

Paradoxes of Sexual Power in Song of Malaya

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Abstract

This paper is a post-colonial reading of Okot p'Bitek's work, Song of Malaya. By premising her arguments on feminism and Michel Foucault's genealogical ideas on power, the author provides the reader with a better understanding of power discourses in Okot p'Bitek's poetry. The author systematically explores how the direct relation between power and bodies operates. With relevant examples from Song of Malaya, this paper shows how sex is political primarily because the male-female relationship is the paradigm for all power relations. Patriarchal ideology, for instance, exaggerates biological differences between men and women making certain that men always have the dominant or 'masculine' roles and women always have the subordinate or 'feminine' ones. This ideology is so powerful such that men will coerce or intimidate a woman where they feel that the woman has failed to submit or subordinate. For the woman to avoid a situation of cruelty and barbarity against her, she had better act feminine. It is this subordination that the poet wants the woman to liberate herself from. The author goes further and shows how other institutions like the church and family also help to enhance this ideology. In Song of Malaya, the family and church blame the prostitute for her actions just because she is a woman. The men fail to realize that they are the ones who have participated in the act of sex with the 'Malaya' (prostitute) so as to complete the action. Consequently, the author argues that since the works of Okot p'Bitek are premised on socio-cultural experiences, the individual characters in the selected work locate themselves within socio-cultural experiences by way of describing, contesting, refuting and illustrating them. The characters are located within given spaces of which they share and at the same time contest the power which they claim to signify. For example, Malaya is located in an immoral and hypocritical society which accords her a vantage position to criticize the hypocrisy of socio-cultural values. The more these characters fortify their positions, the more they expose themselves to criticism. Therefore, the selected work is constructed around characters that seem to be constantly engaged in conflict with each other, within themselves and their society. This paper thus explores the way the protagonists' bodies in Okot's Song of Malaya locate themselves either within the way of power over bodies or of bodies in the Foucauldian sense.

Keywords: Okot p'Bitek, Post-colonial Discourses, Feminism, *Song of Malaya*, Power Discourse, Conflict, Hypocrisy, (Im)morality

1 Introduction

1.1 Preamble

The postcolonial perspective, according to Brydon (2000), resists the attempts at holistic forms of social explanation. It therefore forces recognition of the more complex cultural and political boundaries that exist on the cusp of these often opposed political spheres. Okot p'Bitek, one of the post colonial writers, presents his resistance to the attempts at holistic forms of social explanations.

In his long poems or 'songs', as he names them, he presents his interpretation of power, which in many ways challenge and contest the idea of absolute power. Okot's poetic works fall under the category of 'Contact Literature' - a term used by Carter (1986:7-26) to refer to literatures written in European language from outside Europe. It is within the framework of this type of literature that most of the postcolonial writers belong as they display a postcolonial perspective of their present space or location.

These writers have had to transform the European language to use it in a different way in its new context and as Achebe (1975:62) quoting James Baldwin reminds us, to make it 'bear the burden' of their experience. In this work, however, the concern is with one specific aspect of contact literature, that is, the dramatization of ways of power over and of bodies in Okot p'Bitek's poetry and how this is displayed at different levels of power relations. To engage meaningfully with p'Bitek's dramatization of ways of power over and of bodies, our reading of his poetry is closely and critically guided by Michel Foucault's understanding and interpretation of power manifestations in different forms and situations.

According to Foucault, power manifests itself in two ways: the way of power over bodies and of the body's own power (the body's own force of will and desire). However, the way that power manifests itself is only identifiable and recognizable through discourse. In Okot p'Bitek's poetry, power as a discourse plays out itself in a play of suppression and counter suppression. At one level of this play, imperialism as a concept holds some bodies as the 'other' and constitutes institutions to conform to the superiority of the 'centre'. For instance, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989:7) argue that one of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language. The imperial system installs a 'standard' version of the metropolitan language as a norm and marginalizes all variants as impurities.

Therefore, language becomes the medium through which hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated and the medium through which conceptions of truth, order and reality become established. This is the distinguished 'standard' British English which claims a powerful centre while the multitude of intersecting usages of postcolonial englishes are designed as peripheries, they are as a result of a rejection of the power of the English language. Thus the language of the peripheries was shaped by an oppressive discourse of power as the English, a colonial language, in a sense acts as a way of power over bodies. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (*ibid*: 12) give the paradox of imperial expansion that has had a radically destabilizing effect on its own pre-occupations and power when they argue that:

In pushing the colonial world to the margins of experiences, the 'centre' pushed consciousness beyond the point at which monocentricism in all spheres of thought could be accepted without question. In other words, the alienating process that initially served to relegate the post colonial world to the 'margin' turned upon itself and acted to push that world through a kind of mental barrier into a position from which all experience could be viewed as uncentred, pluralistic and multifarious. Marginality became an unprecedented source of creative energy.

This brings us to the second level of suppression and counter suppression whereby the body upon which power was exerted gradually builds its own power. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989:8) have acknowledged that although British imperialism resulted in the spread of English language across the globe, there is a distinction between the English language of the erstwhile imperial centre and the english which has been transformed and subverted into several distinctive varieties throughout the world. It is in this sense that Acoli language values and aesthetics depict a reaction to the imperial centre as a way of constituting the way of the body's own power.

As such, reading of Okot's poetic works shows evidence of the Acoli cultural aspects of life signifying themselves. In his poetry, Okot uses English, an imperial language that constitutes a way of power over the Acoli culture and traditions. Ironically, there is the refusal of language structures to express his thoughts and ideas; he virtually borrows images from the Acoli culture, which is a way of power that is fighting back against the power of the imperial language - English.

