REVUE INTERDISCIPLINAIRE FRANCOPHONE
RIFRA
https ://rifra-unikin.cd/

eISSN : 2957-8574
pISSN : 2957-8566
Éditeur : Faculté des Lettres et Sciences humaines, UNIKIN

Vol. 8, No.1, 219–234, 2026
DOI : 10.68356/rifra.019.v08.i01.09

Article de recherche

Une lecture féministe moderniste du poème La Chanson de Lawino d'Okot P'Bitek

Claudine MUYALA TAYAYE BIBI[1,*]

[1]*Associate Professor, University of Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo*
[*]*Auteur correspondant*

Auteur correspondant :
contact@rifra-unikin.cd

Reçu : 2 mai 2026
Accepté : 20 juin 2026
Publié en ligne : 20 juin 2026

Résumé

Cet article propose une lecture féministe et moderniste du long poème La Chanson de Lawino dOkot PBitek. Il dénonce la violence faite aux femmes africaines et analyse la réaction de Lawino face aux mauvais traitements infligés par son mari, dans une perspective démancipation.

Mots-clés : féminisme ; modernisme ; lecture ; littérature africaine

Abstract

This article analyzes Okot PBiteks long poem Song of Lawino from a feminist and modernist perspective. It denounces violence against African women and examines Lawinos reaction to her husbands mistreatment in the context of womens emancipation.

Keywords : feminism ; modernism ; reading ; African literature

Introduction

This article is entitled : A Femino-Modernist Reading of Okot Pbiteks Song of Lawino analyses Okot Pbiteks long poem Song of Lawino from a woman, feminist and modernist perspective. It denounces violence against women, before taking a stand in favor of womens rights. It is intended to be a feminists reaction against the way Lawino has been mistreated and repudiated by Ocol, her African husband from a modernist perspective. There are six points to consider : the concept of feminism, and modernism, about Okt pbiteks poem Song of Lawino, which account for its context, subject matter, main problem, and central theme. Section 4 is a personal reading feminist and modernist reading of the poem, followed by section 6 about findings, before shifting to conclusion.

Study Objectives :

The main objective of this study react against the violence done to the woman in many African countries which retards women emancipation. It is intended to show mans mental and intellectual weaknesses from a modernist perspective.

The research problem

This article investigates the impact of African traditions and customs on Ocols attitude towards his wife, Lawino, as the poem depicts.

Study variables

There are two variables : African traditions and customs which is the independent variable, and Ocols attitude his Lawino, his wife.

Research questions :

Two questions are posed : (1) what are the causes that lead Ocol to divorce Lawino ? And (2) Couldnt Ocol give Lawino the chance of going to school, and get educated ?

Research hypothesis :

Two hypotheses are formulated in relation to the questions posed ; (1) The causes of this divorce cultural and educational, and not unfaithfulness.

Pour citer cet article : Claudine MUYALA TAYAYE BIBI (2026). Une lecture féministe moderniste du poème La Chanson de Lawino d'Okot P'Bitek. REVUE INTERDISCIPLINAIRE FRANCOPHONE, 8(1), 219–234. https ://doi.org/10.68356/rifra.019.v08.i01.09

This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License

Thesis to defend

The cause of Lawinos repudiation by her husband, Ocol, is illegal. Methodology

The data for analysis includes the book itself, Song of Lawino, and the characters inside the poem, mostly her husband Ocol. The instruments for data collection are note-taking technique and a checklist of critical statements about the poet and his long poem. Three approaches were used : the discourse-comprehension, feminist and modernist approaches. The data analysis focused on the features of violence against the woman that generate the readers reaction.

1. How has feminism been defined ?

Feminism is a modernism trend characterized in part by womens reaction and rejection of mens unfair treatment and previously established unequal norms that restricted womens rights and social role. It also reacted societal norms established by men that denied womens freedom of action. It is read as womens advocacy of womens rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes ; and as a rejection of unpleasant attitude against them. It is the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes Women need equal treatment, and they want things to be equal for both men and women, and the issue of womens rights and interests which have become prominent. The reason is the unfair treatment they have been victims of by men and societal norms. It is the promotion of women's rights, interests and emancipation that feminism is after.

