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## Poems

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## Poems

### Abstract

IN MEMORIAM: ALFRED BLOSE, and DUMA WILBERFORCE GWALI

# The Image of the Prostitute: A Re-consideration of Okot p'Bitek's Malaya

Malaya is the female character, a prostitute, in Okot p'Bitek's lesser known and admired 'Song of Malaya' (in *Two Songs*).<sup>1</sup> It is a dramatic monologue, written in movements, in the pattern of his earlier songs (*Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*), and in free verse. The narration is from the point of view of this character who adopts various rhetorical strategies (such as the apostrophe, digressions and repetitions) in the bid to persuade us to adopt her point of view, to inform us, to achieve imaginative consent, and to engage our interests and guide our emotional responses as she addresses us.<sup>2</sup>

The present paper examines the image of the prostitute in 'Song of Malaya'. It is inspired by the different and rather negative responses which Okot p'Bitek's presentation of the prostitute has evoked in the minds of its critics. It attempts to show that Malaya is not only relegated to the background because she is overshadowed by Lawino's magnificence and presentation, but also because there has been the tendency to dismiss her as a mere prostitute. There is the need, therefore, for a more balanced assessment of Malaya in her own terms. Adopting an outright moral attitude is bound to cloud the depth of insights we perceive as we read the poem. If anything, we should adopt two positions in analysing her character. The first is the position that Robert Langbaum takes in his discussion of dramatic monologues: 'Sympathy adapts the dramatic monologue for making the «impossible» case and for dealing with the forbidden region of the emotions, because we must suspend moral judgment, we must sympathise in order to read the poem.'<sup>3</sup> He adopted this position because, as he puts it, 'extraordinary moral positions and extraordinary emotions make up the characteristic subject matter of dramatic monologues that follow Browning and Tennyson'. The second position, adopted by Rader, is that in addition to formal considerations

and the type of position adopted by Langbaum, we should not disregard the position of the poet because 'the poet's presence in the poem is a fundamental aspect of its form, not something we know from outside the poem, but something inseparable from our experience of it'.<sup>4</sup> Adopting these positions ensures that we try to be reasonably objective, assume the position of the monologuer and become him/her ('sympathy') while remaining ourselves ('judgment'). It also means that we don't bring in extraneous material (our moral biases and prejudices about WHAT a prostitute is) in judging the character; instead we try to decipher the poet's authorial intention in presenting the character, and the various ramifications of the personality of the character.

Our assertion at the beginning of this paper that Malaya has been overshadowed by Lawino can be supported by the meagre volume of literary attention she has attracted. While criticism and reviews of *Song of Lawino* can be found in journals, books, newspapers and magazines, many admirers of Okot p'Bitek do not know that he wrote another Song in which the monologue is also by a female. Okot has become synonymous with 'the author of *Song of Lawino*'. Even 'Song of Prisoner' has received more sympathetic attention. The few responses to 'Song of Malaya' can be categorised into three types. First, those concerned with only formal characteristics, pointing out that 'Song of Malaya' is a dramatic monologue and so is like *Song of Lawino*.<sup>5</sup> Next, those not only interested in showing formal resemblances with the first Song but in making thematic interpretations. This second group discusses themes with some sympathy towards the prostitute.<sup>6</sup> Whilst Heron sees Malaya as mysterious because we do not know much about her, Moore feels that Okot has created her 'too much on one note'.<sup>7</sup> Tejani sees her as an attempt 'to destroy the reading public's concept of morality'.<sup>8</sup> In making these statements which have the underlying implication of suggesting that, by only showing her as a prostitute, who 'dwells overmuch on the supposed pleasure of the prostitute in her own skill and her own body',<sup>9</sup> Okot p'Bitek failed to give her creation sufficient depth, and they anticipate a third category that dismisses her outright and refuses to discuss her. To the best of my knowledge, this third group's main representative is Roscoe. In his resentment, Roscoe says that

'Song of Malaya' (i.e. Song of the Whore) can be quickly dismissed as a Rabelaisian 'jeu d'esprit', a holiday from commitment and a wasted opportunity, for Okot either refuses to see, or will not examine, the agonies of one of Africa's most distressing human problems. What is offered is a fleshly revel designed to annoy Sunday school teachers.<sup>10</sup>

This third position shares with the second one the tendency to let prejudices arising from stereotyped impressions of, and attitudes towards the prostitute, to prevent detailed attention to the text. These prejudices arising from pre-conceived moral positions (like that of Sunday school teachers?) I believe to be extraneous.

