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, 235–247, 2026
DOI : 10.68356/rifra.019.v08.i01.10

Article de recherche

Le modernisme en littérature africaine en référence avec le roman Un homme, une femme de Timothy M. Aluko

Claudine MUYALA TAYAYE BIBI[1,*] **and Ferdinand NGWABA BIMBALA**[1]

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

Auteur correspondant :
contact@rifra-unikin.cd

Résumé

Cet article analyse lessence de la modernité dans le roman Un homme, une femme de Timothy M. Aluko. Il décrit lorigine, le contexte, lintrigue, le problème central et sa résolution, ainsi que les facteurs de modernité qui font de ce roman une uvre moderniste, sans négliger sa valeur artistique.

Mots-clés : modernisme ; littérature africaine

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

Abstract

This article discusses the essence of modernity in Timothy M. Alukos novel One Man, One Wife. It describes its origin, context, plot, central problem and resolution, as well as the features of modernity that make it a modernist novel, including its artistic value.

Keywords : modernism ; African literature

Introduction

Modernist literature is a worldwide revolutionary literary trend that captures and continued to capture African writers mind and attention, for which Achebe, Ngugi, and Aluko became the most prominent, and quite recently Adiche Chimamanda Ngozi. The need to bring about a change in the African mind-set became predominant in this area of globalization, in lieu of remaining traditionalist and retro. This article shows the need for a change and better assimilation of the positive features of western civilization, as is the case in One Man, One Wife. - Objective : The main objective of this article is to depict the features of modernism in Aluko and in his novel under study. - The problem investigates in this article is the impact of modernity on Alukos novel One Man, One Wife., or in which way do Aluko and his novel look revolutionary. - Two questions are posed for the purpose of this work ; The first question is (1) how modernist is Aluko and his novel One Man, One Wife ? And the second is Aluko for or against the title of his novel ? - The hypothesis is twofold : (1) Aluko is a modernist writer, and (2) he is for the fair principle of One Man, One Wife. - The thesis to defend in this article is that Aluko is definitely against Africans practice of polygamy. - In terms of methodology, the data for analysis is the novel itself, and the various characters performing the actions. The instruments used to collect data is the note-taking and the critical statements about the author and his work. The data were analyzed by using the discourse-comprehension and modernist approaches.

I. Presentation of the Novel One Man, One Wife

I.1. The Origin of One Man, One Wife

The provocative title of Alukos novel One Man, One Wife takes its origin from the Bible ; it is not from African origin ; it is irreconcilable with African traditions and mind-set. It has its origin deeply rooted in the book of Genesis (2 : 18), Its not good for the man to stay alone, I will make a suitable helper for him ; and later, the book of Matthew (19 : 4-6) said : Thats why man shall leave his parents, be united to his wife and both shall become one ; one man for one wife, which is why the Creator made only one wife for Adam.

Pour citer cet article : Claudine MUYALA TAYAYE BIBI et Ferdinand NGWABA BIMBALA (2026). Le modernisme en littérature africaine en référence avec le roman Un homme, une femme de Timothy M. Aluko. REVUE INTERDISCIPLINAIRE FRANCOPHONE, 8(1), 235–247. https ://doi.org/10.68356/rifra.019.v08.i01.10

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

I.2. The Context of the Story of One Man, One Wife

The context of this story is African. It is set in a typical African setting which is the Isolo village in Nigeria shortly after the arrival of the white men and the introduction of Christianity. And the idea of one man for several wives is typical of Africans, and it has been introduced in the Eastern and Western Africa by the Muslim/Islamic faith. Aluko (1918-2010)s short stories and novels advocated in favor of social change and progress rather than enforced the clash between African traditions and Western culture, which is favorable to the development of Africans, as is still the case nowadays. He presented his work as a satire directed against Yorubas ethics, in order to ridicule the practice of polygamy in a poor village The Britannica Encyclopedia writes : Alukos One Man, One Wife (1959), a satirical novel about the conflict of Christian and Yoruba ethics, relates the disillusionment of a village community with the tenets of missionary Christianity43. This conflict between Christian and Yoruba culture on the issue regarding polygamy is apparent in One Man, One Wife. The novel reads : The Nigerian villagers of Isolo have difficulty accepting the Christian idea of "one man, one wife", resulting in intrigue against the Christians, especially Teacher Royasin, who may be having an illicit love affair44.

