

The Native Informant In Okot P' Bitek's Song Of Lawino: A Postcolonial Study

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the role of a native informant in Okot p' Bitek's 'Song of Lawino'. The native informant, in postcolonial studies, is referred to as the native individuals from the colonized countries, who are part of the colonial project to represent their own people as uncivilized and backward. These native informants play a significant role in constructing the colonial narrative that is replete with 'Self' and 'Other' discourse, where 'Self' is superior (West) and 'Other' is inferior (East). When such colonial discourse is further substantiated and endorsed on the basis of local narratives that pretend to reflect a true picture of a native culture, which, in reality, misrepresent the native culture and its people, they are termed as 'the Native Informants' by postcolonial critics. Such native literature also represents the natives as dehumanized people, which gives strength to the fabricated version of the European discourse about the East. Ocol, a native African, plays a role of a native informant, as seen in 'Song of Lawino' in which Lawino refers to the role that he performs to serve the political and ideological interests of European culture. Native informants, like Ocol, assume the titles of writers and academicians to help disseminate knowledge about the native land and its population. These native informants, like Ocol, obtain their education in the European universities which changes their mindset. Postcolonial theory has been used as a theoretical framework to analyze the poem. Gayatri Spivak has given the concept of 'the Native Informant' in her famous work *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999). Textual analysis was used as a data analysis technique.

Keywords: Native Informant, Postcolonial Studies, Colonizers, Colonized, Civilized, Lawino, Ocol, Culture

Introduction

Colonial literature takes its content from the indigenous sources that architect the structured paradigm for the colonial writers to denigrate the local culture. Culture is a geographical phenomenon in nature, which does not exist in a vacuum. It is associated with a certain piece of land in this world. Different regions are known for certain types of climatic features, which determine the way of living of the people who live there. It determines the dress code used in that area according to various types of weather conditions, and also the food produced there. This natural selection of clothes and food has formative influences on the lives of the people who make such cultural attributes their lifestyle, which are natural. Such cultural practices and lifestyles of the native people are natural in essence. To categorize them on the basis of such natural differences as others and backward turns down the laws of nature. But the irony is quite obvious in the writings of the colonizers who rationalize their discriminating approach to indigenous cultures on the basis of superior culture vs inferior culture. Colonizers, who are alien to native cultures of the distant lands, misinterpret these cultural features and consider them strange. Such unrealistic and unbiased representation of other cultures holds a central position in various themes found in colonial discourse. Such representation generates different kinds of stereotypes about the natives. This phenomenon of representation becomes more ironic when the colonizers take the services of the native people to endorse the stereotypical representation of native cultures. Such endorsement of the colonial narratives gives strength to the colonial discourse in literary texts. Bitek's Song of Lawino refers to such native people who are deeply influenced by the West and degrade their own native culture. Ocol, Lawino's husband, considers his wife and her parents to be primitive and backward, which Lawino laments in the song. People like Ocol are found in all cultures and they help in formulating the colonial narratives. This role of facilitating the colonial discourse gives the title of 'native informant' to the native people.

Statement of the Problem

Colonial literature portrays Africans as primitive and uncivilized 'Others', who are to be civilized. Such representation gives a pretext to the European authorities to colonize the natives of Africa in the name of civilization. The project of civilization is facilitated by a section of few natives who belong to different fields, i.e., politicians, academia, tradesmen, etc. These natives inform the colonizers about such aspects of the native culture, which the colonizers exploit to subjugate the native population. Because of this act of informing and facilitating the colonial enterprise, they are called 'The Native Informants' by Gayatri Spivak.

Research Objective

- To analyze the character of Ocol as a Native Informant in Okot 'p Bitek's 'Song of Lawino'

Research Question

Q. How does Okot 'p Bitek portray the character of Ocol as the Native Informant in 'Song of Lawino'?

Literature Review

According to Henry Staten (2005) "the tortuousness of Spivak's account results from a sort of inaccessible overfullness of the context within which subjectivity must in each case be located; there is always too much history, too much human reality beyond what language can adequately represent" (p.111). Said (1993) discusses colonial machinations that are used by the colonizers to subjugate the natives in the distant territories, "Almost all colonial schemes begin with an assumption of native backwardness and general inadequacy to be independent, "equal," and fit" (p.80). Europeans develop assumptions about non-Europeans, which come out of their biased thinking about people living in other territories. They try to develop their argument to rule over distant territories. Certain ideological structures pave the way to develop binary structures of strong and weak, active and lazy and civilized and uncivilized, etc. that function in line with the existing pattern of thinking. Said (1993) describes such colonial machination that the colonizers use by assuming that "Another is an ideological rationale for reducing; then reconstituting the native as someone to be ruled and managed" (p.131). Some of the natives succumb to the narratives of the colonizers either due to their vested interests or they are mentally defeated by acknowledging the superhuman qualities of the colonizers. They perpetuate the colonial rule in their region with the sense that they are inferior to the colonizers in all respects, and rather feel obliged to them for the knowledge and service that the colonial authorities hold in the name of civilization. The role of native inhabitants in substantiating the thoughts of the British colonizers in India in Kim is described by Said in his book *Culture and Imperialism*, which epitomizes the entire story of the involvement of some of the natives in translating the colonial enterprise into reality as he writes "Doubtless some Indians believed that English police officials knew the country better than the natives and that such officials--rather than Indian rulers--should hold the reins of power" (p. 148). Spivak (2003) poses a very pertinent question by ascertaining the position of the natives in the essence of the colonial narrative, "Can the "native informant" ever become the subject of a "cultural study" that does not resemble metropolitan language-based work?" (p.10). The position of the natives in postcolonial studies holds a controversial space because of "excessive privileging of the position of a postcolonial hybrid intellectual who is speaking to, and in the context of, the academic institutions of the former metropole and in its disdain toward all nationalist discourses of resistance" becomes much complicated (Spivak et al, 2006, p.835).