Thus, Okot's use of language and style in a way is a renaissance of the oral tradition, which is the reason why he fits in the 'romanticist' mode, both in form and substance. His use of language and style becomes of generic hybridity - the language is neither English nor Acoli; the poems do not subscribe to a particular mode as they are sang, recited, narrated or dramatized. Power of and over the body is also power in a political sense. Politics dictate power and vice versa. Politics in this case is not restricted to the level of general class relations but can be seen through domestic relations, cultural relations, sexual relations, schooling relations and parent-child relations. At one point or another, Okot, like other African writers, has given his characters the 'will' to act and change the scheme of things.

He plays out this political power as established in certain relationships by giving his characters the voice to narrate their experiences and wishes in an attempt to reject or embrace certain ideologies as one body emits the power and the other receives and vice versa.

1.2 Critical Issues

Okot p'Bitek's work is based on socio-cultural experiences. The individual characters in the work locate themselves within socio-cultural experiences by way of describing, contesting, refuting and illustrating them. The characters are located within given spaces of which they share and at the same time contest the power which they claim to signify. For example, Malaya is located in an immoral and hypocritical society which accords her a vantage position to criticize the hypocrisy of socio-cultural values. The more these characters fortify their positions, the more they expose themselves to criticism.

Therefore, the poetry of Okot p'Bitek is constructed around characters that seem to be constantly engaged in conflict with each other, within themselves and their society. These conflicts are triggered by ideological inclinations that seem to be played out in the nature of intervention between the characters that signify the way of power over and of bodies. This paper thus explores the way the protagonists' bodies in Okot's *Song of Malaya* locate themselves either within the way of power over bodies or of bodies in the Foucauldian sense.

1.3 Theoretical Underpinning(s)

Post colonial readings of *Song of Malaya* premised on feminism and Michel Foucault's genealogical ideas on power gives us a better understanding of power discourses in Okot p'Bitek's poetry. As a genealogist, Foucault emphasizes upon power and practices rather than knowledge and language. He talks of power relations whereby the direct relation between power and bodies operate in two ways. First is the way of power over bodies whereby the power relations have an immediate hold upon the body, they invest it, mask it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies and to emit signs.

The capitalist economy, according to Foucault, involves incorporation of power into the individuals controlling their acts, attitudes and behaviour. This is evident in Malaya. This incorporation of power operates through language and signs, but its manifestation in real sense is usually war-like and battle-like as seen in Okot's work.

Millet (1970), who is perceived as a radical feminist, argues that sex is political primarily because the male-female relationship is the paradigm for all power relations. Patriarchal ideology for instance, according to Millet (ibid.), exaggerates biological differences between men and women making certain that men always have the dominant or 'masculine' roles and women always have the subordinate or 'feminine' ones.

This ideology is so powerful such that men will coerce or intimidate a woman where they feel that the woman has failed to submit or subordinate. For the woman to avoid a situation of cruelty and barbarity against her, she had better act feminine. It is this subordination that the poet wants the woman to liberate herself from. Other institutions like the church and family also help to enhance this ideology. In *Song of Malaya*, the family and church blame the prostitute for her actions just because she is a woman. The men fail to realize that they are the ones who have participated in the act of sex with the 'Malaya' (prostitute) so as to complete the action. In this case, they (society) are as guilty since they have taken part in constructing the prostitute body.

The woman is aware of all the standards of womanhood: every woman knows what is expected of her; what it means to be an adequate woman; that is her own power as a woman over the man. Malaya in *Song of Malaya* knows how to use suiting language on a man as a feminine strength over the masculinity of a man. Stalt (1990: 14) identifies dominance, independence, rationality, assertiveness, competence, strength, bravely, ambition, action, competition, insensitivity and aggression among other behavioural traits as masculine.

The feminine character is expected to be submissive, dependant, unintelligent, incapable, emotional and receptive, intuitive, weak, timid, content, passive, cooperative and sensitive. These attributes are the ones that come into play of power of bodies and over bodies. Despite the personal diversity among both men and women, the men are encouraged to suppress their 'feminine side' while the women suppress their 'masculine side'. These traits are seen in Okot's characters whom he has embodied with power at different levels. The masculine traits are present in the male characters while the feminine traits are evident in Malaya as well as in the other female characters in the work.

1.4 Review of Related Literature

Goodwin (1982) gives the phases that modern poetry has gone through. First is the verse written in British Romantic and Victorian mode but with local foliage. The second is British verse, most of which has academic initiations with local colouring. Last is one that drew inspirations for content, verse form and idiomatic expressions from oral poetry and song of one or more African or religious myth in dramatic or semi-dramatic form. This is the free verse form that deviates from the English traditional verse, it is this form that Okot employs in his song as a way to redefine literature in order to reposition traditional expression at the centre of poetic and narrative expression. Other creative writers such as Okello Oculi, whose works slightly differ from Okot's, have employed this form. For example, Oculi's *Orphan* (1969) is written in a more irregular verse than the *Song of Lawino* with several speakers.

Heron (1976) takes note of Okot's usage of images borrowed from the Acoli literature. Through this, Okot is able to reach a wider audience without borrowing foreign elements that would distort his message. Heron (ibid.) takes note on how Okot Africanized the English language and goes further to analyse the cultural conflict between the African world (Acoli) and Western (European) culture. He clearly observes how *Lawino* mocks the Western culture while *Ocol* idolizes it. Finally, he comments that 'Okot's works are a foundation on which the African should re-build free-of-European influence'.

On style, Ngara (1990) views Okot as being concerned with the African culture, which he views from two perspectives: serious and light-hearted. *Song of Malaya* takes a light-hearted tone where the attitude towards sex is dealt with less seriousness. The issues discussed here put the characters involved in an ambivalent situation. Although Ngara is concerned with culture, his ideas form the basis for this work as through the characters' actions and speech, they are in struggle and confrontation with their past and present. This constitutes the power discourses in Okot's poetry.