3. The Plot

One Man, One wife tells the story of Isolo village people whose traditional social and religious life was once disturbed because of the intrusion of a new way of life and religion : Christianity, requesting people to be converted and males more particularly to be wedded to one and only one wife, unlike in the past, which for them is simply incomprehensible. The new religion is received with some sort of enthusiasm at first, when the white man arrived and new members adhered. Royasin is one of the first villagers to join the new religion and was appointed village catechist due to his devotion. Elder Joshua also joined the new faith, but he was soon disappointed to hear that the new religion forbade males to take a second or third wife. Elder Joshua was secretly in

43T.M. Aluko in https ://www.britannica.com/biography/T-M-Aluko 8/18/2016). 44One Man, One Wife, in http ://www.worldcat.org/title/one-man-onewife/oclc/2887076)

love with another woman, Toro for whom he had already paid for the dowry. The news that Elder Joshua was about to marry Toro as his second wife spread through the village like fire in dry grass, which made him very angry, because of his name that was dragged in the mind of the villagers. According to Elder Joshua, it is Elder Jeremiah who is responsible for the foregoing situation. He threatened to kill Bible Jeremiah physically for tarnishing his image. Meanwhile another scandal occurred. Four days after Jacob had welcome Miss Joke, his wife home, the villagers noticed that the woman was already pregnant of an unknown man. And that was the cause of trouble in the village church. Finally, the man responsible for Jokes pregnancy was known to be Royasin, the village Bible Lesson Teacher. Rev. David took the floor and said :

Elders of the Church of Christ, he said, a terrible catastrophe has befallen our congregation. They all knew the terrible catastrophe. The young woman, Joke, only recently married to Jacob at Isolo, had alleged that Teacher Royasin was the father of her expected child. This thing is terrible. Elders, our work is in ruins (Aluko, 1977 : 56). Unfortunately, Joke died after she had given birth to a stillborn child. Royasin was dismissed from the church for his unclean behaviours. Soon after the dismissal, Royasin began to urge the other village people to rebel against the local church. He assigned himself the task of defending free of charge defenseless people for whatever case they could have. In the meantime, people are dying mysteriously in Isolo, among whom Elder Joshua. Unable to put an end to these events which completely disillusioned the entire village people that had newly accepted the new religion and were struggling with the new principle of one man, one wife , simply resorted to their traditional rites, and customs, and abandoned the new religion and its tough principle. They found strange and not practical in their cultural context. This failure of the new religion to settle is mainly due to Elder Joshua and Royasins inability to remain faithful to their wives and to the conflict between Elder and Bible Jeremiah. Royasin and Joshua have concubines in secret, thus making it difficult to the other villagers to accept the idea of a man being wedded to one wife since they themselves are unable to comply with that idea. Elder Joshua, particularly did not renounce his plan to marry a second wife as the plan is to be traced back to the period before the arrival of the new religion in Isolo, although he had joined the new faith. And Teacher Royasin does not behave well : he has secret sexual intercourse with a married woman who is even pregnant of him, namely Miss Joke who was prepared to be Jacobs wife. Because of the disorder caused by the new church adherents, and considering Teacher Royasins dismissal, Jacob decided to become the new teacher of the new doctrine of One man, One wife and came to consider himself as a prophet. But Jeremiah who was Jacobs fathers opponent said he was a false prophet. At the end, the villagers return to their old habits and marital tradition. The new Christian doctrine of One man, One wife was questioned and rejected. It is mere utopia for them. Thus, the title of the novel One Man, One Wife to mean, in fact, that it was not an appropriate or suitable doctrine for the Isolo people because it was neither realistic, nor possible in their context. None of the church leaders was faithful to be able to set an example for the other villagers to imitate. One Man, One Wife (1959) is thus, strange to them, and the book is one of those tales about polygamy and church politics in a newly Christianized society. Alukos book is a satire directed against past and present African societies.