2. About Modernism

The end of 19th Century saw the rise of modernism is in art and literature. Its main features are the rejection of established societal and religious norms, the emphasis is on innovation of form and style, the conflict between the value of the individual and the value of society, the use of irony, doubt and scepticism, individualism, the rejection of absolute truth, and the re-evaluation of traditional gender and social roles, as in Georges Bernards Shaws play Candida. (1898). Additionally, modernist writers often engaged with taboo topics such as sexuality, and existential uncertainty, asserting their creative autonomy in the face of societal and literary norms. These elements underscore modernism's preoccupation with innovation and rebellion against established traditions (Levenson, 2011). As a concept, modernism includes a variety of artistic and philosophical movements such as symbolism, futurism, surrealism, expressionism, imagism, dada, feminism and others.

3. About Okot Pbiteks Poem, Song of Lawino

3.1. The context of the poem

Like the context of Song of Lawino, the context of Song of Ocol is typically African, more particularly the Acoli traditions in Uganda where this written form of the song was born before Okot wrote Song of Ocol (Heron, 2013 : 1). Song of Ocol is based on a real social problem, very common in rural areas in East Africa. Many husbands who have been abroad, return home with nothing but contempt for the ways of life of the wives they married before (Heron, 1972 : 13).

3.2. The Subject matter

Song of Ocol is about Ocols declaration of divorcing Lawino, his first wife with whom he has two kids (a son and a daughter), and sending her away from his house in favor of a new and modern educated wife by the name of Clementine. Woman, Shut up ! Pack your things Go ! Take all the clothes I bought you The beads, necklaces And the remains Of the utensils, I need no second-hand things. There is a large sack In the boot of the car, Take it Put all your things in it And go ! (Okot, 1972 :124)

The reason for the divorce is simple for him : Lawino is primitive, illiterate, and uneducated. She cannot read, write or speak English. She does not fit his new lifestyle after his return from the white mans land. His displeasure and discontent of her and everything African, the black woman, customs, traditions and mind-set is so deep that he starts despising, ridiculing, scorning, rejecting and cursing them all : lifestyle, foods, tattoos, superstitions, sacred trees, medicines, and ancestral shrines which he sees now as being meaningless, ridiculous, and useless items. He curses and sends them to hell : To hell With your old homestead ; To hell With the husks Of the old tradition And meaningless customs.

He married Lawino, an authentic African woman, and lived with her in their village while he was studying in Uganda. A few years later, he got a scholarship and went to study in England where he sympathized, socialized with white people, admiring their way of life, customs, beliefs, dance and way of eating. He also learned how to behave, think and talk the way white men do, to the point that he became their adept. After his return to his own native country, he performs the influences of the western way of life and almost finds it impossible to continue living with his former wife Lawino, or tolerating the old way of life, beliefs, traditions and customs which he starts cursing. He is so fed up with all those things that he simply denies and rejects his former wife that he now considers primitive, ugly, no longer attractive to the point that he cannot imagine how he can make love with her anymore. For him she does not know how to make love the way white girls do. He rejects not only the woman he married, but also Africa, his continent whose beliefs and customs appear meaningless, ridiculous and worthless to him. The poem almost addresses everything African : Lawino, Africa, African woman, African traditions, customs religious beliefs, poets of negritude who sing empty melodious sounds to celebrate Africa and African woman, for the sake of praising while all around them is misery and poverty. His indignation with everything African, including Africa itself results in denial and scorn for the fact that Africans have not been capable of anything significant for their social welfare and progress but dancing, singing, spending time in long funerals, fetishism, useless religious practices unlike the white man whose science and technology have improved their living standards and lifestyle. He simply sends Africa to hell with their pumpkins, old traditions, meaningless customs. He promises to smash the taboos down, explode the basis of every superstition, uproot the sacred trees and demolish every ancestral shrine though he does not say how ? The poem begins with Ocols rejection and repudiation of his wife, Lawino, although her name is not given, asking her to shut up, pack her things and go. And he asks the houseboy to help her pack, then clean the house, and wash the wall after her. He will also go for the painter to paint the house after her (SOO, 1972 : 124) The next thing he attacks in African woman is Africa. To him Africa means nothing, but blackness, idle giant, sleeping, snoring, singing and dancing, ignorant, chained to the rock of poverty, joking, stuck in stagnant mud of superstition, frightened by the spirits of the bush, the stream, scares of corpses, unadventurous and wizards : men and Women (SOO, 1972 : 128). He also promises to arrest all the village poets, musicians and tribal dancers and put in detention all the folk-story tellers, and myth makers, and send them all to the gallows with the professors of anthropology, teachers of African history, African literature and close down all the schools of African studies ; putt in detention all the preachers of negritude, smash all these mirrors so that they may not see the blackness of the past. He wishes we forgot all about the Kings of Ghana, the rulers of Monomotapa, the Zulu General killed by his own brothers so that he cannot write any poem of proud for the vanquished. What for, he says (SOO, 1972 : 154). The reason is because they have