Wachukia (1980), in her Ph.D. thesis, deals with the theme of cultural conflict in Okot p'Bitek, Ngugi wa Thiongo and Taban Lo Liyong's texts as presented in East Africa. This conflict is because one culture feels superior to the other and the 'other' has to react. She deals with this conflict in *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*. This paper analyses the embodiment of power over bodies and of bodies as seen through the African cultural values and Western cultural values. In this case, the cultures will be bodies of power and not just ideologies. In his M. Phil thesis, "Poetry and Disillusionment in independent Africa:

The example of Malawi", Midega (1997) has outlined how Okot used his poetry to show the loss of African cultural values due to the contact with Europe. This thematic concern highlighted by Midega (ibid.) forms the basis of this work's argument on power discourses as represented in the African world and the Western civilization.

Mugambi (1992) highlights the views of African literary writers concerning the theme of Christianity. According to Mugambi (ibid.), Okot seems to be against the church which he sees as another prison, an image, reflection, shadow and imitation of the 'West'. This foreign religion seems to have interrupted all the spheres whether social, political, economical or educational. In addition to this, the study analyses how this culture of Christianity has shaped the various characters and the effect it has had on them and how the other body, in this case *Lawino* and her Acoli culture, react to this new shaping.

Mweseli (2004) presents Okot p'Bitek's thoughts on social, economic and political situations of East Africa as revealed in his poetic works: *Song of Lawino*, *Song of Ocol*, *Song of Prisoner* and *Song of Malaya*. Mweseli (ibid.) examines the techniques used by Okot to convey his ideas and also analyses the themes in his works. In *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*, she addresses the conflict of traditional ideas, values and practices versus the Western influences. In *Song of Prisoner*, she outlines political issues of tribalism, economic deprivation and other inequities and in *Song of Malaya* she addresses the moral concerns specifically promiscuity and prostitution whereby Okot emphasizes the irrationality and hypocrisy of those who wish to impose a Christian morality upon their society. These thematic concerns are useful to this work as they form the basis of this work's argument on power discourses as presented by Okot.

Okot, as read by Killam and Rome (2000), was concerned with the fact that written literature was too elitist and saw oral performance as the authentic expressive mood. His perspective derived from the cultural expressions of his Acoli society, particularly its response to modern, Western intrusions. They have also briefly analyzed the basic concerns in Okot's songs. *Song of Lawino* is comprised of a series of complaints by Lawino, an Acoli wife whose husband Ocol rejected her for a younger, more Westernized woman. *Song of Ocol* is the sophisticated, self-serving response of the unrepentant Ocol, who has embraced the new culture fervently as his new spouse. Ocol sees nothing worth preserving in the old ways and has few reservations in saying so. The future, he asserts, is with Western culture and the technology that makes it dominant.

The two are then a pair of contrasting philosophies. *Song of Prisoner* and *Song of Malaya* are seen as the hypocrisy with which the politically and economically powerful exploit and condemn the prisoner and prostitute. These concerns are useful to this work as the various characters in these songs represent the power of or over bodies. Their actions and speech emit power. Mboya (1997) analyses how Macgoye presents the African woman as immoral and a criminal and that only by the intervention of the European can a woman be alleviated from the harsh Kenyan (African) traditions. The traditions of traditional Luo marital roles in *Coming to Birth* and Gikuyu female circumcision in *Homing In* are shown as unjust, immoral or outrightly inhuman and the European practices are the suggested remedies or alternatives.

Here the idea of the West wanting to dominate the African culture is evident. Macgoye, according to Mboya (ibid.), is a racist justifying Europe's past and continued political and cultural domination of an African that is perceived as inferior. In this work, the European is seen to have created a centre for himself and his culture thus 'otherizing' the African as his subject. It is this domination that the African rebels against by exposing weaknesses of the so-called 'civilization' thus paving way for her/his defence of the African culture. This is seen through the body of Lawino in Okot's works. The paradox of morality is another aspect tackled in Mboya's study, thus my work also looks at the power of this morality: what is moral and immoral.

1.5 Methodological Approach

This research work for this paper was mainly library-based and adopted a consistent critical analysis research approach. This was necessary as the paper depends on documented literary materials where the selected text and other related materials are analyzed. The actual investigation involves: an intrinsic reading of the primary texts where each is read as a unit to identify the power of discourses in it with a focus of the characters' actions, speech and environment; an extrinsic reading on the criticism on Okot's long poems, his other works and other critical works related to this study.

Finally, the analysis involves the fusion of the findings of both readings with the theoretical framework of power discourses. This work thus shows the extent to which the poet has applied power discourses in his long poems. The research for this work was carried out in several libraries: The Margaret Thatcher Library, Moi University; Jomo Kenyatta Memorial Library and the Department of Literature Library, University of Nairobi, Moi Library at Kenyatta University and the Eldoret National Library.

2 Discussions

2.1 Paradoxes of Sexual Power in Song of Malaya

De Beauvoir (1974) argues that a woman is oppressed by virtue of 'otherness'. Woman is the 'other' because she is not man. Man is the self, the free determining being who defines the meaning of his existence while woman is the 'other', the object whose meaning is determined for her by man. If woman is to become a subject, she must transcend the definitions, labels and essences limiting her existence. She must make herself to be what she wants to be. Millet (1970) has observed that sex is political primarily because the male-female relationship is the paradigm for all power relations.

In her book, *The Politics of Gender*, she talks of woman sexuality being metaphorically used to represent women identity in general. Women have always been defined by men in the way the men perceive them in terms of what men are not and how they (men) use them for their own satisfaction.

Song of Malaya, then, becomes a feminist statement that revises this system of patriarchal society where woman becomes the subject in human sexuality and not the object. In this text, the woman speaks back to the patriarchal society. Therefore, the whole poem, *Song of Malaya*, revises the portrait of the woman in patriarchal society. Thus, sex and prostitution are paradoxical representations of the power of womanhood in general. In *Song of Malaya*, the poet through the voice of Malaya is attempting to illustrate ways of power of and over bodies as manifested in sex.

