepting its scope in various disciplines and calling it postcolonial studies in order to cover various socio-political and socio-economic and ethnocultural fields. According to Young (2016), "The assumption of postcolonial studies is that many of the wrongs, if not crimes, against humanity, are a product of the economic dominance of the north over the south" (p.6). Though the term representation became popular in the 1970s and recognized as a key feature in colonialist discourse theory in the works of Gayatri Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha, the term 'post-colonial' was not part of academic texts in the explicit denotative form to refer to the colonialist discourse in shaping the policies in the colonies. Spivak, in the 1990s, used the term 'post-colonial' in her several interviews. In the beginning, the term 'post-colonial' would evaluate cultural interactions that would take place in literary circles in colonial societies (Ashcroft et al. 2007). The term ‘postcolonial’ has been a point of long and detailed discussion among scholars to define its contextual parameters (Appiah 1992; Loomba 1998). It may become easy for the scholars to define the term if they place it in the context of the time that is after colonialism and imperialism to connect it with the direct rule of the colonizers but find it difficult to delimit the scope of the term by confining it to one particular point of time in history and ignoring the contemporary system of economic hegemony of the powerful states that are still exploiting the Third World economically. Thus the term 'postcolonial' assumes a dialectical idea that refers to a long historical record of decolonization and achievement of sovereignty after determined struggles and also the realistic accounts of states surfacing into another imperialistic context dominated by economic and political features.

**Textual Analysis**

Textual analysis was used to analyze the selected poem. It is a useful technique for texts that are situated in cultural studies because of their cross-cultural characteristics and it is considered a suitable method of analysis. Catherine Belsey discusses this concept in her work "Textual Analysis as a Research Method" given in Gabriele Griffin's book. She further continues "textual analysis is
indispensable to research in cultural criticism, where cultural criticism includes English, cultural history and cultural studies, as well as any other discipline that focuses on texts” (Belsey in Griffin, 2005, p.157).

Analysis and Discussion

Okot p’ Bitek secures a prominent position through his works in the postcolonial canon. He establishes a sound counter-narrative to the colonialist discourse about the colonized. Interestingly, he has created a female native character, Lawino, who dismantles the Western narrative about Africa. In European colonialist literature, non-Europeans are represented as uncultured and uncivilized to denigrate them as 'lesser Others'. Such type of portrayal provides the European authorities a ground to justify their subjugation of the natives in the name of civilization. But Bitek appropriately deconstructs these types of colonial machinations and shows that the natives have their own culture, as Lawino articulates the superiority of her own culture to Western ways of living and doing things when she compares her pure beauty with a Western lady, named Clementine who uses artificial powder to adorn herself in order to hide the ugly blots on her face. Lawino expresses her feelings in ‘The Woman with Whom I Share my Husband’:

I do not like dusting myself with powder:
The thing is good on pink skin
Because it is already pale
But when a black woman has used it
She looks as if she has dysentery (Bitek, 1967, p.)

In the African region, European women would present themselves in a very different manner in order to maintain a distinction between them and the Africans. They would use cosmetics so to give a different look that the African women would aspire to copy. To maintain such a distinct look these European ladies would use heavy cosmetics on their lips and face like dark red lipstick and face powder to give a delicate look, which, Lawino mocks in a very sophisticated manner in order to belittle such type of appearance. His language is quite meaningful and concrete to refer to this type of look as cheating others by hiding one’s own real appearance. Because by using such heavy make-up, these European ladies try to hide something very serious and grim that would denigrate their personalities.

These words further show the resolve of Lawino, who is not ready to adopt the Western culture of adorning themselves, which she believes is the requirement of those who are false and they need it to hide their faults but she (Lawino) does not need anything to hide anything from others. She is rather confident that pure things need no artificial ornaments to beautify oneself. For her, pure beauty is above the commonplace appearance that is deceptive in shape and nature. Her words connote the Greek philosophical point of view about beauty that seeks beauty in truth that is expressed later by a famous romantic poet John Keats (1819) in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' 'Beauty is truth--truth beauty'. In colonialist discourse, African ladies are portrayed in a denigrating tone.
because of their appearance and skin color, but Bitek shows that it is a European lady, who is representative of European ladies, is in need of artificial material to overshadow her facial stigmas that show her real face. Beauty is not only associated with white skin as is projected in Western colonialist discourse. It also refers to the face that how Europeans use a mask in order to maintain double standards that they apply in different situations according to their requirements, which may be termed their hypocritical way of dealing with the things. As the words 'dusting' and powder' refer to a second layer on the skin of a European lady; she uses powder to have an ephemeral cover to hide her hypocrisy that is found predominantly in colonialist discourse about the colonized. The use of powder becomes essential for those who have done something wrong, whereas, those, who have no such antecedents in their life, which can dissociate them from the world of civilization, do not use such powder. The native Africans are not white in their skin color but it does not reckon to the fact they would not be white in their hearts as is the myth or biased assumption of the white colonizers. The word 'black' is often associated with evil in the Western colonialist literature signifies the Western racist ideology that has firm roots in it. Whereas the term 'white' is associated with purity so it gives a sense of superiority to the Western white writers that are civilized and honest. Lawino, gives it an interesting connotation, by juxtaposing the 'white' with 'pale' which shows weakness, which is caused by some kind of an internal fatal disease. The 'pale' appearance of the Western people corresponds to the internal problem in Western culture, which is overwhelmingly detrimental in nature.