Theoretical Framework

The postcolonial theory provides an appropriate lens to deconstruct the literary texts that are replete with 'misrepresentations' in relation to the cultures of distant territories by those who are in power and in most cases colonize those regions. This type of misrepresentation helps the colonizers to justify their illegal occupation of the foreign territories. Said (1979) states that Orientalist texts place "emphasis on the evidence, which is by no means invisible, for such representations as representations, not as "natural" depictions of the Orient" (p.21). Spivak has referred to the role of

the native people who are also very instrumental in substantiating the colonial narratives, as she (1999) said:

My aim, to begin with, was to track the figure of the Native Informant through various practices: philosophy, literature, history, culture. Soon I found that the tracking showed up a colonial subject detaching itself from the Native Informant. After 1989, I began to sense that a certain postcolonial subject had, in turn, been recoding the colonial subject and appropriating the Native Informant's position. (p. ix)

As the current time is heavily characterized by the works of Kant and Marx progresses, the relationship that is found between "European discursive production and the axiomatics of imperialism" (Spivak, 1999, p.4) also modifies, while the axiomatics of imperialism to perform the role of constructing the discursive mainstream emerge uncontaminated, and of bringing itself come into view as the only negotiable means. In the time of this continuous operation, and in one form or another, an unrecognizable instant that she terms "the native informant" is crucially needed by the great texts, and it is foreclosed"(P. 4).

It becomes imperative to ascertain the implications in the position of the native informants, referring to the roles of translators and readers' stories originated in the context of tribal culture for a separated audience, which provides another phase of the desire to safeguard the margins.

The reader must bear in mind that literary content concerning the margins should never be treated as an established socio-historical and anthropological document (Ray, 2009). In today's world, a section of society related to the postcolonial elite, portraying themselves as the most relevant group of Native Informants, is seen in the circles of the human rights activists located in states of the South (Ray, 2009).

Textual Analysis

Since the current research work deals with cultural representations and because of cross-cultural aspects, it is pertinent to use textual analysis as a research method to analyze the 'Song of Lawino'. Catherine Belsey refers to this aspect in the essay "Textual Analysis as a Research Method", discussed in the famous work of Gabriele Griffin. She said that "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 as cited in Griffin, 2005, p. 157). Belsey's usage of Roland Barthes's view of the position of a reader as "the destination of the text" (Belsey as cited in Griffin, 2005, p. 161) and, particularly, she elaborates the idea of the reader by using an analogy of the people who become the masters of their destiny during French Revolution. While reading a text, the readers should not reduce it to their subjective understanding, which may be vague in nature, rather they have to analyze it with special emphasis on the difference it establishes.

Analysis and Discussion

In Song of Lawino, Bitek situates Lawino's husband, Ocol, in place of a native informant, who is complicit in perpetuating the Western discourse about Africa and its inhabitants. Bitek demonstrates his artistic skill in Song of Lawino very dexterously, when Ocol's wife, Lawino, expresses her sentiments by referring to her husband's derogatory remarks about the native culture and the natives. In European literature, the reality about the African region is fabricated through a false representation of the native people and their culture. The role of Ocol as a native informant alludes to the colonial machinations adopted by the European authorities to establish their cultural hegemony in the occupied region. Ocol is a representative figure who despises his own cultural roots and praises Western culture and sees it to be a foundation for an African nation to build its future. Lawino refers to Ocol's words:

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 (Bitek, 1967, p. 42)

To Ocol, elders in his society are backward and are not acquainted with the modern European model of progress and development, which makes him loathe his wife and her relatives and consider them primitive and backward in roots. For him, the culture his wife practices are myopic and old-fashioned, which she has inherited from her forefathers. He 'Son of the Chief' enjoys a privileged position in his society because of his proximity with the European authorities, who approve of the role of Ocol as a facilitator in materializing their narrative by upholding and justifying it when he calls his own family members as primitive and backward and also negates the role of the ancestors of the land who are representative models for the successive generations who are to safeguard their culture against any type of foreign invasion in this regard. As Lawino speaks these words of Ocol:

He says I am rubbish,

He no longer wants me!