A more balanced reading and analysis of the character of Malaya will show that she reveals patterns of behaviour consonant with society's stereotyped ideas of the prostitute as a sex symbol, but that there are also other sides to her personality. Stereotypical thinking is necessary in the socializing process of finding role models. But when stereotypes become so rigid that individual variations are ignored or denigrated, they act as barriers to recognizing the complexity of human beings. For this reason the word 'stereotype' is commonly used in literary criticism to apply to underdeveloped or 'flat' characters or caricatures recognizable in outline.

Yet even characters presented sketchily are often useful for legitimate literary purpose. A flat character may serve as a contrast or foil to a more rounded one; character types used in comedy and satire often make readers feel superior and in a position to laugh. Furthermore, behind even the most fully developed characters lie the sociological stereotypes.

As mentioned earlier, Malaya exhibits features of behaviour expected of prostitutes by most societies — she is a sex symbol and seductress. But there are also other sides to this complex character. The main characteristics of the sex object as a stereotype is the passivity she is supposed to share with all women, and this sexual apathy has seemed to provide a rationale for prostitution. A stereotypical interpretation can show ample traces of this apathy in Malaya, an apathy which makes her give equal and indiscriminate 'welcome' to all her customers. Her 'trade' and its wares are for everyone — the sailor coming ashore with 'a time bomb pulsating' in his loins (p. 127), the released detainee, with 'granaries/ Full/ To overflowing' (p. 128), the debauching Sikhs at the night clubs with broken heads, and the Indian vegetarian 'breeding like a rat'. The village chief, the politician, the teacher, and the school boy are all included. A consequence of this promiscuity is the spread of venereal disease, the main hazard of the business. The prostitute is therefore a social 'reject' to be ostracised by the members of her society. The other characters, the prostitute's detractors, exhibit this attitude towards her: her brother, the policemen and the judge, the 'married sisters', and members of her society all feel that society's moral protection is on their side.

Another expected feature is her apparent lack of verbal reticence that borders on vulgarity and her cynical attitude towards her clientele, a

cynicism and casualness that is reflected in the way she lists her different 'smiles' for her numerous 'customers'. This could lead to a prudish interpretation of her verbal repertoire.

The same interpretation could be given to her matter-of-fact discussion of the effects of venereal disease, and her admission that she is 'open' for everyone, in spite of the euphemism used to make the admission less offensive ('I am an open pollok blossom/ Bees, butterflies, moths/ Visit me by day and night' — p. 150). It can be seen in the exultatory pattern of her refrain-like exhortations for her kindred, a refrain built on the structure 'Sister Prostitutes/ Wherever you are...', used with different synonyms (Whore, Harlot, Malaya). This is repeated ten times. One way this can be interpreted is that in spite of Malaya's intention to make a case for herself and others like her, her tone undermines her argument. Her intention is to expose societal hypocrisy in sexual matters, especially in relation to prostitutes and the 'using' of them. But this exultant repetition may weaken her case. It would seem to some as if she is merely intent on encouraging other prostitutes to greater heights. To these critics she could be seen as sounding banal, vulgar, even obscene and irresponsible. This may have been responsible for Roscoe's dismissal.

But Malaya's presentation should be taken for what it really is — a deliberate satire. Her words are therefore not to be accepted at the surface level. Okot p'Bitek masters the art of the satirist as an ironist. Malaya is a complex character. One moment she is the hard, money-conscious professional, the next she is a fulfilled and very sentimental mother offering solace to her son whose father has refused to accept him because of society's double standards. Her anger is directed against the perpetrators of this duality. Therefore, her exultation and exhortation of her profession and its practitioners may be designed to offend such moral prudes, whose prudery does not extend to the non-exploitation of prostitutes. Her clientele is multi-racial: Indians, Sikhs, white miners and her regular African 'brothers', and her dragnet covers all the customers she unreservedly welcomes — from politicians, engineers to local chiefs, school teachers and schoolboys. There is thus a universal note to her 'sexploitation', and also to the sexual hypocrisy she decries. So the more sensibilities she hurts, the more satisfaction she derives. Her exultation therefore has a thematic significance within the context of her satire.

