



Colonialism, Clash Of Ideologies, Exploitation And Resistance: Postcolonial Issues In Short Stories Of Grace Ogot's The Green Leaves And Bessie Head's The Collector Of Treasures

Dr. M. Rameshwor Singh, D.M. College of Arts, Dhanamanjuri University, Manipur.

Dr. Ph. Sanamacha Sharma, D.M. College of Commerce, Dhanamanjuri University, Manipur.

Abstract: The postcolonial short story is a developed version of the oral folk tale tradition and the writer may be termed as the modern-day minstrel. Colonial experience and concerns were not similar in all the subjugated territories across the globe; hence, the stories also differed in their subject matter and treatment. Having attained their liberation from the European or the English rule in the twentieth century postcolonial countries worked towards regaining their lost glories by going back to revive and reclaim their heritage. History, culture, language, and literature became matters of national pride. Some of the key concerns and issues addressed in the postcolonial short story are challenging colonial authority, challenging patriarchal authority, resolving complications and tensions caused by the colonial rule, greed of the western world in grabbing land, extensive mining, exploiting forest produce, grabbing raw farm produce, exploiting land resources and worst of all indulging in human trafficking. Postcolonial story is the story of the decolonised man making his own destiny by knowing himself and reconstructing himself. Decolonisation triggered the urge to search one's roots via the memory lanes of ancestry, history and oral legacies in order to locate the individual and the community in the pre-colonial past and this search gave birth to a large body of literary treasure. The journey of the postcolonial story originates in the pre-colonial past, moves through the colonial period, coincides with the postcolonial present and aims to culminate in a globalised future. The present paper attempts to highlight some basic postcolonial issues narrated by African women story writers.

Key words: Postcolonial, heritage, national pride, decolonisation, literary treasure.

Introduction:

Literatures from nations and regions which have been erstwhile colonies of the European countries formed the entity called as 'the postcolonial literatures'. Besides Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, which belong to the inner circle of the English-speaking countries, this entity includes African countries like Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Sudan, South Africa and others, the Caribbean and Latin American countries like Jamaica, Cuba, Trinidad and Tobago, West Indies, Barbados, British Columbia, Chile, Saint Martin, etc., Asian countries

4896 | **Dr. M. Rameshwor Singh** Colonialism, Clash Of Ideologies, Exploitation And Resistance: Postcolonial Issues In Short Stories Of Grace Ogot's The Green Leaves And Bessie Head's The Collector Of Treasures

like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Singapore etc. Postcolonial literature has grown on the fertile soil of the pristine land, breathed in free air and it does not need to conform to the European literary traditions. It is no longer a miniscule body representing a minority, rather more and more languages, cultures, countries and ethnicities are getting entrenched continually to this genre. It is no longer limited to the narrativization of accidents between the native culture and the so-called advanced European cultures, not just the literature written in English after the subjugated regions attained freedom from the colonial rule. It is rather a fusion of the ancient and the modern, a retelling of a grandma's folk tale by a grand-daughter, an attempt to explore the treasure buried within, an attempt to find one's moorings so as to take off from a firmer base and to affirm that a tree which has deep roots stands tall and firm. It cannot be defined in simplistic terms either by the erstwhile rulers or by the ex-ruled. It is not just a body of literature but literatures.

The founding exponents of the postcolonial theory, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in their seminal text *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature* systematically examine the field of postcolonial studies, the dynamics of language and the inner relationships among the different postcolonial literatures. Reading postcolonial literature is a kind of experience which offers reading about original and raw sensibilities rich in history and culture and exuding fragrance of the native soil free from the sense of subjugation or alienation or oppression.