Heron (1976: 139) argues “Malaya is attempting to illustrate that no one practices morality because it places unnatural restrictions on ‘good’ sexual desires”. Malaya, a body in which this way of power (sex) is embodied, criticizes the hypocrisy of those who supposedly hold the socio-cultural values as pertains to sex. For instance the bishops, the sailor, soldier, prisoner, miners, engineers, teachers, businessmen, drivers, factory workers, shop assistants, and school boys. These characters’ professions in society are the source of their power. As professionals, they are expected to uphold the societal standards of sexual morality but which they fail to. The intensity of sexual desire overpowers the ‘unnatural’ restrictions on the desire for sex, thus these characters end up being vulnerable to the power of sex as they finally engage in it with the very prostitute whose moral probity they explicitly question.

This power play is demonstrated in the way the male characters who condemn the sexual acts of the prostitute, succumb to the power of sexual desire as manifested in the prostitute’s body. Her body’s own power is embodied in her attractive nature that is sexually oriented. This way of power drives the men to engage with her body so as to acquire the power of health and normality. In this process, the man is out to use his power on the woman as a way of conquering her. Paradoxically, he ends up surrendering his power as he depends on her to fulfil his sexual desires. Foucault argues that sexuality or the idea of sex becomes a cultural object that imposes itself on bodies thus symbolizing ways of power over bodies. According to him, sex becomes an agency that dominates one and underlies all that one is. It gives meaning and definition to what one is. Instead of sex as a desire, it becomes that which is desirable.

Therefore, all the characters in *song of Malaya* are defined sexually. Their social-cultural roles are determined by sex. The male’s social-cultural power is weakened by their sexual desire which is the bodies’ own power. Through the power of the prostitute’s body, their desires are met as her sexuality becomes desirable.

2.1.1 The Power of Sexuality

Michel Foucault is perceived as one whose ideas are “beyond convention” as the norm is subverted since he believes in power not being centred in one place but is rather a power play. This can be related to the way feminist theories’ perspectives celebrate the ways in which so many women have “beaten” the patriarchal system, taken charge of their own destinies, and encouraged each other to live, love, laugh and be happy as women (Tong, 1989: 1) as opposed to the laments on the way in which women have been oppressed, repressed and suppressed. These elements of encouragement, love, laughter and happiness give the woman power. *Song of Malaya* sets off with this sorority:

Sister prostitutes
Wherever you are
I salute you
Wealth and health
To us all. (1971: 123)

The first section of *Song of Malaya*, “Karibu,” is a summoning of the sorority of sisterhood or power of prostitute hood.

Sister harlots
Whenever you are
Wake up
Wash up
Brighten up
Go gay and clean... (1971: 132)

The prostitute, through her sexuality possesses a way of power over the men as they get attracted to her as they desire sex. The prostitutes are aware of this way of power of sex in them, thus the reason for their sorority to control the men who are supposedly the agents of power in the patriarchal society and critics of sexual immorality. The men become vulnerable to female sexuality which is a way of power over them. These men become victims of power while the women become the agents of power. The prostitute deliberately sequences her “clients” from the most vulnerable: the sailor, soldier and newly released prisoner, who are most frustrated because of the many months they have spent away from home; to the least vulnerable; the factory workers, shop assistants and the brother politician who are least frustrated as they are able to be home almost daily.

These men have power over the women especially Malaya. They are economically empowered by the particular jobs that they do. According to Marxist feminists, it is the economic difference between men and women that cause the suppression of the women. Their suggested remedy to this is that women should be so as to be freed from the suppression by men. Since this has not happened, the poet in *Song of Malaya* is demonstrating how the women deploy their bodies’ power of sexuality to determine or subvert the men’s economic power.

The sailor, soldier and detained murderer are characters who spend a lot of time away from their wives as they carry out their duties in their respective places. Their absence requires them to suppress their sexual desires as they carry out their duties. Their level of perseverance gives them power, that is, as men who are not easily overwhelmed by the power of sexual emotions. This power of perseverance as manifested in the men is endangered by the fact that these men are home-bound at the end of the day. In their pursuit to control their sexual desires, they fall prey to the power of sex and thus become vulnerable to the prostitute who is their most immediate available commodity to satisfy their sexual desires.

The prostitute’s body can be defined as a way of power over bodies of men as seen in the way she welcomes the drunken Sikhs, Indian vegetarian and sweating engineer (1971:128-129) to have sex with her. This is because their wives are away from them. The power of these men is manifested in their freedom to be away from their family responsibilities for a while, especially from their wives. Ironically, this power of a “free man” is what the prostitute capitalizes on so as to impose her power over him through sex. She feels justified in her action. She perceives it as a way of assisting the wives of these men in taking care of them. The prostitute says:

Indian vegetarian
Your wife breeding
Like a rat
Welcome to my table too... (1971: 129)

The poet digresses from his presentation of the paradoxes of the power of sexuality among the adults, men and Malaya and focuses on the paradox of this power of sexuality as seen through the body of a youth. The schoolboy lover is presented as a powerless character that is given sexual “services” by the prostitute free of charge. Ironically, his power is embedded in his youthful body. The power of his youthful body seems to energize the prostitute. It is as if the youth’s bodily power is transferred into the prostitute’s body through this sexual encounter. Indeed, this sexual transaction becomes a site in which ways of power of bodies are played out. The prostitute confirms this when she says: Oh!/I feel ten years/Younger (1971: 130).