Another explanation can be given for her apparent lack of decorum and verbal propriety in speech. In traditional societies, there are taboos that guide linguistic usage. Taboos are not, however, peculiar to traditional societies. The breaking of such taboos results in accusations of linguistic impropriety. But there are occasions when tabooed elements of

language are used, with some kind of 'licence', for specific effects.<sup>11</sup> As a counterpoint to the use of euphemisms and periphrasis, Okot p'Bitek exploits this aspect of traditional orature for some specific stylistic effects — to reveal the character's verbal honesty and lack of squeamishness in 'calling a spade a spade'. This is revealed in the directness with which some usually tabooed elements are described. Thus Malaya's frankness in describing and cataloguing her smiles and her unabashed discussion of her sexual relations with her customers, is a reflection of this traditional usage. This kind of directness in the use of obscene language in literature may not be merely gratuitous, a mere attempt at reproducing street language, rather it may serve a fundamental use in the expression of anger and hate. If taken in the contexts in which they are used, they are often directed towards some person or thing which the narrator loathes. The use of such scatological images may have some kind of didacticism central to it, reminiscent of the use of this kind of 'shock strategy' by Jonathan Swift and, closer to the Okot situation, the description of filth and graffiti in a latrine by Koomson in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*.<sup>12</sup>

Various other images of the prostitute abound in literature, both African and non-African, and usually these images are unsympathetic. Among them is the exhibition of defiance against constituted authority (moral authority), often reflected in its being directed at the menfolk, a certain cynicism that shows their lack of warmth, their impersonality, their unfeeling and insensitive hardness. But if we suspend moral judgment, these weaknesses can be seen in a new light. Okot p'Bitek's Malaya shares her defiance for men with the much-admired Lawino, the self-righteous village girl. But, as seen by prudes, Malaya's defiance is 'different'. Lawino's tongue is caustic and she is, at times, very insolent. Her anger, her clear lack of reticence at such moments when she loses all self-control and gives in to the jealousy of a rejected wife, has been justified. Ruchoya saw her in this light:

She is so bitter that her justifiable anger and bitterness carries her away to become vulgar and comically offensive... In spite of this, Lawino is that vital voice of Africa, much wanted, a human voice which must of necessity revolt against inhuman treatment and displacement. She stands as a dramatic figure deeply personal and genuinely moving. She is indeed justified to struggle and protest, and her spiritedness in this process is noteworthy. So also is her alienated grief which is deeply experienced all over the world.<sup>13</sup>

It is obvious that Ruchoya's attitude is a morally positive and sympathetic one. His acceptance that Lawino is often brusque and rude

seems to imply that this is incidental and of no consequence, it is to be overlooked because it is justified.

The important question, then, is: is there no justification for Malaya's humorous and light-hearted presentation of her plight? Her mockery of her customers lacks Lawino's condescension and conciliatory tone. Malaya does not accept her position as inferior to the men. Instead, in relating to them, she describes them with a certain degree of knowledge that implies complete confidence in herself, and complete knowledge of the fallibility and gullibility of the men. Her attack is against hypocrisy of any type. In her defiance, she emphasizes her role as a free woman, as seductress and sex object. The lack of verbal reticence is in keeping with her role as Malaya, a woman without matrimonial protection — it gives to her speech a degree of appropriateness and authenticity — she lives and talks like a prostitute.

Malaya also resorts to allusion to defend her sexual role:

Raise your glasses and half gourds  
My Sisters,  
And click them with mine....  
Here's to Eve  
With her golden apples,  
And to the Egyptian girl  
Who stole Abraham  
From Sarah's bed....

We'll drink to the  
Daughters of Sodom  
And to the daughters of Gomorrah  
Who set the towns ablaze  
With their flaming kisses....

Let's drink to Rahab  
With her two spy boy friends,  
To Esther the daughter of Abigail,  
To Delilah and her bushy-headed  
Jaw bone gangster,  
To Magdalena who anointed  
The feet of Jesus!

We will remember Theodora  
The Queen of Whores  
Who struck Chief Justinian's marriage  
With her embrace  
And flung his wife  
Beyond the deserts,  
And the unknown Prostitute Sister



Her allusions range from Classical Rome to the Old and New Testaments, and the implication is that if indulgence in sex is a weakness, then it is a weakness she shares with all the outstanding names in her allusions who were human enough to show that weakness in spite of their greatness.