not helped Africa and Africans to develop and improve their lifestyle, and living conditions. All is dark, and darkness, he says.

3.3. The main problem in Song of Lawino

The main problem in Song of Lawino is Ocols rejection of not only his wife, but also his identity and Africanity. Lawino is unfit, illiterate, ignorant with uncivilized behaviors and lifestyle ; and she has become unbearable to Ocol to continue living and sharing the same bed and home with her. It is also his scorn, displeasure, and discontent with everything African : women, the foods, customs, etc. He is fed up with all of them. To hell Africa and the Black woman, he says (Okot, 1972 : 129).

3.4. The Central theme

The central theme in Song of Ocol is the speakers overall denial and rejection of everything African : his first wife, Lawino, that he is kicking out, African woman, tradition, customs, mind-set, and culture on the one hand, and on the other hand, his adoption of the white mans culture which he strongly admires. This denial, rejection and curse are due to the incompatibility between the old traditional African lifestyle and mind-set, and the modern lifestyle and the education he has received abroad and his long contact with the white man. His hatred toward Africa and its culture is so strong that he curses them to hell, to destruction because he says, we will uproot every sacred tree and demolish every ancestral shrine so that nothing more is heard of that. Chapter Two of the poem displays Ocols denial and rejection of Africa and of everything African : What is Africa To me ? Blackness Deep, deep fathomless Darkness.
Stuck in the stagnant mud Of superstition, (Okot, 1972 : 128).
To hell With the pumpkin And your old traditions And meaningless customs.