Paradoxically, the boy’s innocence as a schoolboy that had given him power over the other men, no longer exists. He is a man just like any other whose sexual desires need satisfaction. The prostitute cautions him not to tell the teacher as he (the teacher), has also “tasted the waters”:

Hey! Listen ...
Do not let the
teacher know...
Mm...mmm?
He was here
Last night...! (1971: 130)

The teacher is given power by society to model the student to be moral and he is expected to do this by example. Unfortunately, he fails as he is involved in prostitution and so is his student, the school boy.

His economic status which obviously should have empowered him seems to act as a way of power over him as he uses his “earnings” to buy sex from the prostitute which definitely makes him lose his elevated position as a custodian of morality in the society. The sexual power embodied in the prostitute completely disarms him. She beckons:

Welcome you teachers
Teaching in bush schools
I see you in buses
And bicycles
Coming into the city
Your trousers pockets
Bulging with wallets... (1971: 130)

All the other men: the chieftain, the factory workers, the shop assistants, the politician brother, all get into the same trap of the desirable - the prostitute’s sexuality. The prostitute, who is supposedly a marginalized subject, skilfully creates her centre by using the power of her body over the bodies of men so as to subvert the power equation. This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that she is aware of the power of men and that is why she refers to them as “lions” which symbolize the power of being mighty, energetic and of strength. She goes further to refer to them as “hungry lions”. The adjective ‘hungry’ in this case gives more power to the lion as he is prone to do anything so as to satisfy his hunger but at the same time it reduces his power of reasoning as he can easily get into a trap.

The prostitute then capitalizes on the lion’s hunger as a point of weakness as she uses her sexuality to satisfy the hungry lions, therefore, creating a centre of power around her. She does this by using her body and other possibilities to make the men malleable to her. For instance, it is the prostitute’s kindness and hospitality that paradoxically empowers her. She pretends to nourish the men as she prepares good food and gets ready for them, but with a concealed motive of getting them to come to her and spend their monies. In this case, the prostitute’s behaviour can be equated to that of a trickster because she cunningly does all these for her own selfish gains. She displays her hospitality in:

I have cold beer
In the house
I have hot water
And cold water...
Your trays
With fresh fruits
Fresh vegetables
And plenty of fresh meat
The hungry lions
Of the world
Hunting! (1971: 132-133)

The prostitute’s actions to win the man then justify Lawino’s idea that “a man’s heart is won at the cooking place’. This struggle by the prostitute to win the men to her side finally gives her power over them and at the same time deprives her of her power. She becomes a slave for the man’s satisfaction. It is this idea of the woman conditioning herself for the man that the socialist feminist Juliet Mitchell, in her book, *Psychoanalysis and Feminist* (1971: 414-416) makes clear that “a woman’s interior world (her psyche) must be transformed for without such change, improvement in her exterior world will not liberate her from the kind of patriarchal thoughts that undermine her confidence”.

In the 'Rich Harvest,' the poet juxtaposes the structured and legal authoritarian power with the Prostitute's sexual power. The Big Chief and the prostitute are bodies of power. The Big Chief has the political power, which gives him authority to oppress the prostitute by accusing her of being immoral. Ironically this political power that the chief has over the prostitute does not stop her from afflicting him with a venereal disease after having sex with her. Thus:

Why do you hiss
Like a frightened cobra
And bark at me
As if I were
A thief...
And chief
How do you know
It was I
Who gave IT to you, anyway? (1971: 135 - 137)

From the chief's condemnation of immorality, it is clear that as a leader, he is expected to be morally upright as one of the indicators of his power over his subjects. Ironically, the chief is sexually involved with the prostitute. Because his sexual desires must be fulfilled, and in this case by the prostitute, the prostitute who was at the margin of power creates her centre of power through her sexuality while the chief is at the periphery as he submits to the power of the Prostitute's sexuality so as to derive his joy. This is demonstrated when the persona reminds the chief of his sexual encounter with Achola:

Her young breasts
Sunk deep into your chest...
And broke her ribs
And when you rose
The yellow seeds of sweat
On your face
And the spark of joy
Dancing on your trembling lips
Hid the grief, shame and fear
In your half closed eyes (1971: 138)

The poet juxtaposes political and economic power with sexual power. Those who hold the politics and economic power in Africa fall victims of sexuality which is a way of power over their own bodies. For example, the doctors, mayors and town clerks are entrusted with this power of politics and economy; unfortunately they are also victims of the power of sexuality as they get involved with the prostitute whose power is sex. The persona argues that prostitution, whose power is embodied in sexual desire, is the oldest profession and all people of all calibre subscribe to it and it is the reason for failing to get rid of it. It is the only one that withstands the passage of time:

And you headmistresses
And headmasters...
You presidents, ministers
Liberators of Africa
You heroes
You who defeated colonialism
And imperialism...
Brave fighters against
Corruption and decay
Can we not free Africa
From this one pest? (1971: 140)

The Prostitute, who is already aware of the power of her sexuality, knows very well that this power lies in her body and therefore she must keep that body healthy all the time because so long as the body is healthy, then she has power over men. She does this by protecting her body from infections, as she does not want the men to deprive her of her sexual power by infecting her with diseases. She preaches the same gospel to her fellow prostitutes:

But hey!
Listen,
The boxing gloves...
Carry the gloves.
In your handbags
Sister prostitutes
Wherever you are,
Wealth and health
To us all (1971: 142)

In order to safeguard her power of sexuality through a healthy body, she further advises her clients to also take care of themselves so that they don't infect the prostitutes:

And why don't you
Get circumcised
You Kaffir
Don't you know
That your leather bag
Carries insects?
And bring your
Gum boots (1971: 141)