I have already pointed out that Malaya is more than the simple, one-sided, flat stereotype she is taken for. Though it may be conceded that her self-revelation has dramatic irony in that it reveals as undesirable the traits which she is proud of, Malaya is not repulsive. Her frank enjoyment of life, her pleasure in her triumphs, her broad experience, make her attractive as a human being. There are various ways in which this impression is justified from the text. We pointed out that she may be accused of verbal impropriety, of flippancy. But a careful reader realizes a degree of reticence in the speech of this often enigmatic character. There are instances when she tries to be proper, decorous, to state the obvious in circumlocutory patterns, preferring euphemisms and periphrases, her intention being not to cause offence. This carefulness is exhibited in several sections of her Song, in the adoption of a pattern of half-statements, uncompleted words, and even proverbs. She belongs to the society that rejects her, and its social mores, even in speech, guide her. A higher degree of verbal looseness is EXPECTED of a prostitute, therefore her selectiveness and decency become the more surprising.

The fifth section of her Song is significant because it performs the dual function of revealing Malaya as a compassionate woman given to motherly feelings and also to verbal control. Her son has been called a bastard, and she is angry. She jibes at the Christian belief in virgin birth and traces a parallel between her son and Christ:

And you bush teacher  
Troubling my son,  
How dare you  
Throw the first stone  
While Christ writes  
In the sand?.... (p. 173)

This six-line stanza, in question form, and in keeping with her rage, is only one sentence. We expect her to lose control in the next stanza, a follow up on the preceding one. It is true that she questions the morality of the teacher in questioning her son's legitimacy and therefore casting

aspersions on her social situation. He has committed adultery and so is not in a position to judge her. He, too, has illegitimate children and illegal wives:

How many teen-agers  
Have you clubbed  
With your large headed hammer,  
Sowing death in their  
Innocent fields?  
Who does not know  
The little girls  
In your class  
Who are your wives,  
And the children  
That these children  
Have  
By you?.... (p. 173)

The same question pattern is adopted, the images speak for themselves. The male organ is a 'large headed hammer' which performs the physiologically negative function of 'sowing death'. 'Sowing' implies growth, life, regeneration. The teacher prefers to sow destruction, degeneration. Contrasted with Malaya, the mother of three, the giver of life, the attack on the teacher carries a pungent note. The situation, if recreated, as she suckles her baby and cooes for it, makes a glaring contrast between her humanity and the teacher's inhumanity. The same pattern is adopted for her brother who 'throws heated stones' (p. 13) into Achola (another prostitute). In criticising human nature, her euphemisms and images often have inanimate attributes, like the 'heated stones' for 'sperms'. She adopts the opposite pattern in addressing inanimate objects: the doctor's injection is described as 'bottled sperm'. She however exploits the ambiguous nature of the phrase. The Chief may be sterile hence the need for the artificial form, she tends to suggest. The doctor's needle reminds her of an arrow:

Doctor,  
I see you stabbing  
The Chief's buttocks  
With the poisoned arrow,  
My sister is wriggling  
As you have orgasm  
And pour bottled sperm  
Into her flesh...  
Tut-tut-tut-tut....

Apart from the highly evocative and suggestive nature of this usage, one can also make another suggestion. This is that Malaya uses obscene or vulgar words in reference to inanimate objects because taboos do not normally apply to them. Addressing them as such would cause them no offence as they have no senses. But because venereal disease is a sensitive experience she adopts a serious tone as she describes it as 'this one pest'. Her images have a pedestrian effect all the same that one wonders if she is a city girl who has not completely lost touch with her village background and its images. For example, aeroplanes are called 'Steel hawks', trains have 'bellies', and shapely thighs remind her of 'elephant tusks' and 'pythons' (p. 154).