4. A Feminist and Modernist Reading of Song of Lawino (1972)

Song of Lawino, just as many other African stories, such as Okots Song of Ocol, Alukos One Man, One Wife, and Flora Nwapas Idu, to mention but a few, are the same in many ways because they are more concerned with one central issue : polygamy in Africa, or violence made to the women through polygamy in Africa. They tell stories about how African women are ill-treated and tortured socially, financially, morally, and psychologically through polygamy in their homes by their African husbands. Violence against women and girls takes many forms in Africa of which the most obvious are the phenomenon of mistress, polygamy, rape, starvation, neglect, forced abortion, sexual abuse, adultery, forced divorce, blows and beatings, forced marriages, preferential marriage, deprivation of liberty, verbal violence, and insults (Muyala, 2017). Men are more concerned with marrying a lot of women, and producing a lot of children, which they are unable to take care of, and send to college, which is bizarre ! The idea of marrying a lot of wives and having many children is not sensible. Nowadays, sensible people think of having a good education to better their lives. Most Africans do not show any consideration for women. And polygamy did not bring any wealth to them. Africa is ruined by misery and poverty, and it is still underdeveloped though. It is sensible that one be wedded to one wife to avoid promiscuity and diseases sexually transmissible as HIV/AIDS that is destroying lives, and a lot couples have passed away and are still victims of. The rejection of the principle of one man, one wife by Africans in favor of polygamy in order to get many children is a criminal attitude visvis those women and children. Their parents are able to send them to school for a better future, which contributes to high rate of streets kids. Uneducated people constitute a real danger, and a retarding bomb for their countries. The return to their traditional customs of polygamy is a return to their own misery, and to the miseries of the uneducated, illiterate and desperate women who accept them for their ruin. Polygamy has not brought Africa to development, but rather contributed to its misery and poverty. It sounds as if African males fail to control their sexual desires by marrying many wives ; animals behave the same way in this respect. They want them for sex, and for other dark practices, which are devilish sometimes. It is a shame to say what African husbands do to their wives in their homes. Okot PBitek (1972) is certainly right to assume that Africa is in the dark with unnecessary taboos, rites, rituals that rather hinder social progress. Both polygamy and polyandry are certainly not values, but vices against nature. And the fact of having many children is not a value either. Children are a considerable source of expenses and trouble that make parents lives difficult to enjoy. It is strange that males in Africa aim at having many women and children. Similarly, women in Africa swear by husbands and children, as if they were wealth. While intelligent people around the world seek for a better education, and better life conditions, males and females in African fight to have more wives and more children. It is certainly a mental problem due to the lack of education. More and more uneducated African women are victims of violence by men, as is depicted in Song of Lawino and in fact, in all African literary genres. In Okt Pbiteks Song of Ocol, Ocol is a typical example of African husband despite the education he received. He has a degree in Economics, and his life has changed a lot because he has adopted a modern lifestyle, but he does not seem to have assimilate the Western values and western culture on issues regarding human rights, the meaning of marriage, tolerance, commonsense, gender, and parity, if we consider the way he illtreated his first wife, Lawino. Every human being is entitled to life, respect, equality, consideration, education, freedom, among many others, but Ocol does have any consideration for his own wife. He insults g=her publically, which shows a of savoir-vivre and of commonsense ! Ocol is not tolerant of other peoples culture and way of life. He is not gentle in his attitude towards his wife, and he is arrogant, rude and disrespectful, which is a shame. He was supposed to set example. He does not consider gender ; and he does not consider the women as human beings. I do understand that it is his right to divorce, but he could have done it more softly. He was more arrogant than Lawino who never went to school. Ocol does not consider parity either : the fact that man and woman are equal being humans, just as most husbands do in Africa. Ocol thinks he is superior to his wife, just the way African husbands do, due probably to dowry they pay in order to get a woman, and they end up abusing of their wives. Ocol behaved just as a non-educated African husband would do. African husbands divorce their wives in much the same way as Ocol did with insults, disdain and disgust, ignoring the good old days spent together and the mutual services they rendered one another. That is unfair and ungrateful for an educated person as him. Marriage is not servitude, but rather an agreement between two people who decide to live together for the better. And it is a divine institution that, nevertheless can be broken if the two parties or one of them refuses or becomes unfaithful to the rules of the game. It has never been an obligation, and nobody obliged Ocol to marry this woman. It was his own consent. Actually, Lawino is not accused of breaking any of those marriage rules to deserve such a treatment. It is Ocol who finds that he cannot continue to live with her. Why then not break up their union with respect and dignity for her ? Something is really wrong in him, not in Lawino because she didnt offence him in their relationships. One more thing to raise Ocols paradoxical attitude. He does not seem to be logical with himself. He went to study because it was good to be educated, but he forgot to send his own wife to school after he came back home so that she might be educated as him. And what he didnt do is what he blamed his wife for ! Some husbands send their women to school even after they have married them. The wife is mans joy and glory and the ideal partner who takes care of her husband and makes him happy.