Evolution of postcolonial short story:

A short story is classified as a self-contained prose fiction or narrative about an incident or linked incidents evoking a particular effect and which can be read in a single sitting. It is shorter than a novel and revolves around a few characters. The most important thing about short story according to Edgar Allan Poe is that it must have a compact unified effect. It is a genre received very little critical attention and this fact is true in the context of postcolonial short story as well and in the postcolonial critical canon this genre has been systematically sidelined. The postcolonial short story is a developed version of the oral folk tale tradition and the writer may be termed as the modern-day minstrel. Colonial experience and concerns were not similar in all the subjugated territories across the globe which differed in their respective history and culture; hence, the stories also differed in their subject matter and its treatment. Having attained their liberation from the European or the English rule in the twentieth century postcolonial countries worked towards regaining their lost moorings by going back to revive and reclaim their heritage. History, culture, language, and literature became matters of national pride. This kind of exploration of the native and the aboriginal cultural pride can be witnessed not only among the countries of the African continent but also among the newly liberated countries to the east as well as to the west viz. the South American countries and the Asian countries including India. Literatures in these countries flourished in all its forms and spread over to various genres like novel, drama, poetry, story, folklore and retellings of

history and classics. Among all these, short story occupies a very little space. Innumerable forms of short stories are available which include real stories, surreal stories, fantasy, horror stories, gothic, comic, tragic, and ghost stories, fairy tales, animal fables, religious stories, didactic stories, mythological stories, heroic tales, bed time stories, stories within stories and stories involving the colonial experience. Some of these forms developed through the oral tradition of story-telling. These stories may quite often be identified as related to a particular period, geographical location, community, and tribe etc. and they invariably remind the reader of the interesting and captivating features of oral literature.

Some of the key concerns and issues addressed in the postcolonial short story are challenging colonial authority, challenging patriarchal authority, resolving complications and tensions caused by the colonial rule, greed of the western world in grabbing land, extensive mining, exploiting forest produce, grabbing raw farm produce, exploiting land resources and worst of all indulging in human trafficking. The large-scale enslavement of the men of the native tribes by the whites in the Caribbean, yoking these black slaves like animals, keeping them in chains, their transatlantic supply to America, subjecting them to extreme physical torture and the sub-human treatment meted out to them became the subject matter of a large number of stories woven around the appalling crime in human trade. The agony, both physical and psychological, their longing to return to the native land, the hatred and enmity towards their white masters including their attempts both successful and unsuccessful to break free served as the background of the stories written from the point of view of the oppressed. Before the advent of the whites to these regions, the natives were living in a perfectly harmonised society with their own set of laws, rituals, customs, family systems, power equations, and occasions of celebration and festivities which were different from those of the invaders. The whites considered their way of living as uncivilised and tried to replace it all with their own life style and way of looking at things and this bigotry and sense of false supremacy was met with tough resistance. Franz Fanon, French psychiatrist, in his 1961 book *The Wretched of the Earth* analysed the dehumanising effects of colonialism upon the individual and the region and has also discussed the implications of building up a movement for the process of decolonising the individual mind and the nation.

Postcolonial story is the story of the decolonised man making his own destiny by knowing himself and reconstructing himself. It is the story of realisation by the colonised that the colonised, dehumanised thing is as much human and as much evolved as the colonised him. Decolonisation spurred the urge to search one's roots via the memory lanes of ancestry, history and oral legacies in order to locate the individual and the community in the pre-colonial past and this search gave birth to a large body of literary treasure. Whether the postcolonial writers revelled in the nostalgia of the past or made the present as the only relevant point of reference, they all spun stories around the struggle for freedom, their diverge glorious indigenous cultures, utopia of equality, their faith in human dignity and ambivalent moods of hope and despair. The journey of the

**4898 | Dr. M. Rameshwor Singh Colonialism, Clash Of Ideologies, Exploitation
And Resistance: Postcolonial Issues In Short Stories Of Grace Ogot's The Green
Leaves And Bessie Head's The Collector Of Treasures**

postcolonial story originates in the pre-colonial past, moves through the colonial period, coincides with the postcolonial present and aims to culminate in a globalised future. There is a long list of postcolonial fiction and short story writers, both men and women, which include writers like Ngugi wa Thiongo, Chinua Achebe, Nadine Gordimer, Salman Rushdie, Jean Rhys, Pablo Neruda, David Malouf, Doris Lessing, Buchi Emecheta, Bessie Head, Grace Ogot and so on.