4. The Main Problem and How it is Resolved

The main problem in Alukos One Man, One Wife is the incompatibility between the One Man, One Wife Christian principle with the traditional African practice of polygamy. The Isolo people cannot reconcile this belief with their own marital customs, and they do not accept it because they think that it is just not practical. Being a man in Isolo means having more than one woman for many serious reasons, which is why they returned to their former ancestral habits and traditions due to their inability to assimilate the new religion and its benefits This conflict which is considered by the village elders and all men as being an attack against village beliefs, customs and traditions is unfortunately against African women welfare, insofar as it reinforces mans violence against women.

5. The Central Theme

The central theme in Alukos novel One Man, One Wife is the clash between the Christian belief and the traditional customs on issues regarding marriage. Males and their elders in the village of Isolo have difficulty accepting the Christian faith, they think it is with its strange principle of one man one wife that the white man had brought ; and so they returned to their customs and worship of their traditional gods and the practice of these habits. The conflict between the traditional belief and Christianity is perhaps better shown in the following extract. The narrator says : The new faith insisted on absolute devotion to the one and only one God, whereas the authorities and the people of the land recognized and worshipped many deities. Above all, the new faith taught a very strange matrimonial doctrinethat the highest level of Christianity, the last rung on the ladder to the Christian Gods Heaven ; a Christian man must marry only one wife. These things were incomprehensible (Aluko, 1977 : 35). The new faith recommends to worship one God, which does not meet the villagers consent. Actually,

they found it strange, including the new matrimonial doctrine of one man, one wife !

6. About the Characters

The majority of the characters are flat, stereotyped and deeply anchored in their African mind-set : Toro, Elder Joshua, Teacher Royasin, Sergeant Lawal, Ma Sheyi, the President of the Court of Idasa, the two judges, Nikum, Joke, and Dele. Sergeant Lawal, for example, is a typical African man with a typical African mind-set. He is Toros new husband, the one who rescued her from the trial with Jacob by paying the č27 and acquiring her publicly at the court of Idasa. Actually he was already married to another young woman, the one that carried the bag that contained the money to reimburse Jacobs dowry in respect of Toro. That was the money that Joshua had paid long before his death in respect of Toro. The money had to be paid back to Jacob, Joshuas son, because Toro had refused to marry him. she said his father was a dishonest person and a thief ! He is strongly attached to the village traditions and customs. His behavior is predictable. Ma Sheyi, is Toros mother. Her husband who already had three wives rejected her while she was pregnant of him. And the baby-girl she was expecting is Toro. And Ma Sheyis mother is called Gbemi. After her husband had rejected her, she and her mother took care of Toro until she became mature. Ma Sheyi received a dowry and several other gifts from Elder Joshua in respect of her daughter, who unfortunately ran away, which is why the affair was reported to the court.

7. How Modernist is Aluko and His Novel One Man, One Wife

Aluko stands as modernist writer who has taken a stand against societal norms : namely African beliefs, traditions and the practice of polygamy in One Man, One Wife. He is surprised that the people of Isolo village rejected the fair principle of one man for one wife, and Christianity to return to their ancestral custom, and they are proud of having several women, despite their poor revenue, which is strange and sensensible. Aluko did not side with these customs which he considers unnecessary customs and traditions that hinder progress and women emancipation in most African countries. One Man, One Wife does not praise these customs and traditions, nor reject the Christian principle either ; instead, he describes a society with strange, abnormal behaviors and way of thinking, in much the same as George Bernard Shaw did in his novel Erewhon, which is nowhere turned backward. Modernism continues to challenge conventional morality, social norms, and described the state of individual alienation from society. Aluko did the same by questioning the relevance of polygamy and the rejection of Christian faith in his society. What Aluko is criticizing is womens domination and exploitation through polygamy, although themselves do not seem to understand due to ignorance, illiteracy and the lack of formal education and empowerment. Toro did raise her voice to react against her parents and dessert from her parents home after she had become aware that she had been booked to be Joshuas wife before she was born. So she ran away from her mothers home although the dowry was already paid in respect of her. After all she was a human and mature to decide about her own life. Aluko appears as a feminist in his attitude toward Toro, His attitude meets Simon de Bauvoire advocacy for womens rights and freedom as human beings, just as men, and who just refuses to continue to be oppressed by men and mens laws made for the purpose to keeping women under males domination. Toro took a stand and declared that publicly at the court of Idasa to show that she was fed up. The narrator comments : Toro, the runaway daughter of Ma Sheyi came to the Court House the following day Dear Mother,