But unfortunately, Ocol did not make an effort to educate his wife, Lawino ; there have only been those insults followed by her repudiation. Who is to be blamed more in this case, the woman or the husband ? People go to school to be changed positively ; and it is a change that is reflected through their behaviors, through the way they act and interact, think and talk, and through their attitude toward other people. Education is that which makes the great difference among men, qualifies them, makes them knowledgeable and fit, useful or useless, good or bad (John Lock, cited in Clarke & Clarke, 1976 : 5). In Africa unfortunately, educated or not educated, most husbands do not treat their partners with respect and dignity. Ocol is another case. He only claims that he is educated and has money, but actually, his behaviors do not reflect it. Another point is that most African husbands are more attached to their traditions, and customs than to their wives. They are also more attached to their relatives than to their wives. I would tolerate that Ocol divorced his wife, and I understand, it is his right ; but at the same I think that he should also learn to respect womens rights. Actually, public insults are illegal. Lawino is actually, not in a good position to take any action against her husband Ocol, because she is illiterate, and that makes her dependent on Ocol. She does not have a paid job to secure her life. Had she been educated, or had a good job and a high position, her story could have taken another direction, and Ocol could have possibly been arrested, or at least scared by being put in detention, even for a few hours in revenge. There should be a law to regulate African husbands dictatorship and unhuman behaviors toward their wives in their homes. The law should also regulate African husbands virus regarding polygamy, or having mistresses. If it is not honorable for married women to go out with boyfriends because it is dishonorable for husbands, it similarly IS a shame, dishonorable and humiliating for women to hear that their husbands have mistresses. It is a matter of commonsense. Most husbands are not self-disciplined at this point. It is also a matter of education and self-control. Women should be prepared to face their men on issues regarding violence. They should have their own lawyers to defend their cases, rather than leave their husbands continue to exert violence on them. My feeling is that Ocol never loved Lawino. He STILL was immature when he married her ; he certainly wanted sex permanently with her, not a woman partner for life, because he did not help her improve her conditions, nor did he tolerate to maintain her next to him while living with his mistress which was an illegal union. This way of abusing of women should be illegal. I understand, until the opposite is proven, that the woman is mans suitable helper without which man would be helpless, alone, and difficult to stand, and vice-versa (Genesis, 2 : 18), but NOT mens toys to play with. Furthermore, if African males need children as they often say, they must respect their women who take care and bear those children, and suffer to raise them in their early years. They cannot just want children and not take good care of the women, the way Ocol did in Song of Lawino. It is like wanting to eat an omelet while throwing away the egg. The importance of the woman is in any case unquestionable. Everything exists for a purpose, even that which seems to be useless. It is not the man who created the woman to declare her of less importance or unnecessary ; and the world we live in is not mans creation. The one who created man is the same who created the woman. And there is no such a unique creature in the world as the woman whom God gave to man. The importance of the woman is, in any case, unquestionable, and could be explained by her relevance in the so many irreplaceable roles she happens to play in society, such as (1) in the reproduction of humankind, (2) in mans life as a partner and helper, (3) in the household as a house technician serving the family and as children caretaker, (4) in breast feeding, and (5) during the sexual intercourse for the mutual pleasure of both, to mention but a few. A commonsense statement about the importance of the woman is, certainly the Lord Gods declaration of intent. The Bible reads : It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him (Genesis, 2 : 18).

A wife is there to help the husband meet his needs. It would have been terrible if man had been alone. He would have been helpless without a suitable helper. There are two great statements to care of in the Creators statement : it is not good for the man to be alone, and a suitable helper that matter most here in this context. Suitable means that which is appropriate for a purpose.