In these instances, the bodies of the prostitute and her clients, which are agents of the power of sexuality, face another challenge from the desire to have healthy bodies. Thus sexual protection and the fear for infection becomes a way of power over sexuality as one has to be cautious with sex thus hindering the individual's freedom to express sexual desires whenever need arises. In 'part-time', the poet also juxtaposes the family structure of husband and wife and sexuality with the prostitute and sexuality. Ideally, in a 'modern' society, the married man and woman are expected to be monogamous. Ironically, this does not happen as the man is also the lover of the prostitute despite his married status. In the text *The Woman Question* (1975), Fredrick Engels on the article 'The Monogamous Family' talks of monogamy as:

... based on the supremacy of the man, the express purpose being to produce children of undisputed paternity... The right of conjugal infidelity remains secure to the man, at any rate of custom, so long as he does not bring his concubine into the house, and as social life develops he exercises his right more and more... (1975: 17)

The family structure symbolizes a way of power over and of bodies. As observed by Engel (1975), it is clear that a monogamous family is crucial as children earn their identity through paternal identity which is a way of power for them as they get identified in society. Paradoxically, the same power of a monogamous family fails to withstand the power of sexuality. The man gives in to the power of the prostitute's sexuality and therefore betrays his marriage. Custom, which is a way of power that gives the man the right to share his sexuality with other women other than his wife, leads him to give in to the power of the prostitute's sexuality. But this same way of power as embodied in custom that should have empowered him is the same power that disempowers him as he has no power to bring home his concubine. This then is the reason for his sexual involvement with a prostitute as he cannot take her to his house as a wife. The prostitute affirms this in:

And you
My married sister
You whose husband
I also love dearly... (1971: 147)

Therefore, the two centres of sexuality; family structure, which is approved, and prostitution, which is socially disapproved, are ways of power. Thus, sexuality is indeed a way of power of and over bodies. The body of the man (husband) is pitted against the body of the wife and the prostitute. In their own way of exercising the way of power of their bodies, both use their bodies to subjugate the man.

The wife feels that she has power over her husband because they are already married but she forgets that her husband desires to be sensitively nursed so as to avoid being temperamental and going out to look for this nursing from another woman. She is also expected to be hygienic, slow to anger and criticism towards the husband, failure to which she loses her power over him. On the contrary, the prostitute, through her sarcastic postulations, already has the answers on how to have power over the man. When the wife annoys the man, she is available to sensitively nurse and soothe him like a baby thus makes him regain his jovial mood. Therefore, the prostitute ends up at the centre of power as she is quite gentle to him. She thus asserts her power:

When you turn
Into a bloody bitch
And he storms out
Of your house
Mad at you, hungry, thirsty...
Is it not I
Who nurse and soothe him
Like my own baby?
Does he not return to you
Clean shaven, smiling... (1971: 148)

Ironically, the man's power over the woman as portrayed when he gets annoyed with his wife and storms out leaving her is later relegated to the prostitute who cleverly manipulates the man to submit to her as a lover. She succeeds by playing out the societal model of a perfect wife as she, with a lot of humility, welcomes and takes care of the man. The Prostitute's humble behaviour as an ideal wife becomes a way of power over both the man and his wife. The prostitute, in a sarcastic way, informs the 'wife' of her failure as a wife:

Come sister
Do you think
Your wild screams
And childish sobs
Are sweet music
In the ears of
Our man?
What did your mother
Teach you?
To welcome your man
With lips locked by anger...? (1971: 149)

In Malaya's criticism of the 'wife's action towards her husband, she brings out the idea of polygamy as a source of power for the man as allowed by culture. The man can have part-time wives whom the wife should not hate or question. She argues:

My friend
 Did your father teach you
 To hate your husband's
 Outside wives?
 To hate his children
 By his part-time wives? (1971: 150)

On the other hand, the prostitute neutralizes cultural powers such as polygamy by clearly showing that human sexuality is by nature communal. Monogamy, as already discussed in *Song of Lawino*, is not natural but constructed for civility and Christian moralities. Therefore, as a woman, the prostitute can also share her sexuality with a number of men thus possessing power over men as they all desire her. Thus:

I am an open Pollok blossom
 Bees, butterflies, moths...
 Visit me by day and by night... (1971: 150)

The radical feminists argue that a woman is enslaved by her roles of childbearing and rearing. To free and empower themselves, women should decide when to have children and to who to rear them or not to have children at all. In *Song of Malaya*, the persona demonstrates how the woman has liberated and empowered herself from the patriarchal structured society where she is no longer an object of man, bearing him children and letting him prove his power, that is, manhood. She liberates herself by controlling her childbearing role:

What better proof
 Of manhood
 Especially when the wife
 In the house
 Eats lizard eggs
 To prevent pregnancy! (1971: 151)

In this case, the woman has power over the man and socio-cultural ideologies on the role of a woman. She purely controls her body and its function in terms of childbearing and therefore limits the power of the man in using her body to bear children so as to prove his manhood. In her argument on the empowerment of a woman in terms of regulating her childbearing by taking contraceptives, the persona is on the other hand trying to justify polygamy as opposed to monogamy. Paradoxically, this way of power that was supposed to liberate the woman becomes the source of power for the man as the man, whose wife is on contraceptives, can equally prove his manhood by having children with other women. The prostitute goes on to scorn the power of Christian ideologies on monogamy and celibacy:

Sister prostitutes
 Wherever you are
 Listen to the call
 Black students
 Arriving in Rome
 In London, in New York...
 Arrows ready, bows drawn
 The first white kill... (1971: 153)

Thus, through the prostitute's voice, the persona urges all to fulfil their sexual desires as this is a way of power over them as they cannot escape. In this case, the prostitute who possesses the power of sex becomes the unifying force:

Oh-oh-oh-oh
Sister...
Take your rightful share
Of your man...
Let him taste
The wild honey
He cannot get
In his own home... (1971: 158)