Another aspect in colonial discourse that is quite prominent in colonial discourse is 'wilderness' which is considered an indigenous characteristic found in the native population of Africa, who are represented as 'wild', 'barbaric' and 'uncivilized', etc. Making 'wilderness' a part of their culture, Africans are deemed to be involved in crimes of terrible nature. But Lawino, by using simile, 'a wild cat' for a European lady, shows that these Europeans are characterized by wild nature, and are involved in different types of crimes in the world for their own gains. These lines substantiate the linguistic skills of Bitek as he epitomizes the crime history of the colonizers, when Lawino, 'The Woman with Whom I Share my Husband', calls Clementine, a European, a ferocious animal who lives on the blood of other innocent creatures:

She resembles the wild cat

That has dipped its mouth in blood,

Her mouth is like raw yaws

It looks like an open ulcer,

Like the mouth of a field! (Bitek, 1967)

Lawino is directly setting the tone for the brutalities of the colonizers in the colonized territories. The list of their atrocities is unending as it is continuing to happen. In colonialist
discourse, non-European ladies are portrayed as weak, lazy, dull, and ignorant in so many respects, and owing to such negative attributes they have no voice in political matters, but Lawino destroys these stereotypical images of the natives. She identifies Clementine as a wild creature, who is harmful to other creatures innocent, and harmless. To further describe the wilderness of the colonizers, she creates very powerful imagery when she compares her red lips with red hot glowing charcoal that alludes to her dangerous design to burn the peace of the colonized world. Lawino's words are so explicit that they create concrete imageries to elaborate on the heinous crimes of different nature of the colonizers. Words like 'yaws', and 'ulcer' have a horrendous tone as they contain fatal problems in colonizers who are suffering from disease ulcer which is a very fatal disease, which is deep-rooted in the body and spread to all parts of the body if not cured. In such words, she is suggesting that these are the Europeans who need a cure to live a civilized life, not the African natives who do not rely on artificial and fake ornaments to hide reality.

Bitek in this poem responds to many of the mythical constructions of the colonizers who have often represented the colonized in a derogatory tone and tenor. Canonical English literary texts have often portrayed non-Europeans as lower creatures in all respects. Non-Europeans are shown in dirty conditions and maintain a backward lifestyle. They show the colonized world is away from modern ways of living and there is no sense of civilization that can enlighten the natives to spend their lives in a neat and clean manner. E. M. Forster, an English novelist, in A Passage to India, shows the Indians as dirty and stink when Mrs. Moore, a character in the novel, describes the incident in the cave and expresses her feelings about the native Indians in such words that she was about to faint because "the cave had become too full, because all their retinue followed them. Crammed with villagers and servants, the circular chamber began to smell" (Forster, 2005, p. 158). Lawino dismantles such type of narrative of the Europeans who consider that they are neat and clean that they do not smell and they only associate the smell with non-Europeans. They assume that the rest of the world is not aware of the cosmetics and perfume industry that is only familiar to them. Lawino use of words 'powder' and 'sweat' to deconstruct this myth of civilization of the Europeans who considered themselves to be well-informed of the modern ways of living which she considers their futile practice because no artificial thing in the world can be a good replacement for the natural. For Lawino, natural cleanliness is in the heart and the body is more important than artificial beauty and appearance, which to Lawino are fake and deceptive in nature. As she expresses herself in 'The Woman with Whom I Share my Husband' in the following words:

She dusts the ash-dirt all over her face

And when little sweat

Begins to appear on her body

She looks lie the guinea fowl!

The smell of carbolic soap
Makes me sick, (Bitek, 1967)

These words are quite loud and clear that express the voice of the subaltern to give an outlet for their feelings and emotions. These words move in a targeted fashion to counter the colonialist discourse about the native males and females by presenting them as dirty and unclean.

Conclusion

Okot p’ Bitek in Song of Lawino: My Husband's Tongue is Bitter deconstructs the colonialist discourse about the colonized. Subalter is a term informed by Antonio Gramsci and Gayatri Spivak used for the weak and oppressed people whose voice is suppressed by the powerful groups. These oppressed people cannot raise their voice against the horrific atrocities of the colonizers who use their power position to portray the natives the way they want. But Bitek, a postcolonial writer, through a female character Lawino, responds to the colonialist discourse and shows that the subaltern can speak to represent their own culture and show the mirror to the colonizers. Subaltern can raise their voice because they have their own culture and civilization that give them the courage to safeguard themselves against the false and fabricated narrative of the colonizers in their literary canon.

References