Please dont think that I am a bad a daughter, Mother. But you were trying to force me to marry Jacob. You know that I dont like him. He has a long nose, like White Mans nose. Your dear daughter, Toro (Aluko, 1977 : 139-140). Modernism displayed a disregard for conventions and other forms45 ; it was marked by a strong and intentional break with traditions. This break includes a strong reaction against established religions, political and social views 46 Aluko was strongly opposed this Africans mindset and males established social traditions considered retro. And literature pursues that great role of educating, entertaining people (Culler 1997 : 37) through stories wholly invented or given new life through imagination, as Aristotle noted. African literature of the early independence has the merit of debating significant issues of universal interest, such as commonsense, violence against women, honesty, the defense of human rights, freedom of speech, democracy, the need for education, parity, gender, and tolerance, to mention but a few.

45J.H. Dettmar, Modernism in Kastan S. D. (ed). The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Litera Oxford : OUP. 46 Merriam Websters Encyclopedia of Literature (1995) Springfield, Ma : Merriam-Webster Alukos One Man, One Wife shall be remembered as great examples well set, along with Achebes Things Fall Apart where Okonkwo collapsed in front of the new culture that settled in Umofia, adopted by most of his own kinsmen because it sounds fair and sensible in lieu of remaining illiterate and uneducated in world that was meant to be dynamic and go better and better. The high rate of violence exerted by men against the women in Africa could be minimized considering a good education, enforced laws, women empowerment strategies, and strong continuing campaigns of sensitization (Muyala 2021). Actually, we can expect variability in anything we observe because human behaviors do not remain constant (Hatch & Lazaraton, 1991 : 51).

8. Features of Modernity in One Man, One Wife

At the origin, modernity lies on the writers reaction against most of the established religious, political, scientific and societal norms, beliefs, snobbery and optimism. Actually, modernists adopted a sceptical attitude towards everything including societal norms. One Man, One Wife displays lots of modernists features from the title to the end. 1. As the title reads, discourse use in this novel is quite revolutionary by rejecting previously established social norms that makes literature new in response to modernity 2. Modernist from the title. Actually, the title of this novel denotes a rejection of the traditional norms and customs. 3. It is a frontal attack against traditional customs and beliefs 4. The novel advocates womens rights and freedom, as is shown through Toros reaction and revolt against her parents will 5. The novel rejects, attacks, and scorns traditional religions by introducing Christianity in the village of Isolo 6. One Man, One Wife showed discontent against woman exploitation by men. 7. The novel criticizes the hypocrisy of the ruling Christian leaders through Teacher Royasins behavior vis-a-vis the girl he impregnated. 8. The novel shows discontent against Africans mentality and mindset 9. It is a feminist novel in its defense of womens rights in a patriarchal society dominated by men 10. This novel appears quite revolutionary right from its title which implies the rejection of polygamy 11. One Man, One Wife stigmatizes gender, the lack of consideration for women 12. This novel addresses patriarchy and gender inequality whereby males are excessively dominating 13. The use of irony and paradox is also characteristic of modernity. Actually, the ending of this novel is in contraction with its novel. What the title reads is not what the people did. The paradox is that what the title says is not what the villagers did.

9. Artistic values of the One Man, One Wife

Considered from a purely humanist point of view, One Man, one Wife has a significant, universal value because it displays a lot of commonsense : the idea of one man, one wife and vice-versa, especially no-

wadays with the spread out of HIV/ AIDS and other dangerous and incurable sexually transmissible diseases and also for the childrens education after all. That one man be wedded to one wife, and vice-versa is all commonsense. The title of the novel One Man, One Wife, seems provocative for most African men and why not for a few women also who claim that they are free to live their lives as they desire. Another value the novel is trying to teach is honesty. Not many people are honest in their inner lives. Many of them pretend to be honest, such as the case Elder Joshua and Teacher Royasin in this very novel. A lot of people among those who claimed to be Gods servants are, in fact, not true servants. This novel shows that hypocrisy does not pay well. The title of Alukos novel seems to tell an important religious message for the sake of order, and families welfare. But the content of the novel destroys that title in the sense that what the title reads is not what the people in the novel do and are for. The Isolo village decided to return to their traditions instead of keeping up with the Christian belief that was brought to them.