In cruel jokes, he laughs at 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 blocked

And cannot hear a single foreign word,

That I cannot count the coins (Bitek, 1967, p. 43)

These are very direct words that reflect the colonial mindset in explicit form. Ocol considers his wife, not a lady from the modern world rather she is a burden in the modern world. He considers her to be of no use because she does not handle the modern gadgets, which are very much essential for living in the modern technological world. She cannot read anything in the master's literature that is in English, which renders her to be a dull and useless creature.

You insult me

You laugh at me

You say I do not know the letter A

Because I have not been to school (Bitek, 1967, p. 42)

In colonized countries, the European education system is considered to be a status symbol and it is considered a privilege of the upper class to gain education in the language of the colonizers and also by learning their language they also learn and practice the European culture that divides the native society into superior and inferior people. Those who are colonizers already enjoy a lucrative position as colonial authorities reward them for their services as native informants for serving the interests of their masters at the cost of their own kiths and kins and also their clansmen.

People like Ocol exist in every colonized society because it is not possible for the intruders to establish their rule without the support of such native informants. These colonizers come in the garb of civilization to enlighten the natives but in reality, they occupy the distant territory and grab its all resources. In the establishment of the rule of the colonizers, the native informants like Ocol play a vital role, who inform the colonizers about the strengths and weaknesses of the native people so as to make it easy for the colonial masters to perpetuate their rule in a smooth manner. These native informants abuse their own people for the happiness of their masters by further denigrating their own countrymen and women to a great extent. As Lawino addresses her clansmen and informs them about her husband's attitude and his inclination towards the European culture:

My husband abuses me together with my parents,

He says terrible things about my mother

And I am so ashamed!

He abuses me in English

And he is so arrogant! (Bitek, 1967, p. 43)

Ocol, to make a place for himself in the European power corridors, shows disloyalty to his people whom he treats in derogatory ways and means. He even goes to the extent to look down upon his own relatives whom he considers lesser human beings. For him, his soil is cheap as he insults the mothers who belong to this land, ignoring the sanctity of the role of a mother who stands for the country as the state is best known by the motherland. The place of a mother in every society is very powerful because she gives sacrifices to nourish the inhabitants to safeguard the country against foreign invasion. But Ocol loses his indigenous values for his personal gains that he wants to multiply at the cost of his motherland. He uses the language of the masters to frighten his native people in order to give the impression that he is also a very powerful individual who can communicate in the language of his masters. It is a common practice in colonized countries, to dominate the rest of the population the individuals use English as a tool to suppress others. It is often observed, that people with a colonial mindset, even scold their servants and guards in the English language so as to maintain psychological superiority over them. The irony in such situations is very much obvious that could these servants and guards speak, they would not be serving in such lower positions, rather they would be doing some white-collar jobs because such lucrative positions are offered to those who are proficient in the English language. As even examination for civil service is conducted in the English language, no matter the candidates for such jobs may be morally and ethically stand at the lowest rung, still they succeed in securing a higher position in the administration. When s/he is educated in English and also gets an executive position in their country, they, consciously or unconsciously, substantiate the norms of the masters and establish their culture as superior in every field of life ranging from table manners to dress code. This method of the colonizers to control the regions through their language is known as a colonial legacy in postcolonial studies, when the English are gone physically, still, they rule over the minds of the colonized and control their region through the civil servants trained in European norms that are classified as normative standards that are to be followed as universal standards, which are essential parts of civil service training. Ocol further calls her by derogatory titles:

He says I am like sheep,

The fool

Ocol treats me

As if I am no longer a person,

He says I am silly (Bitek, 1967, pp. 43-44)

Ocol does not stop here, as he continues his song of hatred for the natives and his wife, which Lawino tells:

He says I am a village woman,

I am of the old type,

And no longer attractive (Bitek, 1967, p. 45)

The words, which Ocol uses for Lawino are more direct and painful and seem very much strange pronounced by a husband for his wife because she does not follow the Western culture and adopts their ways of living and doing things. He not only degrades his wife but also her relatives and clansmen. Such direct and concrete language makes Lawino express her painful feelings for her husband, who does not spare his own people and keeps jeering at them and ridiculing them. Lawino's words allude to the extreme frustration in Ocol's case because he is filled with complete hatred for his own people. So she explicates the venom that her husband has for the natives.

Conclusion

The poem is an exquisite example of a native informant how s/he works to make a good space for himself or herself in the eyes of the colonizers. As Ocol instead of defending his native people speaks ill against them. And in contrast, he presents his personality that he is a different person who belongs to civilization and modern culture as compared to his native people. Bitek skillfully refers to the binaries produced by Ocol which are very much in practice in colonial discourse when the colonizers instill this notion of superiority in the minds of the natives who also believe and propagate it.

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