Again, Malaya could be dismissed as hard, cold, impassive, unfeeling, etc., the way prostitutes are bound to be treated. Her fifth section, however, paints a different picture. Although she reveals varied emotions, as anger, cynicism, even hatred, in the other sections, her emotions in this section are different. After her initial contempt for every member of her society, male and female, and her 'immoral' exultations of her trade and co-practitioners, she shows some tenderness. To our mind, this is the most dramatic of all the sections in her Song. She exposes herself as the compassionate mother when she addresses her suckling baby:

My sweet baby,  
Mm!  
You tickle my teats  
With your toothless kisses  
And remind me  
Of my first love.... (p. 169)

The language is titillating, but the emotion expressed is not only regret but nostalgia. 'My first love' could be one of her earlier children; textually, it refers to her youthful past. She is reminiscing. It refers anaphorically to when she '...was thirteen/ Or maybe fourteen...' Even the short and terse lines make this section stand out from the rest of the text, and even from Lawino's Song at its most intense. It marks a further development of the trend in Okot's adoption of more compressed verse started in *Song of Ocol*. There is also more profuse use of punctuations as an element of compression. They are also used to show loss of trend of thought, doubt and regret, and pity. The baby is addressed severally as 'sweet', 'darling'; she 'loves' it; its tears stab '...your/ Mum's heart' (p. 170). She moves from the nursing baby to her school-age son. He is sobbing, is hungry and has been mocked at school. She asks him to sit on

her lap and calls him 'My Boy' (p. 172). Before this, the single-line, single-word, stanza 'What?' (p. 171), signals a change in her mood from pure tenderness towards her brood to one mixed with bitterness and hostility as she attacks the offending teacher.

In the early stanzas of this section, Okot masterfully uses punctuation and typographical arrangement to foreground the relationship between Malaya's psychological state of mind and the pattern of her utterances as she at one moment expresses love, at another doubt, the next anger, and then outright venom (cf. pp. 169-172). They help to foreground emotions in a remarkable way. Punctuation marks used here perform most of the function they serve in the English language. But outstanding is the use of question marks to mark inquiry and to express doubt; dots show discontinuous discourse which acts as indices of either loss of trend of thought or emotional breakdown, leading to tears; exclamation marks have a variety of functions, revealing different moods, particularly excitement, happiness, surprise or indignation. At expression level, uncompleted words may show interruption or even loss of self-control, etc. (e.g. 'A bastard.../ Illegit...?', p. 171); chuckle words, usually accompanied by exclamations, may also show lack of belief or indifference or doubt; and interjections ('Oh!' and 'Mm!') have their own augmentative effects. The total effect is that punctuations recreate the supposed dialogue between mother and her children, all emanating from Malaya as she responds to different facets of that dialogue. This is dramatic monologue at its best. Here, Malaya is shown as capable of tenderness and display, even if it is momentary and reserved for family. It will not be completely correct, then, to dismiss her as abrupt, insensitive, passive and impersonal. In all, however, it shows her attempt, as a monologuer, to carry along the audience and to win their sympathy, as she successfully does, to herself. She wants us to see that the prostitute is a mother and a benefactor capable of intense feelings, in spite of society's feelings towards her.

The quasi-physical and impressionistic interpretations are not far-fetched as Malaya really seems to attract our sympathy. She makes one feel that the society that exploits prostitutes physically, while reserving moral advantage over them with which to punish and blackmail them, is at fault. There is reason therefore to believe that, in portraying Malaya as he did, Okot p'Bitek expects her to win our sympathy. He is one writer who is not callous about the plight of the prostitute. Malaya's creation reminds one of several prostitutes in African literature: Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Wanja in *Petals of Blood* who is a victim of ruthless capitalist exploitation; Ekwensi's Jagua in *Jagua Nana* who tries to change and

become a more acceptable and humanitarian member of her society; Oculi's prostitute, Rosa, in *Prostitute*; etc. These prostitutes differ in the depth of their development as characters, but retain a similarity in their unique profession, and the sympathetic treatments given them by their 'creators'. Going farther afield, Malaya can be compared with Blake's picture of London where he shows the prostitute as an extreme example of man's inhumanity — they are to be pitied as victims of society:

But most thro' midnight streets I hear  
How the youthful harlot's curse  
Blasts the new-born infant's tear,  
And blights with plagues the marriage hearse.<sup>15</sup>

Blake points to prostitution as the support, even the price of marriage. Blake in his time was interested in portraying the whore as undesirable but as a victim of society's 'mind-forged manacles'. Men are now imprisoned in the chains they have forged for themselves; it was they who invented the society which now oppresses them. Nothing, absolutely nothing, has escaped the curse man has brought upon himself. Prostitution is one of such curses, the consequence of society's restriction of free love.