“Take the sickle” juxtaposes the power of circumstantial sexual morality with socio-cultural or ethical sexual morality. Sexual morality based on biological and practical circumstances is privileged over the Christian conditioned vales. For instance, the Christian culture as a body of power teaches monogamy as that which is ethical. This is seen through the black bishop who represents the power of the body of the Christian mythology, as he preaches on morality and advocates for monogamy. Paradoxically, even the bishop fails to understand the power of his past. He comes from a polygamous family, a practice that he now condemns. The persona strongly defends the practice of polygamy as she clearly demonstrates the fact that sexuality is communal and monogamy is for the sake of civility but is never practical. Malaya questions:

Do you actually pray
To bless each bee
So that it should stick to one flower
And each butterfly
And each moth
And each male ladybird
Should it visit only one flower
In its life-time
Would you take your sickle
And slash the flowers
In your garden
To ensure that the remainder
Have but one visitor
Each? (1971: 162)

In this section, the poet further satirizes the power of the Christian mythology. He subverts the Christian myths to rewrite the story of the power of the woman’s sexuality. He alludes to the women in the bible who are objects for the men as they are expected to be submissive and respectful to the men. Contrary, in this subversion, the woman becomes the subject as she owns power over the man through the power of her sexuality. The prostitute affirms this as she says:

Raise your glasses and half gourds
My sisters
And click them with mine
Here’s eve
With her golden apples
And the Egyptian girl
Who stole Abraham
From Sarah’s bed...
Daughters of Sodom
And to the daughters of Gomorrah
Who set the town a blaze...
Let’s drink to Rahab
With her two spy boy friends
To Esther the daughter of Abigail
To Delilah and her bushy-headed
Jawbone gangster,
To Magdalene who anointed
The feet of Jesus (1971: 166)

All the women alluded to in this section had the power to destroy men. Their association with the men in this allusion is that of sexuality, and it is this power of sexuality that deprives them of their power as men. To the persona, even Jesus, from whom the power of Christian morality is derived, was also caught in the web of a woman, Magdalene. Therefore, the argument emerging in this case is that sexual morality is relative. All are sexually moral or immoral from whichever perspective one looks at it. It is this allusion to great people in the bible and in the world in relation to the ways of power of sexuality that makes the prostitutes in *Song of Malaya* claim their possession of power:

Sister prostitutes
Whenever you are
Power and fame
To us all! (1971: 167)

“Pearly of crying” cast the prostitute in a maternal light that redeems her from societal accusation as she is capable of motherly love and compassion that symbolize a way of power of bodies. She compassionately soothes her boy:

My sweet baby
Mm!
You trickle my teats
With your toothless kisses
And remind me
Of my first love...
What is it my boy?
Are you hungry
Ah.....ahaaa!
But do you know
What mum has cooked
For you? (1971: 169)

The prostitute’s ability as a mother who can love and be compassionate to her ‘son’ empowers her as a responsible character according to patriarchal society’s set standards – to bear and rear children.

Despite the redemption of the prostitute to a motherly figure, she still faces condemnation of bearing a child outside marriage which brands both mother and son as outcasts, powerless and shameful characters in society. She bitterly inquires about her accusers: Called you/A bastard/Illegit...? (1971: 171)

The prostitute defends her position and her son’s status by alluding to Jesus’ parentage. In this way, the Christian mythology is subverted to redeem the prostitute’s story. He is the greatest man that ever lived, but his father was not Joseph the carpenter:

Who was the greatest man
That ever lived?
The saviour
Redeemer
The light
King of kings
The prince of peace
My big Boy
Tell mommy
What was his father’s name?
Was the carpenter
Really His father? (1971: 172)

The poet also deals with hypocrisy as demonstrated in the paradox of the way of power of sexuality. Those who are at the forefront in condemning others for getting involved in sex with those who are not their spouses are also victims of the same action. For instance, the teacher brands the prostitute's son "bastard" yet he fails to realize that he is one of those who have contributed to the birth of such children. The prostitute reminds him:

And you bush teacher
Troubling my son
How dare you
Throw the first stone...
How many teenagers
With your, large headed hammer...
The little girls
In your class
Who are your wives
And the children
That these children
Have
By you? (1971: 173)

In this case, the teacher is also immoral. The emphasis is still on the fact that power of sexuality as manifested in his sexual desires deprives him of his professional power as an educationist who is expected to be a custodian of morality. The persona goes on to demonstrate the way of power of sexuality as she claims that all are in this profession of prostitution thus they should not condemn the "Malayas":

Sister harlots
Wherever you are
The bedcovers of the world
Have been removed...
Wives, houseboys,
Hotel slaves
Have made the beds
Fresh...no crumpled pillows...
The carpets, sodas
Car seats, Park benches... (1971: 174)

It is then clear that the bodies of all these characters possess an inner power of desire for sex that must be fulfilled. In their endeavour to fulfil this desire, the way of power of sexual morality is lost. "The duet" is a continuation of the poet's condemnation of hypocritical attitude of society towards the prostitute. For example, the brother wants to control his sister's sexuality while he expresses his freely. He does this as he is aware that men are empowered by the way of power of cultural practices as they have a right to have their sexual desires fulfilled even outside marriage while to a woman this is not acceptable. The prostitute resents this as she observes her brother's accusations of her actions:

And you Brother
Son of my mother...
I see you spitting
With contempt
I hear you muttering
That I have brought disgrace
On the family... (1974: 175 – 176)

Some radical feminists argue that "no specific kind of sexual experience should be prescribed as the best kind for a liberated woman.

She should experiment sexuality with herself, other women and even men. In heterosexuality, the woman must feel free to follow the lead of her own desires". This group of feminists therefore recognizes the power of sexuality over the individual power. In the same way, the prostitute just like her brother liberates and empowers herself through sexuality by following her own desires:

Tell me
 Son of my mother
 Tell me
 Where were you
 Two nights ago
 Soon after the bars
 Were closed?
 Of course
 You did not know
 That I
 Was in the next room
 With your friend
 Your boss... (1971: 176)

The radical feminists, according to Tong (1989: 3), advocate for a compulsory overturning of the patriarchy's legal and political structures as well as its social and cultural institutions (especially the church, family and academy) as a means of liberating and empowering the woman. In *Song of Malaya*, the prostitute's brother has a misconception that he has control over this woman.

