



# Colonial Fear, Gender Dynamics And The Justice - A Study On Grace Ogot's Short Story "The Green Leaves"

Om Prakash Pokhrel, Assistant Professor  
Chandra Prasad Ghimire, Assistant Professor  
Gyanpeeth Degree College  
Nikashi, Baksa, Assam

## Abstract:

The most dominant feature of the post colonial literature is its reference to the colonial fear that evolved as a recurrent theme in their narratives. The anxieties, exploitation, and psychological oppression experienced by colonized individuals or communities under colonial imperialist are manifested in the form of fear as the undercurrent force in their writings. The imposition of a foreign regime, their religious principles, cultural erasure, displacement, and direct violence manufactured certain amount of fear in the minds of colonized which remains as an incurable ailment. The loss of language, culture and identity, the power structure and societal constraints of the colonizer, the law enforcement that mitigates the local interest, lead to the mistrust and as a result the fear elements emerge. Gender dynamics shape gender roles, identities, and the power structures and the female writers like Grace Ogot critically examine the ways in which colonialism reinforced patriarchy. The thrust of this paper would be to show how Grace Ogot's *The Green Leaves*, (1968) critiques the colonial fears, greed, gender dynamics and justice are intertwined leaving women in the periphery.

Keywords: Cultural erasure, displacement, gender dynamics, power structure, colonial fear...etc

## Introduction:

*"Those people who were once colonized by the language are now rapidly remaking it, domesticating it, becoming more relaxed about the way they use it- assisted by the English language's enormous flexibility and size, they are carving out large territories for themselves within its frontiers."*

(Rushdie 21)

Postcolonial literature is the production of the vast territories of the non-western world once colonized by the Europe. A greater amount of earth's surface was colonized by the European powers in the early 1900s by seizing their land and all the materials. During the long lasting impact of this colonial structure, a handful of literary works produced by the colonized subject expressed the diverse experiences that

they encounter negotiating with that new aggression of the imperial domination. In *Shakespeare's The Tempest*, the colonized *Caliban* tells his master Prospero:

*"...you taught me language and my profit on't  
Is. I know how to curse " (18).*

Thus, it is pertinent that post colonial literature is an attempt to endorse the colonised subjects using the language of the colonisers by the colonised artists. They invaded the lands, eliminated the indigenous ancestors, enslaved them and taught their language to communicate with them and that finally remains as a form of 'curse' for them. Now the idea of decolonization is really the creation of new people as they tend to become more liberated.

Short story, often called a condensed novel or a shorter form of narratives is found to be a vocal literary expression in the postcolonial world along with novel, drama, poetry and folklore. The key concerns of these stories were the challenges of colonial imperialism, stereotype patriarchy, western aggression, conflicts, greed, womanhood and the human exploitation and trafficking.

The best known Female short story writer, a pioneer in African literature, born in Kenya (1930) developed her interest in writing at a very early age, stimulated by her grandmother's folktales. Long before she could read and write, her father read stories to this young mind from both English and Kiswahill story books translating them into their mother tongue.

*"My interest in writing fiction may have started at a very early age....And long before I could read or write my father, a school teacher, read stories from both English and Kiswahill story books and translated them to us in our tongue."*

*(Interview, Nairobi, August 13, 1976)*

Her short story *The Rain Came* (1964) was considered among the first English stories by an East African woman and *The Promised Land* (1966), the first novel explored about the issues of migration, identity and the challenges of new environment among the Luo people. Ogot has to her credit three volumes of short stories, *Land Without Thunder* (1968), *The Other Woman* (1976), and *The Island of Tears* (1980) that prove her literary eminence.

Grace Ogot's short story *The Green Leaves* (1968) draws a realistic picture of a compelling exploration of gender dynamics, colonial fear within a post colonial African setting particularly in alignment with violence and white exploitation. The central theme of the story reflects about a society that has its root grounded in patriarchy and male aggression. The masculinity and women passivity prevalent in that society where missionary is the ultimate influence on the social and political structure portray the pathetic world of the women. Nyagar, the protagonist asserts dominance through his physical strength and decision-making power in the family and Nyamundhe, his wife is always submissive, silence and voiceless, representing the existing norm of the traditional women in the community. The First appearance of Nyamundhe in the story itself is her disappearance because she is not present.

*"He turned to wake up his wife. She was not there. He got up and rushed to the door. It was unlocked. Where was Nyamundhe? How could she slip back to her hut so quietly? He wondered. I have told her and again never to leave my hut without waking me up to bolt the door. She will see me tomorrow!"(Ogot, 69)*

This absence of the woman character in the beginning lines of the story tells the trajectory of the Nyamundhe as a colonized woman subject and it can be seen as the post colonial predicament of the African women. Towards the end of the story Nyamundhe is a cathartic character who dares to voice against the orthodox structure by questioning about the mysterious death of her husband.

