

Song of lawino: cultural duality and universality essay sample

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Song of Lawino by Okot p'Bitek centers on the main narrator Lawino's plea towards her husband, Ocol, who shuns his old Acholi background for Westernization. Lawino implores Ocol not to abandon his heritage but rather accept both Acholi and Western cultures; as noted, cultural duality serves as the prime theme in Song of Lawino. Through the character of Lawino, p'Bitek conveys his message that Acholi and Western cultures could be fused in the era of Westernization. In making his point, p'Bitek employs techniques, namely the language, diction, syntax structures, imagery, and figures of speech, to ensure that Song of Lawino supports both Acholi and Western characteristics. Furthermore, the reader could apply p'Bitek's idea to any cultural clash and understand that a balanced blending of the cultures could settle the conflict. Thereby, analyses of the various literary techniques in Song of Lawino demonstrate that author Okot p'Bitek utilizes the specific techniques to suggest that both the Acholi and Western cultures be embraced, ultimately establishing the importance of integrating both old and new cultures when in need of a resolution.

Okot p'Bitek originally published Song of Lawino in Acholi in 1966 without translation mind, and the reader should note that when translated into English, certain lines from the Acholi version lost their meanings and effects. The following lines well prove the aforementioned point: " Listen, my husband, / You are the son of a Chief. / The pumpkin in the old homestead / Must not be uprooted!" (346 - 349). To the Western audience, the significance of the pumpkin remains as an unclear point. Here, p'Bitek in fact makes a comparison that Ocol giving up his Acholi culture for Westernization is similar to senseless destruction. Pumpkins are considered a luxury food in

the Acholi culture, and moving to a new homestead does not become an excuse for uprooting such a valuable share of property. Indeed, there are disadvantages to studying Song of Lawino in English; however, p'Bitek essentially trades off the minor disadvantages for a significantly larger audience when he translates the poem into English. P'Bitek successfully recreates and applies effective literary techniques in English for the significantly larger audience to comprehend his message, as seen in analyses of other techniques.

While it remains true that the English version no longer contains the “regular rhythm and rhyme” of the Acholi version, the variations in diction and syntax structures of the verses in Song of Lawino highlight p'Bitek's support for the Acholi culture. For example, p'Bitek carefully places weak and strong words in the following lines to produce desired emphases: “But when you see the beautiful woman / With whom I share my husband / You feel a little pity for her! / Her breasts are completely shriveled up, / They are all folded dry skins, / They have made nests of cotton wool / And she folds the bits of cow-hide / In the nests / And call them breasts!” (207 - 215).

In this section, Lawino speaks of Ocol's new modernized mistress, Clementine, and of her breasts, which Lawino describes to resemble cow-hide. Clementine's bodily structure sharply contrasts the traditionally voluptuous and rich body structure of African women, a trait that Lawino appreciates and that Clementine rejects. P'Bitek clusters weak words, such as pronouns, coordinating conjunctions, and prepositions, into the beginning of the line, but he finishes each line with strong phrases like “beautiful

woman," " shriveled up," " dry skins," " cotton wool," " cow-hide," and " breasts." Such juxtaposition allows p'Bitek to stress the end of each line for a lively and bouncy rhythm, amplifying Lawino's upset, disdainful tone.

Through the diction and syntax structures that indicate Lawino's strong stance against a blind reception of Westernization, p'Bitek too rejects the idea of submitting to the Western ways at the expense of the Acholi culture.

Imagery and figures of speech additionally serve as prominent literary devices in Song of Lawino, as p'Bitek uses the techniques to show his advocacy of the Acholi culture. For example, p'Bitek applies positive imagery when he portrays an Acholi woman in the arena, ready to dance: " The tattoos on her chest / Are like palm fruits, / The tattoos on her back / Are like stars on a black night; / Her eyes sparkle like the fireflies / Her breasts are ripe / Like the full moon." (442 - 448). Immediately, the reader notices words and phrases, such as " palm fruits," " stars on a black night," " fireflies," and " full moon," which all relate to the natural world. In contrast, p'Bitek presents indecent imagery to delineate the environment " dances of the white people" take place in: " Some dungs are red like ochre / Others are yellow / Like the ripe mango, / Like inside a ripe pawpaw. /

Others are black like soil, / Like the soil we use / For smearing the floor. / Some dungs are of mixed colours! / Vomit and urine flow by" (600 - 608).

From this section, phrases like " ripe mango," and " ripe pawpaw" also pertain to the nature. However, the depiction of the Acholi dancer emits an aura of fruitfulness and serenity, whereas the Western dances are rather filthy. This brings up an interesting aspect, as p'Bitek works with metaphors

and similes associated with the nature in both cases, yet the two instances yield dramatically different effects. The enticing figures of speech indeed bring the two scenes in the spotlight; however, as opposed to supporting both the Acholi and Western forms of dances, p'Bitek paints the two dances contrastively with the imageries to clarify his position on the subject. P'Bitek skillfully incorporates imageries and figures of speech to draw attention to Acholi and Western dances and upholds the Acholi tradition.

In the introduction to *Song of Lawino*, George A. Heron offers his critical opinions on the narrative poem that “ through his thorough knowledge of an African literary tradition Okot has succeeded in using English as a tool to reach a wider audience without borrowing foreign elements that distort his message”. With the message being that both the Acholi and Western cultures be embraced, p'Bitek indeed delivers his argument by applying literary techniques to *Song of Lawino* in a compelling manner. However, analyses of diction, syntax structures, imagery, and figures of speech thus far could offer the false impression that p'Bitek downgrades the Western culture while backing the Acholi culture. P'Bitek uses diction and syntax structures to establish Lawino's disdain towards forfeiting the Acholi culture, while he uses imagery and figures of speech to visually illustrate to the negativity of Western culture compared to the Acholi culture.

It is nonetheless vital to remember that p'Bitek expresses his concern for the Western culture in a major way by publishing the English translation of the work, despite the trivial, inevitable downsides that follow. P'Bitek best represents his message in Lawino's emotional monologue: “ I do not

understand / The ways of foreigners / But I do not despise their customs. / Why should you despise yours?" (342 – 345). Lawino's lines epitomize and reflect p'Bitek's espousal of both the Acholi and Western cultures but more importantly hold a universal quality in addition to cultural duality. P'Bitek's ideals notably mirror nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's quote, " You have your way. I have my way. As for the right way, the correct way, and the only way, it does not exist." As both p'Bitek and Nietzsche suggest, it is important to realize the futility of insisting on pursuing either the existing or new culture. Despite the rather simplistic nature of the verdict, an individual in the middle of cultural tensions must find a harmonious, equally beneficial consensus, an integration of both cultures.

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