However, the prostitute reminds him that the way of power of culture that has given him power over his woman is deceptive as his woman has already rebelled against this power as she imagines her own way of meeting her sexual desires. Malaya warns her brother:

Your beautiful queen
 Faithful
 Innocent?
 Sweet?
 Yes?
 And when you go
 On Safari
 Or to the office...
 When she goes
 To the market
 When she goes for the mass...
 Do you lock up
 The gate of her palace
 And keep the key
 With you... (1971: 178)

The persona also feels that the family institution is a symbol of power over the woman as it imprisons her:

Look at the slaves
 Of the world
 Calling themselves wives,
 Penned like goats
 To unwilling pegs (1971: 179)

It is from this prison as symbolized by the family institution that the prostitute attempts to free herself. She does this by empowering herself through the power of sex and she warns her male counterparts of condemning her. She further demonstrates her power as a woman by being able to do what men think they can do best – provide for the children:

I have not come to you
 For help
 My children are healthy
 And happy
 They do not go about
 In tattered clothes
 Dirty untrimmed... (1971: 180)

As already mentioned, Marxist feminists believe that economic differences between men and women cause the suppression of the women. If women are economically empowered, as socialist feminists argue, they will not depend on men. In *Song of Malaya*, the prostitute empowers herself economically as portrayed in her ability to provide for her children. Therefore, she transcends the definition the ‘other’ labelled on her by the man, as observed by De Beauvoir (1974), and makes herself to be what she desires to be. The final section of *Song of Malaya*, ‘Flaming eternity’, is an epilogue that portrays a justified existence of the prostitute.

It is the power of sexuality that makes both men and women vulnerable to sex and prostitution, the oldest profession, will never end as it signifies reality. On the contrary, this profession is not vulnerable to the way of power of socio-cultural and political structures. In projecting this fact, the persona freely allows all to condemn the prostitutes for their involvement or participation in prostitution, but reminds them that they are part of the action:

You sergeant
 Arresting me now
 Sir,
 But we were together
 In my house
 Only last night...!
 Let the disappointed men
 Shout abuses at us...
 Let the black Bishops
 And priest
 Preach against us
 Let the parliamentarians
 Debate and pass laws
 Against us... (1971: 181 – 184)

The prostitute’s use of the word ‘let’ in this section shows her surrender to the society’s perception of what is sexually moral and immoral. The people have failed to realize that it is this very patriarchal society that has created the prostitute for its own satisfaction. Malaya finally defends this power of sexuality when she argues that despite all forms of condemnation, no one has power greater than that of sexuality so as to be able to put an end to prostitution:

But
 Who can command
 The sun
 Not to rise in the morning?
 Or having risen
 Can hold it
 At noon
 And stop it
 From going down
 In the West (1971: 184)

Jean Jacques Rousseau, as quoted by Okot p'Bitek in his book *Artist the Ruler* (1986: 19), argues that "Man is born free, but everywhere, he is in chains". In relation to *Song of Malaya*, man is free to express his sexuality but once he is exposed to socio-cultures like that of religion and family, he is not free. He loses his power as a free man and becomes powerless as laws that define his morality are then defined by the socio-cultural society. These results in the power play of and over bodies as manifested in sex.

3 Conclusions and Way Forward

This work set out to examine the poet's presentation of power discourses in post colonial Africa as portrayed in his poetic works. It has explored the manifestation of power in the characters and their immediate environment. In this undertaking, we have seen how power is not just an end in itself but a play whereby no absolute power exists. We can therefore conclude that Okot has presented power relations in his long poems as a way of illustrating the state of power in society. As a way of presenting a hypocritical society, the persona in *Song of Malaya* shows the paradox of sexual power. The observation made is that patriarchal society has given men power over women. The women are defined and criticized on the basis of what is best for the man.

The woman's sexuality is confined to the man's and particularly her husband's satisfaction as well as to bear and rear children for him. The woman has no right to enjoy the power of her desire for sex. If she transcends the laid down boundaries, she is labelled immoral while a man in the same situation remains blameless. However, Okot subverts this myth as he clearly shows the ways of power of and over bodies as manifested in sexuality. Prostitute, a woman, attempts to transcend the definitions and labels against her. She argues out that the idealistic values on sexuality that the patriarchal society insists on are not practical. The power of sexuality is one that no one can either get rid of or avoid.

All men and women in society give in to the power of sex and therefore no one can claim to be perfect. Therefore, the persona's journey through prostitution can be viewed as a process of power play. In this case, her involvement in prostitution is equated to ownership of power over those who desire her for their sexual satisfaction. This approach of analyzing discourse of power in Okot's poetry has been quite successful as there is no way of power that is absolute. Power is never permanent; it shifts from one point to another and vice versa. According to Susan Bordo as read by Linda J. Nicholson in *Feminist/Postmodernism* (1990:138), "For the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion are condemned to be haunted by a voice from the margins already speaking, awakening us to what has been excluded, effaced, damaged".

In summary, the idea of power discourses applies to all spheres of life as power is everywhere. The findings in this work are useful to students of Literature by offering a new way of understanding the vibrant issue of power discourse that has preoccupied post colonial writers in the Diaspora. Therefore, this approach is recommended for all other literary studies in which the idea of power discourse is dominant. For instance, all cultural studies either presented in written or oral presentations like in theatre or traditional ceremonies can be read using this method to establish the forms of power in them. It can also be applied to studies in other disciplines like Political Science, Anthropology and Religion.

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