Neo-Negritude Tempers in Okot p.Bitek’s “Song of Lawino”

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Abstract

This paper examines the dilemma of the educated African elite who is torn between the realities of two conflicting cultural realities. Using the fictional character, Lawino, Okot P’Bitek provides a meeting point between the two conflicting cultures of the West and African negritude philosophy through the platform of Neo-negritude’s ideology forge a better humanity.

Key words: fictional character, Lawino, neo-negritude, humanity.
The literary clime is dotted by varied ideological signposts in its attempts to grapple with diverse human situations which have continued to serve as its inspiring fount. In African literature, one of such ideological signposts is the negritude movement championed by African poets like Leopold Sedar Senghor, Birogo Diop, David Diop, and Bernard Dadie among others.

At the inception, it was Aime Cesaire, a West Indies black poet and senghor that led movement in the early 1930s as a kind of follow up to the Harlem renaissance in America. Harlem renaissance was fired by the spirit of cultural nationalism among the black artists who employed their skills to rebel “against the traditional perception of self-pity and inferiority complex” (Raji-Oyelade 1997:166) which the white racial onslaught had foisted on them. This racial assault was best expressed in the French policy of Assimilation in their colonies. This policy which sought to make Frenchman of their colonial subjects to a large extent, succeed in alienating educated Africans who became “deeply Frenchified” (Nwoga, 1986:216) in black skin.

At the heart of this movement seemed to be the nagging question: can the cultural essence (history) of a people be re-scripted on the basis of a mere racially inspired document as enunciated by the “supremacist” philosophy of Assimilation? The Blackman’s answer and reaction to this poser was expressed in the palpable rage that marked the tone of most of the negritude poems. This as Nwoga (1958:217) observed “led to a poetry of protest that expressed a rejection and a new glorification of African and blackness”. Though, at this time, “the return-to-Africa” sentiment was a pan-continent feeling, the historical facts enunciated above explain why the Negritude movement was most prominent among the Franco-phone African writers. It is a kind of racial pride to counter the erstwhile assumed superiority of the whites. Therefore, Negritude can be described as an intellectual revolt against the enforced French assimilation policy and the promotion of the philosophy of blackness Principally, Negritude, as Senanu and Vincent (1076:23), observe, aims among other things, to reassert and revive, through literature, the cultural values identity and authenticity of Africans and to extol the ancestral glories and the beauty of Africa partly through a renunciation of what is western and partly through a re-ordering of imagery “(emphasis ours).

It was this attempt at a wholesale condemnation of the western values that accounted for the tendency for the negritude poets to over-romanticize the black culture. The hyperbolic terms in which Africa and everything African is described a consequence of this attempt at over glorification.

For example, Senghor sees the black woman as symbol of life and beauty in “Black woman”

Naked woman, black woman

Clothed with your colour which is life.

With your form which is beauty...!
In terms of imagery, African imageries come to replace foreign imageries in the works of negritude writers. This attempts at domesticating poetic imageries is no doubt, a worthy contribution of the negritude poets. In response to the negritudeists attempt at over glorification and uncritical projection of African value over the western values, many critic have reacted to the negritude philosophy. Some of these critics include according to Okunoye (1997:138), Jean Pual Sartre, Ezekiel Mphalele, Lewis Nkosi: Janheinz Jahn and Wole Soyinka. Wole Soyinka’s major stricture against Negritude movement is summed up in the view that:

*Its poets perpetuate the European myths about African simplicity and hyper sexuality borrow their Manichean methodology from the Europeans are too self conscious.* (Adekoya1997:149)

Above all, Soyinka feels that the “Tiger does not proclaim its Tigeritude” He does not see any reason for the pervasive nostalgia for the African past which runs through the poetic out-put of the Negritude writers. In consequence of these strictures emerged a new sensibility still espousing the theme of African cultural worth but within the frame work of a global culture. This new sensibility is styled neo-negritude movement. This successor to the old negritude movement emphasizes an objective assessment of the black culture and where it stands in relation to the pan-human culture.  

The spate of criticisms to which the Negritude movement was subjected engendered a corresponding liberalization of the negritude philosophy. This ushered in a careful examination of the African values vis-à-vis the western culture. Thus, the combative –protestation noticed in the tone of the early negritudeist became mellowed down. albeit. The use of African imageries were still retained. Neo-negritude posturing in Okot p’Bitek’s Song of Lawino.

The fire of cultural fervor among the negritude poets caught up with other African poets outside the Franco-phone block. Thus, the movement, which used to be solely identified with the French-speaking African writers won discipleship among Anglo-phone African writers. This is one of the central features of the neo-negritude period in the development of African poetry. Okot P’Bitek falls into this new set of neo-negritude writers.

Okot formally launched his neo-negritude mission with his long poem, *Song of Lawino* where the old themes of Negritude are emphasized. In the poem. Okot p’Bitek employs the tongue of Lawino to present and define the Acoli (by extension traditional African) values. The poem can be seen as a painstaking attempts at defining and projecting the African values within the dynamics of a global culture. As (cook.1984:43)puts it, the song is “a constructive assertion of the rights and dignity of an on-going traditional society which should be considered on a par with its sophisticated modern counter parts” (Our emphasis).  

The point in emphasis here is that the traditional African culture is not a static unresponsive one totally impervious to changes and improvements in the face of changing socio-political realities of the dynamics world. Rather, it is a culture which is amenable to positive changes dictated by the dynamics of the pan-human universal culture. In essence, the song is not
“a lament” but a “celebration” of an African (Acoli) culture. It is not a denigration of other people’s culture but a call for mutual respect of all cultures. Lawiwo, the protagonist, confesses:

I do not understand
The ways of foreigners
But I do not despise their customs
Why should you despise yours?