FINDINGS :

1. One Man, One Wife displays lots of modernists features from the title to the end. The title is shocking for Africans for whom a man cannot just have one wife. It denotes a rejection of the traditional norms and customs. It is a frontal attack against traditional customs and beliefs 2. The novel advocates womens rights and freedom, as is shown through Toros reaction and revolt against her parents will 3. The novel rejects, attacks, and scorns traditional religions by introducing Christianity in the village of Isolo 4. One Man, One Wife showed discontent against woman exploitation by men. 5. The novel criticizes the hypocrisy of the ruling Christian leaders through Teacher Royasins behavior vis-a-vis the girl he impregnated. 6. The novel shows discontent against Africans mentality and mindset 7. It is a feminist novel in its defense of womens rights in a patriarchal society dominated by men 8. This novel appears quite revolutionary right from its title which implies the rejection of polygamy 9. One Man, One Wife stigmatizes gender, the lack of consideration for women 10. This novel addresses patriarchy and gender inequality whereby males are excessively dominating The use of irony and paradox is also characteristic of modernity. Actually, the ending of this novel is in contraction with its novel. What the title reads is not what the people did. The paradox is that what the title says is not what the villagers did 11. Aluko is sceptical and critical towards Africans social norms traditions and beliefs.

Conclusion

The problem investigated was the impact of modernity on Aluko and on novel One Man, One Wife., The analysis showed about eleven features of modernism in this Alukos novel which tend to confirm that both Aluko and his novel are modernist. The two hypotheses are confirmed (1) Aluko is a modernist writer, and (2) he is for the fair principle of One Man, One Wife. The provocative title of Alukos novel One Man, One Wife takes its origin from the Bible ; it is not of African origin ; it is irreconcilable with African traditions and mindset. It has its origin deeply rooted in the book of Genesis (2 : 18), Its not good for the man to stay alone, I will make a suitable helper for him ; and later, the book of Matthew (19 : 4-6) said : Thats why man shall leave his parents, be united to his wife and both shall become one ; one man for one wife, which is why the Creator made only one wife for Adam. The context of this story is African. It is set in a typical African setting which is the Isolo village in Nigeria shortly after the arrival of the white men and the introduction of Christianity. And the idea of one man for several wives is typical of Africans, and it has been introduced in the Eastern and Western Africa by the Muslim/Islamic faith. Aluko advocated in favor of social change and progress rather than enforced the clash between African traditions and Western culture, which is favorable to the development of Africans, as is still the case nowadays. He presented his work as a satire directed against Yorubas ethics, in order to ridicule the practice of polygamy in a poor village

References

Aluko, M.T (1977). One Man, One Wife. London : Heinemann
Brad K. and J. A. Sparks .2001."Shaw and Modernity". University of Florida Press.Gainesville, Florida, USA.
Bradbury, M., & McFarlane, J. (1991). Modernism : A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930. Penguin Books.
Bradbury, M., & McFarlane, J. (1991). Modernism : A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930. Penguin Books.
Childs, P. (2008). Modernism : The New Critical Idiom. Routledge.
De Beauvoir S. (1952). The Second Sex. Vintage Book
Fiveable. (2024). Modernism in Literature. Retrieved from Fiveable.
Jameson, F. (1991). Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. Duke University Press.
Levenson M. (1999). The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Culture. Cambridge University Press,
Levenson, M. (2011). Modernism. Yale University Press.
Meyer, M. (2010). The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism. Cambridge University Press.
Online Literature. (2024). Modernism
Literature Periods & Movements. Retrieved from Online Literature on November 15th, 2024.
Modernism in Merriam Websters Encyclopedia of Literature (1995). Springfield, MA : Merriam-Webster.