Clash of ideologies and degeneration of values in Grace Ogot's *The Green Leaves*:

Grace Ogot (1930-2015), one of the pioneers of postcolonial literature of East Africa, was born in a Christian Luo family in Asembo, a village in district Nyanza, Kenya. She grew up listening to folk tales of the area in her mother tongue from her grandmother and stories of the Old Testament from her father, a teacher in a Christian school. As a multi-faceted personality, Ogot worked as a nurse, a journalist, a teacher, a script writer, a radio announcer, a columnist, a public relations officer, a block development officer, a cabinet minister and as a diplomat besides being a novelist and a short story writer. Ogot was the first published woman writer of East Africa. Initially she wrote in English but soon started writing and publishing her stories both in English and in Luo. Collection of her short stories appeared under the titles *Land without Thunder* (1968), *The Other Woman* (1976), and *The Island of Tears* (1980). Her stories present an insider's account of the life of the Luo people and their folklore and mythology with the recurring themes revolving round their tribal culture, ancient laws, community customs and practices, superstitions, marriage and family life, conflict between the native and the colonial rule, conflict between the traditional healing system and the modern medicine etc.

Ogot's short story *The Green Leaves* is included in the collection *Land Without Thunder* which presents an insight into the ancient Luo culture of the pre-colonial East Africa with its primitive laws and their conflict with the laws of the white rulers. She explores in this story the themes of native laws, cultural practices, superstitions, gender roles, greed, and concept of crime, family and relationships. Ogot exhibited that Luo tribes have their own unwritten but well defined and widely understood system of laws and punishment for different crimes. What is justice in the eyes of the tribes may be a crime in the eyes of their white lords. In the Luo legal system, it is a crime to rob someone and the punishment for such a crime is death by lynching but to rob a robber is not a crime. There has been a clash between the ideologies of the colonisers and the colonised. The corruption of the innocent thoughts of the natives by the imperial oppressor is hinted at through the gradual and systematic surrender to such cardinal flaws as greed and distrust.

The white man's way of investigation of a crime is beyond the comprehension of the tribes. They wonder at the mysterious power which the white possesses by use of which they are able to find out criminals. The tribes find the idea of post-mortem of a death body too uncanny as for them it is either ghostly or sacred and in both the cases of dead body

4899 | Dr. M. Rameshwor Singh Colonialism, Clash Of Ideologies, Exploitation And Resistance: Postcolonial Issues In Short Stories Of Grace Ogot's *The Green Leaves* And Bessie Head's *The Collector Of Treasures*

must not be tempered with. In Luo society the head of tribe is considered to be a representative of God himself and as such his word is meant to be obeyed like an oracle. But after the arrival of the whites the authority of the headman of the village is much diminished. The villagers no longer repose complete faith in him and he has also accepted his position as one without power. Nyagar's wife Nyamundhe does not even consider the headman blameless in her husband's murder.

The Luo society is essentially patriarchal. The head of the family feels proud to possess several wives, many children, numerous cattle and rich produce from his land. Polygamy is not just a prevalent custom; it is also a symbol of a man's social status within the tribe. The concept of a self-contained nuclear family is alien to the tribal community. It is community in which a wife even in the death of her husband acknowledges his relationships with his parents and other members of the extended family like his mother-in-law and empathises with them for their loss as well. Nyamundhe on the death of her husband visualises her lonesome future and laments that having lost a husband she has in her store dark, cold, long, and lonely nights without conjugal bliss. The lament which she vents out is both frenzied and somewhat customary. She laments not only the loss of her lover but also realises the loss that Nyagar's parents shall suffer. The way Nyamundhe addresses her dead husband shows that in the Luo society relationship is of utmost importance. She is sorry for her cursed fate and realises that all the sympathy which the men and women are showing towards her is a mere sham and nobody is going to exchange their fate with hers.

It is the duty of the men to provide protection to the families in the village and also to protect the boundaries of the village. Thieving is a common activity and since the cattle are a valuable resource, they are at high risk of being stolen. Hunting in the primitive tribe is a community activity. Hunting is just hunting and it does not matter whether an animal is being hunted down or it is a man. In their primitive laws thieves and adulterers are regarded as animals and if one kills any of them, he is not considered guilty of murder. They are considered the kind of crimes which rob a man of his humanity and such a man is considered no better than an animal and earns for himself the vulnerability to be treated like an animal as such is rightly hunted down according to their primitive law. In the story the white masters attempt to create a bridge between the laws of the primitive society and the laws of the civilised society.