(Song of Lawino p.41)

This liberal disposition to and appreciation of the white man’s ways of life is further demonstrated in Lawino’s comments about the clock:

I do not know
How to tell the time
Became I cannot read
The figures
To me the clock
Is a great source of pride
It is beautiful to see
And when the visitors come
They are highly impressed

(Song of Lawino p.63)

The strongest point of OkotP’Bitek’s neo-gegritude poetry is the ability of his poetic personal, Lawino, to confess her limited knowledge of the white man’s culture and consciously makes herself a humorous subject in essence, she does not preach a wholesale rejection of the white-man’s way rather, she advocates a symbiotic relationship between her Acoli and the western culture:

It is true
White man’s medicines are strong
But Acoli medicines
Are also strong

(The song. P. 101)

No doubt, the song is a satiric piece, but it is a satire directed not at the white man’s culture rather at the educated blacks represented by Ocol, who so unashamedly parrot the western bourgeois value and modes of life.

Lawino’s anger stems from Ocol’s attitudes, who after acquiring western education abandons his rural world for the urban artificiality which the western values have come to represent. His mistress, Clementine, the symbol of Ocol’s new world distorts her figure, straightens her hair, reddens her lips, pads her breast—all in a feverish pursuit of the western ideal of beauty and accomplishment. Lawino denounces Ocol, ridicules the artificiality of his civilized ways, and proudly asserts the primacy and vibrancy of the peasant value which she captures in the imagery of the Pumpkin—she queries: “who has ever uprooted the Pumpkin?” (P.34). Ina stout defense of the Acoli culture against the blind rampage of the western value; she declares:

The Pumpkin in the old homestead
Must not be uprooted

(p. 41)

Through his poetic persona, Lawino, Okot p. Bitek comments on every aspect of life in the traditional setting, already being affected by western cultural intrusion. These aspects of life include dances, dresses, food, religion, education, medicine and politics. To each of these we now turn our attention to examine how they are treated within the neo-negritude construct already discussed.

On its facial value a less careful reader will see Lawino’s comments about the white-man’s dance represented by the “ball-room dance” as a condemnation. However, her confession that:

I am ignorant of the dance of foreigners
And how they dress
I do not know
I only know the dance of our people

(Song of Lawino. P.42)

negates this view. Since dances are aspect of a people’s culture. It is only reasonable for a person steeped in that culture to be at home with it. It is no crime not to know about the dance tradition of an alien culture. What is ridiculous is to seek to ape that tradition with which one is not at
home. The manner of the ballroom dance insults her moral upbringing. She is therefore filled with revulsion with the manner in which people dance it. For example, the Africans dance outside in broad-day-light, while the class Ocol associates with dances in the darkness and at night dead drunk!. The Africans encourages dancers to hold to one another who may not be one’s wife “tightly” she declares:

I cannot dance the ballroom dance
Being held so tightly
I feel ashamed
Being held so tightly in public
I cannot do it
It looks shameful to me! (p.44)

In western dance, there is no respect for the elders and relatives as:

Girls hold their fathers
Boys hold their sister close
They dance even with their mothers

(p.45)

The situation where these people dance is dirty and indecent. This sharply contrasts with the vibrant and lively African dance done not in the dark but openly.

One must note that Lawino does not reject the validity of the western culture what appalls her is the self hatred that makes Ocol totally reject and even consciously repudiate his root and the African peasant world. He and his likes even go further to uncritically accept the half-baked mannerisms of the European bourgeois.

Lawino could not understand how Ocol could have been so quickly torn from his roots as she retrospect’s:

But only recently
We would sit close together/touching each other!
Only recently I would play
On my bow-harp
Singing praises to my beloved:
I used to admire him speaking
What is being described here is the entire alienating effect of western education. People are educated in order to help their communities and raise their cultural resources and not to form a screen between such communities and objective realities as shown in Ocol’s attitudes and conducts.

It is in this regard that the song is viewed as a new mood informed by the desire to subject Africans to self-questioning and self-examination, to find out where the shoe pinches and not an unquestioning acceptance of other people’s culture.

On the political plank, Lawino observes that the two warning political parties (Democratic Party and the Congress Party) controlled by the so-called African elites fundamentally represent the bourgeois class interests. She finds herself unable to wholly identify with either of them mainly because the don’t represent her real interest and ideals.

The parties only pay lip-service to unity but in reality:

The new parties have split
The homestead
As the battle axe splits the skull

The division and suspicion which these elites have foisted on their people is demonstrated by the fierce enmity between Ocol and his brother.

Towards the end of the song, Lawino advises her husband to come back to his people so that he might be blessed and become a man again.

In Conclusion, Lawino personalizes the African values with its vibrant and healthy ethnics defined by the realities of African traditional existence while Clementine symbolizes the artificiality of the westernized African elites with all its attendant hollow pretensions. Ocol, the typical educated African denigrates his African past in an unrealistic attempt at announcing to the world that he is a “civilized” individual. This explains his open rejection of Lawino and opting for Clematina. Lawino, therefore is left with no option but to develop a passionate dislike for Ocol and his mistress, Clementine. Her ultimate goal is not to abuse these antagonists of hers just for the sake of abuse but to beat them back to their senses. In effect the song is not a criticism of the western values, but a call for self examination on those Africans who might have been caught in the “Ocol Afro-phobic complex”. This is the kernel of Okot p’Bitek’s neo-negritude attitude examined in this paper.
References