5. Findings

The impact of African traditions and customs is considerable in Okts poem, Song of Lawino. Actually, Lawinos husband, Ocol behave like a typical African in spite of the education he got from the white country. There are 7 instances of violence against the women in this story : violence through the subject matter, violence through the themes treated, sexual abuse, divorce, insults, verbal violence, and psychological violence,

The subject matter of this poem is all violence and violation of womens rights. It is the cry a woman who is victim of violence on behalf of her husband, Ocol, who has taken another woman. He doesnt love her anymore because he thinks she is illiterate, primitive and uneducated to fit his new lifestyle. And instead of keeping the two wives as most Africans do, he just decided to repudiate her, after abusing of her for many years. She is mother of two, which reduces her chance to remarry. Ocol chased his wife after abusing of her sexually for several years. Why couldnt he then wait to get married after studies ? Why was he in a hurry ? He married her because he loved her at that time. He could have also sent her to school at the time he was also studying to give her a change to be educated and improve her level. He knew that she was illiterate, and he didnt help her get educated. He just waited till he finished studies to declare her primitive, unfit and finally repudiate her ; it is in any case unfair. Actually, most African get married young, especially in traditional milieu. The central theme in Song of Lawino is divorce : Lawinos repudiation from Ocols home for which she is lamenting and complaining. Men that were born tender and to whom the earth was given are the ones that fill the earth with violence.

Conclusion

The story of Lawino is all violence against the woman in Africa, the purpose of which is to depict and show how women are mistreated and dishonored in their homes by their husbands. I am personally against the way African husbands do not honor their wives in most African settings, as is the case in this particular African story by Okot, for example. Ocol chased his wife after abusing of her sexually for several years. Why couldnt he then wait to get married after studies ? Why was he in a hurry ? He married her because he loved her at that time. He could have also sent her to school at the time he was also studying to give her a change to be educated and improve her level. He knew that she was illiterate, and he didnt help her get educated. He just waited till he finished studies to declare her primitive, unfit and finally repudiate her ; it is in any case unfair. Actually, most African get married young, especially in traditional milieu. Based on the findings, the hypotheses are validated because Ocol did not divorce Lawino for unfaithfulness, but just for the fact that she was illiterate. There was another feasible option, though, that of sending her to school after his return back home., And this way of divorcing his wife is illegal. Thus showing that the impact of African traditions and customs significant on Ocols attitude towards Lawino, his first wife.

References

Aluko, T.M. (1977). One Man, One Wife. London : Heinemann.
Buhendwa, M. F. Literary Criticism as a Paradigm in Literature Research and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages : a

Position Paper in Review of Applied Languages and Communication. Kinshasa : University of Kinshasa, pp. 29 pages. Feminism in Oxford Reference Dictionary (2003). Oxford : OUP.
Gabembo (2011), Violences Faites à la Femme et à la Jeune fille en République Démocratique du Congo. Kinshasa : UNICEF.
Genesis in The Bible : New International Version (1978). Michigan : Zondervan Bible Publishers.
Heron, G.A. Introduction to Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol in Okot pBitek (1972). Song of Lawino & Song of Ocol. Nairobi : Educational Publishers.
Levenson M. (1999). The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Culture. Cambridge University Press,
Lock, J. Importance of Education, in Clarke, M.A. & A.D.R. Clarke (1976). Early Experience : Myth and Experience. London : Open Books
Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English for Advanced Learners (2012). New ed. Edinburgh : Pearson Education Limited
Muyala, T.B.C. (2016). Violence against the Women in One Man, One Wife. Kinshasa : University of Kinshasa. MA Thesis, unpublished.
Ngwaba B. F. (2013). Exercises in Poetic Discourse Analysis : From Theory to Practice. Kinshasa. Arts Appreciation Publishers.
Nwapa, Flora (1970). Idu. London : Heinman educational Books Ltd.
Okot; Pbitek (1972). Song of Lawino & Song of Ocol. Nairobi : Educational Publishers.
Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary on line (2016). Oxford : OUP.
Oxford Reference Dictionary (2003). Oxford : OUP.
Genesis in The Bible : New International Version (1978). Michigan : Zondervan Bible Publishers.
Importance of the Woman in http ://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woman 7/30/2010.