There are many superstitions which Luo tribal community nurse and observe. Death to them is not the end of existence rather it is a transformation from bodily existence to ghostly existence. They believe that when someone dies his ghost is liberated from the body and it clings to or sits over the person who is available at hand, so they do not kill their enemy rather leave him fatally wounded to die alone with nobody around so that when the person gives up his ghost, it does not settle on anyone or over the village. One of the ways to save themselves from the ghost is by using ash and people keep ash with

4900 | Dr. M. Rameshwar Singh Colonialism, Clash Of Ideologies, Exploitation And Resistance: Postcolonial Issues In Short Stories Of Grace Ogot's The Green Leaves And Bessie Head's The Collector Of Treasures

them to protect themselves in the same way as one would keep weapons. The sound of the dog barking in the night is considered a bad omen. It is also a bad sign for a black cat cross one's way first thing in the morning. Nyamundhe gets worried and mentions about the black cat to her co-wife as she enquires after the whereabouts of Nyagar when she could not find him anywhere.

Greed, one of the basic flaws of human nature, becomes the prime cause of the central character's undoing. Nyagar himself mentions that he is sufficiently rich and has no need for stealing money from anyone, yet he feels tempted to go secretly in the middle of the night to search the pockets of the dead thief and rob him of whatever money he carried on his person. He is so much blinded by greed that he does not reflect upon why the man's body was still warm. Instead of applying common sense that the man could be alive and could attack him, he attributes the phenomenon to some unknown being. Contrary to it, based on his common sense and experience, an elderly man had warned the villagers against throwing a spear towards the thieves because if it missed the target, it could in turn be used by the thieves to hurt them. It reflects that providence plays an important role in the story. Earlier Nyagar was ensuring that nobody saw him search the dead man's pocket but when realised that he was alone with the dead man he felt nervous. He experienced an uncanny fear and did not realise that true fear resided not in the man being dead but in the man being alive.

Ironical significance of the green leaves in the story:

The green leaves have special significance in the story because it is the shifting of the green leaves from the body of the thief to the body of Nyagar which has given its shocking and surprising turn. The appearance of Nyagar's face from the underneath of the green leaves instead of the thief's remains an unresolved enigma for the people of the entire clan and the police officer. The title is ironic in suggestion as the green leaves which are generally associated with the beauty and bounty of nature get associated with a hideous killing and sow the seeds of suspicion on one another among the members of the clan. The integrated Luo society of the village starts falling apart. The green leaves are generally symbol of life and resurrection and a source of happiness and optimism. However, in the story the green leaves become symbol of death, disintegration, discord and distrust among the people of the community and the readers can easily visualise that soon there would be a spree of accusations, counter-accusations and witch hunting thereby corrupting the psyche and disintegrating the very fabric of the community.

Male chauvinism and redemptive powers of female solidarity in Bessie Head's The Collector of Treasures:

Bessie Amelia Emery Head (1937-1986), born of mixed parentage, was a significant voice among the notable writers of sub-Saharan Africa. Under 'Apartheid' a mixed marriage was considered illegal in South Africa. Head's mother was a white woman and her father, a black groom employed by her family and hence their alliance was not welcomed by the

society. Her mother was admitted to a mental asylum because of her linkage with a black man and she subsequently gave birth to Bessie Head there. Children of mixed parentage were considered coloured children and they found no concurrence from either the white supremacists or the subjugated black population. Being a coloured person, Bessie Head struggled with acceptance and it shaped her writings as well. When she felt alienated by South African society, she sought refuge in Botswana and that's where she found her literary voice. She lived in the rural Botswana and observed the lives of poor and disenfranchised women. She learned that the black women are doubly marginalised: as black subjects suffering under colonial rule as well as women suffering from deep rooted patriarchy, and this theme found prominence in Head's literary output. Some of Head's remarkable works are *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), *Maru* (1971), *A Question of Power* (1973), and an anthology of short stories: *Collector of Treasures* (1977).