### Objective of the study:

- I) To examine the Colonial Fear, gender dynamics in the Luo community of Africa.
- II) To understand postcolonial justice and morality reflected in the African legal system as well as colonial system.

### Methodology:

The proposed study would be carried out in an analytical method. Data shall be collected from both primary and secondary sources. The analytical method will be used in the study of books, journals, souvenirs', relevant research articles etc.

### Critical analysis:

*"Those people who were once colonised by the language are now rapidly remaking it, domesticating more and more relaxed about the way they use it---assisted by the English language's enormous flexibility and size, they are carving out large territories for themselves within its frontiers."*

*(Rushdie 21)*

Ogot's story *The Green Leaves* is centred on the issue of colonial fear and masculinity in the backdrop of the postcolonial African village. Colonial Fear, traditional beliefs, and the male voice shape their actions and decision –making in the story. The villagers chase to nab the cattle thieves, Nyagar is woken up by the noise outside of his hut, and he throws himself out of the blanket and leaves to join the unknown mob with a spear and a club. These three intruders in the form of thieves are symbolic of those powerful forces that can dart through anytime to dismantle and destabilize the peaceful sleep of this African community. Nyagar's existence with fear is an issue of the village, the villagers are always fear-driven and the apprehension of confronting an unknown demands some power structure. The Philosophy of Fearism argues that *"life is conducted, directed and controlled by the fear"* (subba, 2014), they carry their 'club and spear' as a protection." *Nyagar put a sheet round his well-developed body, fumbled for his spear and club, and then left the hut.*(Ogot,69)

Interestingly, during the chase, the elders' advice," *Don't throw a spear...if it misses, they can use it against us.*"(Ogot, 70). The fear of being counter attacked by the thieves shows their weaknesses and inability to eliminate the unwanted forces. The Villagers take pride in hunting down the thieves to show that they got the strength to protect their community especially women who never take part in such chase. Throughout the story, we never get to hear the voices of any of the thieves which can be symbolic in the sense an intruder loves to be passive to carve a way in a new virgin land. Out of the three thieves, two penetrates with a safe passage to enjoy the liberty while the third fall into the snare to face dire

consequences of the wild mob. The ensuing violence against the thief is justified by the leader of the clan, Olieo-

*"Although our laws prohibit any wanton killing, thieves and adulterers we regard as animals. If anyone kills one of them he is not guilty of murder. He is looked upon as a person who has rid society of an evil spirit, and in return society has a duty to protect him and his children." (Ogot 69)*

Their fear of lawlessness can be seen as a remnant of colonial rule, and it makes them act ruthlessly defying all the legal social structure of the colonial administration. At this level, they fear for prosecution, and stand united to counter the white with a single reply altogether "we killed a thief". The masculinity and the decision to take control over the situation are well maintained by the leader Olieo and others are so convinced. But this power of masculinity found to be crumbling down when they discover the dead body of Nyagara underneath the green leaves. Their perception of reality does not seem to be stable as they thought it to be, and the truth just unravelled by the white becomes the ultimate truth for these people.

While the thief is taught some lesson and left for "to give up the ghost" alone under the green leaves, but the women in the houses were left with usual silence to converse with. Nyamundhe is an example of this submission and quells her curiosity without asking anything like what noises are about, who were the people chasing, to Nyagara since it was outside the purview of her assigned role. Interestingly, the men of the village are directed to reach the spot of the killing early in the morning, "to stop the women before they start going to the river" (Ogot 71)

Another woman character Nyagara's co-wife can be seen as an example of submission to the patriarchal norms. She is equally silent throughout the story implying that their voices and concerns are secondary and husbands like Nyagara never allow autonomy. Their role in the society seems to be the mourning and accepting the fate in any case. When the whole folk assemble in the morning to carry out the funeral of the dead thief, sudden twists confronted by them leave all frightened. The clan leader summoned the European officer to justify the killing of a thief but not of a man as he questions the leader directly about the "truth". At this point of time the native tongue Dholou takes the lead to unravel the mystery to be translated by an African Officer into English.

The European officer as an authority displays his power and expresses his bitterness, and he hated the traditional custom of justice giving of the villagers.