Okot p'Bitek's Malaya, as a twentieth-century East African, is an example of the same universal plight Blake describes in 'London'. Her portrayal may reveal Okot's feelings about the condition of prostitution. Prostitutes accept the contempt of policemen and judges and churchmen. Married men also 'use' her. Wives nag husbands at home, thus make them turn to prostitutes as substitutes; thus Malaya is surprised that her married sisters are unhappy that she provides warm hospitality to their husbands. In her own case, Malaya has three sons for a man whose intolerable and ugly wife has borne two daughters:

You have two little daughters,  
I have three sons....  
Our husband is father  
To, at least, five kids....

In Malaya's African society, sons are preferred to daughters — so Malaya is even more fulfilling, to the unnamed man, as procreator (hence she sees herself as an 'outside' wife). As receptive as she is, she is nevertheless aware and worried about the hazards of her trade, such as venereal disease, though she treats them with some humour. But most significant is the image of Malaya as a 'liberated' woman who is aware of

the choices open to her. This awareness frees her from the compulsiveness of traditional role-playing (the type Lawino suggests for herself) and, at the same time, awakens her to the complexity of living and loving. To be fully human is to face the hardness of life with strength. Her apparent lack of seriousness, which Roscoe dismisses for a 'revel', is the show of her emotional strength, the strength to cope with the vagaries of the realities of her existence while remaining level-headed and humorous. She is, therefore, not a simple, one-sided, flat, monotonous character but a complex one portrayed in a simple manner. It is this simplicity in her portrayal that has misled most critics.

One last statement on authorial intention and the place of Okot p'Bitek in the Song as a satirist, wielding the tool of irony effectively. There seems to be a tendency among critics to take *Two Songs* literally and thus to misinterpret the personae of Prisoner and Malaya. Marshment has aptly decried this trend in her assessment of reviews of 'Song of Prisoner', particularly that by Atieno-Odhiambo:

Atieno makes the mistake of too readily assuming that what the Prisoner says is what the poem 'says'. He makes no mention of *one of Okot's most recognised qualities as a poet — his irony*. Actually, he is not alone in this: many reviewers of Okot's poetry, however much they may praise his irony, seem to forget all about it when it comes to reading the poems and analysing what they are saying ... opinions expressed by the characters in the poems should never be extracted and presented as the views of Okot — at least not without careful consideration of the context of the 'Singer' and his or her situation. (my italics)<sup>16</sup>

This observation is crucially true of 'Song of Malaya'. Earlier on, we pointed out that Malaya (as a character) is satirised, as those things she shows as desirable, praises and exhorts, are revealed as undesirable, from the responses of members of her society, the auditors of her society's norms. But the satire is double-edged. These 'protectors' are also guilty, as it were. They have denuded their own integrity (and thus moral objectivity, if there is any such thing!) and are so not in the best position to judge her. In a sense, too, Malaya acts as a juror in the trial of her 'judges'! She has been shown to respect some of the norms of her society — in her attempt at some verbal control, in spite of the judgment of prudes. But at the same time, she maintains a contradictory stance in order to make her 'case'. She has to defy all that her society adores, all that is responsible, in a sense, for her society's hypocrisy, its ills, its alienation of the prostitute as a vagrant. She has to turn into a rebel. She portrays all the members of her society as deluded: their perceptions of the role of the prostitute in their society is muddled. They denigrate her,

yet use her to achieve their various ends. They are not realistic; if they were, they would have realised the inevitable, and natural, existence of sexual urge, of libido, come to terms with it and accept the paradoxical position of the malaya. Her rhetorical question at the end of the last section, with its use of the cyclical image of darkness and light, of the inevitability of the rising of the sun and the coming of night, clinch her argument:

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? (p. 184)

If this is impossible, then bravo, malayas! Hence she ends the section with a last note of exhortation of prostitutes and all their supposed ills to their society. This last section is a kind of summary of her protest, a protest against sexual repression, and repression of all kinds, and to achieve that freedom, she has to defy every institution and authority in her society. Thus, in this section, she adopts a tone of ironic acceptance of what every member of society does to oppress her, her tone is one of surprise and disappointment. The repeated use of the pattern, 'Let + noun group...' (repeated fourteen times), creates the misleading impression of unquering acceptance of her fate by Malaya, that she suffers from despondency and self-pity. That will be being too literal. But this impression is punctured by the questions she asks above. That is where the irony lies. The irony is the source of her freedom, she seems to imply: she is denying rather than accepting society's judgment. She has to achieve this in a unique way. On a final note, Heywood has summarised Malaya's method, as rebel:

In order to reach this point of positive commitment Malaya had to become nothing and rid herself of all collective restraint and dependencies. The lines preceding her affirmation read like a ritual stripping or like a formal exorcism. She casts off in succession all familial, social, and societal bonds, defying in turn men and their wives; parents and brothers; church and state; God himself (if he is on their side); and every power of civic law and persecution.<sup>17</sup>

This kind of interpretation of the significance of the character of the prostitute cannot be rendered unless we take a more positive note towards the poet's use of irony. A too literal interpretation of the character, a tendency to identify Malaya's with Okot's moral position or lack of seriousness and sensitivity, will be grossly misleading. He has instead exploited, effectively, a weakness in the first-person dramatic monologue — the monologuer's presentation of his case solely from his point of view, a point of view which need not necessarily be that of his creator.

#### NOTES

1. Okot p'Bitek, *Two Songs* ('*Song of Prisoner*', '*Song of Malaya*') (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1971). All further references will be to this edition and are included in the text.
2. Rhetorics is defined here as the art of 'persuasion' and 'self-justification' in speech — after Aristotle and Quintilian. It derives from the fact that Okot p'Bitek emphasizes the importance of the 'spoken word' as the vehicle of the communication between the 'singer' and his 'audience'. See Okot p'Bitek, 'What is Literature', *Busara*, 4, 1, 1972, pp. 21-27.
3. Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (New York: Norton & Co., Inc., 1957), p. 93.
4. Ralph W. Rader, 'The Dramatic Monologue and Related Lyric Forms', *Critical Inquiry*, 30, 1, 1976, pp. 131-151.
5. See Taban lo Liyong, '*Two Songs* by Okot p'Bitek: *Song of Prisoner*, *Song of Malaya*', *Dhana*, 1971, pp. 59-61; Timothy Wangusa, 'East African Poetry', *African Literature Today*, 6 1973, pp. 46-53; and O.R. Dathorne, *African Literature in the Twentieth Century* (London: Heinemann, 1976).
6. See Bahadur Tejani, 'Review of Okot p'Bitek's *Two Songs*: «*Song of Prisoner*» and «*Song of Malaya*»', *African Literature Today*, 6, 1973, pp. 160-166; G.A. Heron, *The Poetry of Okot p'Bitek* (London: Heinemann, 1976); and Gerald H. Moore, 'Okot p'Bitek: The Horn of the Grasslands', paper presented to the Fourth Ibadan Annual Literature Conference, University of Ibadan, July 1979.
7. Moore, p. 19.
8. Tejani, p. 163.
9. Moore, p. 18.
10. Adrian Roscoe, *Uhuru's Fire: African Literature East to South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 54.
11. Peter Trudgill has observed, in talking about taboo words in human language, that 'if they were not said at all they could hardly remain in the language'. See his *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 29.
12. Reference to the African Writers Series edition (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1968), pp. 105-106. The use of shock strategy is not peculiar to African literature. For fairly detailed discussions of its use in other areas, see Stanford Luce, 'Increment and Excrement: Celine and the Language of Hate', *Maledicta*, 1, 1, 1977, pp. 43-48; and



- Terence Collins, 'Self-Image Through Imagery: Black Art Poets and the Politics of Excrement', *Maledicta*, 3, 1, 1979, pp. 71-84.
13. M.N. Ruchoya, 'Lawino's Complex Protest: A Socialist Re-appraisal', *Busara*, 3, 2, 1971, p. 57.
  14. Okot p'Bitek, *Two Songs*, pp. 166-167.
  15. Andrew M. Wilkinson, *William Blake: Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (London: University Tutorial Press, 1958), p. 36.
  16. Margaret Marshment, 'Song of Prisoner: A Reply to Atieno-Odhiambo', *Busara*, 4, 1, 1972, p. 63.
  17. Annemarie Heywood, 'Modes of Freedom: Songs of Okot p'Bitek', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, XV, 1, 1980, p. 71.

# Ama Ata Aidoo

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## FOR BESSIE HEAD

To begin with,  
there's a small problem of address:

calling you  
by the only name some of us  
knew you by,

hailing you by titles you  
could not possibly  
have cared for,

referring you to  
strange and clouded  
origins that eat into  
our past our pain  
like prize-winning cassava tubers in  
abandoned harvest fields...

Some of us never ever met you.