The story of *The Collector of Treasures* begins in media res (in the middle of events) where we see a woman being driven to a prison far away from her home. As she looks wistfully at the passing landscape, she realises that she will not be able to see the mundane things like cattle grazing in the fields, bushes, and forest from her prison cell. Late in the evening her crime is revealed when the guards talk to each other and introduce her as the husband killer of Puleng village. The story is a fictionalisation of a gruesome incident that actually took place in rural Serowe. Head uses real incidents and fictionalises them for her anthology. Botswana, like many other African countries, had a rich tradition of oral literature that included folktales, songs, proverbs etc. Head understands the need to dilate the story around the incidents in order to provide context to the women who are compelled to commit crimes. According to Craig McKenzie, "Dikeledi's act should not be perceived as an arbitrary act of retribution but as a socially determined act". Her story is the stories of several other women who suffer years of patriarchal abuse and are finally pushed to commit acts of violence.

Dikeledi's crime may be comprehended within the framework of a lop-sided system where women have no social or political currency. Like her, Kebonye, a cellmate also killed her husband in similar vein and for similar reasons. Kebonye's husband was a serial rapist. After raping and impregnating several young female students at the rural school, he was finally killed by Kebonye. Like, Garesego, he was guilty of committing sexual crimes against defenceless women and getting complete exemption from any kind of punishment. Men slip through the biased legal system which does not hold them responsible for the crime against women. Women like Dikeledi and Kebonye are replica of many disempowered women who suffer for years before acting against their oppressors. To the community, sexual crime against female students by an education officer is not a matter of legal significance. Sexual crime committed by men is conveniently out of the sphere of legal justice system and hence, women like Dikeledi and Kebonye are expected to suffer in silence. Bessie Head's story in a way encourages the reader to see Dikeledi's crime as a reflection of marginalised women's resistance. In a complex world

4902 | Dr. M. Rameshwor Singh Colonialism, Clash Of Ideologies, Exploitation And Resistance: Postcolonial Issues In Short Stories Of Grace Ogot's *The Green Leaves* And Bessie Head's *The Collector Of Treasures*

marred by patriarchy, breakdown of traditional tribal value system corroded by colonialism, and postcolonial double exploitation, her ultimate act of violence is her refusal to conform to the status quo. Her crime cannot be treated as an ordinary crime committed by an individual; it is rather a statement against misogyny and society's failure to rectify it.

Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasures* is peopled with chauvinistic men who have sexual exploits with complete impunity and Garesego is the stereotype of such individuals. The writer undertakes a socio-historical classification of men in the African society. She says that there are two types of men. The first kind is selfish, cruel, irresponsible male who acts without any consideration for others. They are reduced to the level of base animals who copulate with the females of their species without any regard to her consent and who do not nurture their offspring. Garesego is presented as an example of such type. Contrary to them, the second kind of man, according to Head, can be exemplified by Paul Thebolo who was enlightened enough to create and nurture his family as well as community, who is kind and generous towards his family and neighbours. Head uses imagery from the world of animals to comment upon social behaviour of male characters. Dikeledi, Kebonye, and the other similar women of Botswana are constantly inflicted by the barbaric behaviour of patriarchal chauvinistic men. Emboldened by newly found economic abundance, misogynistic men like Garesego believe that they can prey upon any defenceless women. The declining power of the tribal customs and traditions enables predatory men such as Garesego to reject any sense of responsibility, leading a selfish hedonistic life. The narrator's use of animal imagery like bulls, donkeys, and dogs further suggests that sexual intimacy has no relevance for such men. Like animals, they fornicate to satisfy their own sexual urges and then leave the female to fend for self. On the other hand, refined men like Paul Thebolo symbolise empathy and compassion and therefore, have become a 'poem of tenderness'. Nevertheless, Head's use of animal imagery is to establish the lack of societal principles of dignity in marriage and family which form the base of the community in Serowe.