*"How many times have I told you that you must abandon this savage custom of butchering one another? No-one is a thief until he has been tried in a court of law and found guilty. You people are deaf, "The white man pointed at Olieo with his stick in an ominous manner.*

*"This time I shall show you how to defy the law. Who killed him? The white officer asked angrily. (Ogot. 76)*

It is evident that like the colonized people of the village the European officer too employs similar tactics to silence the evolving situation. The fear structure plays role in controlling and exercising the power hierarchic in both section.

The character of Nyagara is also the embodiment of masculine greed; ego and overconfidence which represents the African man's colonial trait of desire for materialistic gain align with power and superiority. He is a male so decisive by nature ventures out in search of a secret treasure lay buried underneath the green leaves in the pocket of that thief.



*"He must have a lot of money in his pocket, " Nyagar thought...the others were foolish not to have searched him." (Ogot)*

He was least bothered about the fatal wound waiting for him in disguise. Nyagar's tragedy shows that the pursuit of masculinity and excessive confidence sometimes may not bring a peaceful conclusion.

The unexpected discovery of the murder of Nyagara creates an anticlimax in the story *The Green Leaves*. His death can be seen as a poetic justice for he dares not to comply with the call and wisdom of his own community. His individual greed and lust for superiority work together to frame a collective justice and it proves that personal ambition is not encouraged in a community where justice remain unpredictable and full of flaws.

Nyamundhe rushes towards the dead body of her husband and breaking the long silence cries at the authoritative superior.

*Nyamundhe broke loose from the crowd and rushed towards the dead body. She fell on her husband's body and wept bitterly. Then turning to the crowd, she shouted, "Where is the thief you killed? Where is he?"(Ogot 77)*

The suppressed women of the village demonstrate their outburst and interrogate the social structure governed by male while the masculinity is seen at a stake. The real actors of the scene are mere spectators and the silent observers are in action. Nyamundhe is now extremely powerful in her questioning; the officer and the clan leader are not capable of restoring the binary structure which just has shattered. She wails, mourns and shouts tearing her clothes.

*Nyamundhe tore her clothes and stripped to the waist. She walked behind the mourners, weeping and chanting, her hands raised above her head.*

*My lover the son of Ochieng'  
The son of Omolo  
The rains are coming down  
Yes, the rains are coming down  
The nights will be dark  
...I have no heart to forgive  
I have no heart to pardon  
All these mourners cheat me now  
Yes, they cheat me now  
...there is none  
There is no woman who will lend me a  
Husband for the night  
Ah, my lover, the son of Chieng'  
The son-in-law of my mother. (Ogot 77-78)*

**Conclusion:** Grace Ogot in the *The Green Leaves* is able to highlight the fragile boundaries between justice and injustice in a society trapped between tradition and modernity where the age old community ethics and the external modern impact play significant role. Ogot successfully weaves gender binaries to influence the communal identity to explore compelling narratives of the post colonial world. The fear of breaking the inherited justice system is the central theme of the story and the central character Nyagar has been the victim of greed, indecisiveness and male overconfidence. His inability to confront the reality of the thief's survival, his greed to gain economic stability by grabbing the unconfirmed treasure lay in the thief's pocket reflect a psychological imbalances of men during colonial regime. The concept of justice is not straightforward; the thief is punished not through law but through mob violence silently. Thus, the story serves as a reflection on how justice is not just a legal construct but a deeply human struggle, the fear as well is born of a long history of colonial violence and gendered silence.

### Works Cited:

- Achebe, C. (1990). *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* . Anchor Books.
- Lindfors, B. (23 june 2015). "Interview with Grace Ogot" *World Literatures Written English*(18.1)2008. In *World Literatures Written English*(18.1)2008 (pp. 57-68).
- Mbembe, A. (2001). *On the Post Colony*. University of California Press.
- Michael R Fisher, a. B. (2020). *Fear, Law and Criminology: Critical Issues in Applying a Fearist Perspective* . iUniverse.
- Mital, N. (2015). Grace Ogot's "The Green Leaves" : Framing Reality. In e. b. swati, *A Warble of Postcolonial Voices* (pp. 315-332). Worldview Publication.
- Ogot, G. (1968, 35 Print). *The African Writer*. *East African Journal* 5 .
- Ogot, G. (1968). *The Green Leaves, Land Without Thunder*. Nairobi, Kenya: East African Publishing House.
- Singh, N. (2015). From Silence to Song: Woman's Voice in Grace Ogot's "The Green Leaves". *A Warble of Postcolonial Voices, An Anthology of Short Stories and Poems. vol.I* , pp. 298-314.
- Subba, D. (2014). *Philosophy of Fearism: Life is Conducted, Directed and Controlled by the Fear*. Xlibris Corporation.