In rural Africa conventional patriarchy and postcolonialism had collectively compelled women virtually powerless. The lives of women are restricted to domestic quarters. The world of employment, politics, and current affairs etc. are beyond their reach. This exclusion from decision making and financial empowerment worsens the conditions of women. Women like Dikeledi cannot have a dialogue with the systematic patriarchy because they are not equipped with any tools of negotiation. They lack higher education, important jobs, and are deliberately kept out of local politics. They are heavily dependent on the goodwill of their husbands to sustain their lives. Within this unequal world, they can only turn inwards and to other women to draw comfort and sustenance in an otherwise bleak existence. Dikeledi turns to women like Kenalepe and Kebonye, who understand her suffering and provide solace to her and this comradeship is a valuable treasure in her long, traumatised existence.

4903 | Dr. M. Rameshwor Singh Colonialism, Clash Of Ideologies, Exploitation And Resistance: Postcolonial Issues In Short Stories Of Grace Ogot's *The Green Leaves* And Bessie Head's *The Collector Of Treasures*

Bessie Head creates a model of female solidarity in the story. When Dikeledi's husband deserts her and three children, she takes recourse to the cottage industry of sewing, knitting, thatching roofs to sustain her family. She has no access to formal education or formal employment and when she hears Paul Thebolo discuss world politics with other male members of the community, she realises that there is a larger world around her and education provides access to it. Uneducated women like her are excluded from the system. She shares these details with friends. Women only get conversational scraps about politics and philosophy while men are given the liberty to participate in policy making. Although Kenelope was born to loving parents and married to a progressive man, her role in life is restricted to the domestic sphere like birthing children, cooking, washing, and caring for her family. As far as Dikeledi and her type of women are concerned, male oppression and domination are part and parcel of being women. Women desiring a more detailed political awareness are kept out of the modern knowledge systems and employment. Dikeledi's circumstances have always been cruel but she finds lightness in the form of female comradeship she strikes with Kenelope and others, including Kebonye. The pathos in the story stems from Dikeledi's unfaltering optimism despite of unmitigated cruelties she is subjected to. Her determination and courage are a testimony to her unflinching trust in basic human kindness. Her willingness to share, and to help others creates a bedrock of her relationship with the people around her. The deep friendship amongst women is a vigorous and constant solace against the perpetual estrangement that women like Dikeledi feel.

African women writers in general depict the condition of women in African society which is characterised by inconsistencies and resistances emerging out of the colonial influence in Africa. Through their writings they share their concern for women in the society and at the same time try to cope with existing challenges in the society like male chauvinism and oppressive patriarchal system. They keep reminding that women empowerment is essential for a nation to progress, education is important for emancipation, and economic independence and self-assertiveness are integral part of women liberation. African women writers like Bessie Head, Grace Ogot, Ama Ata Aidoo, Nadine Gordimer, Buchi Emecheta, Yvonne Vera and Tsitsi Dangaremba wrote stories and novels centering around the themes including women's plight under patriarchy, clash of ideologies, clash between past and present, tradition and modernity, self and society, economic disparities, politics and development, rights and roles of women, and so on.

REFERENCES

Head, Bessie. (2008). *The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana village stories*. London: Longman.

.....(1990). *A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings*. London: Heinemann.

..... (2009). *A Question of Power*. London: Longman.

4904 | Dr. M. Rameshwar Singh Colonialism, Clash Of Ideologies, Exploitation And Resistance: Postcolonial Issues In Short Stories Of Grace Ogot's The Green Leaves And Bessie Head's The Collector Of Treasures

Brown, Barbara B. (1983). "The Impact of male labour migration on women in Botswana". *African Affairs*, P. 367-88.

Kuria, John Mike Muthari. (2001). *The Challenge of feminism in Kenya: Towards an Afrocentric worldview*. Leeds: University of Leeds.

Mackenzie, Craig. (1989). "Short fiction in the making: The case of Bessie Head". *English in Africa*. Vol. 16. No. 1. P. 17-28. Rhodes University.

Piano, Doreen. (2002). *Critical essay on "The Green Leaves" in Short Stories for Students*. Michigan: Gale Group.

Taiwo, O. (1984). *Female Novelists of Africa*. London: MacMillan.