



## A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF GRACE OGOT'S *LAND WITHOUT THUNDER*

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### **Abstract:**

Colonialism has been a destructive force that has affected colonized peoples at different levels. The inevitable interaction between the colonizer and the colonized produced a conflict of ideologies and a clash of cultures. Literature has been a reflection of this dark part of human history, among which short stories reveal almost exactly what larger literary genres maintain in terms of ideology and culture. This paper aimed to analyze Grace Ogot's collection of short stories, entitled *Land Without Thunder*, from postcolonial perspectives. The approach used was descriptive qualitative, according to which most stories were thoroughly analyzed. This analysis showed that *Land Without Thunder* had presented ideologically conflicted discourse. Moreover, Ogot intended to use much of her native language and dialect to identify her people's indigenous culture. This paper may be limited in theory as the collection of these stories also tackles gender-oriented issues and psychological conflicts, which require different theories other than the postcolonial. In future papers, it is suggested that *Land Without Thunder* be read from both feminist and psychoanalytic perspectives.

**Keywords:** postcolonial theory, short story, Grace Ogot, *Land Without Thunder*, Orientalism, culture, ideology, universalism, Eurocentrism, discrimination

### **1. Introduction**

Grace Ogot (better known as Grace Juju) was born in a small village called Tsavo West, in Central Kenya. She is often referred to as the "*mother of Kenyan literature*" and a "*feminist pioneer*." She studied at Makerere University in Uganda and New York University. Ogot published her first novel, *The Promised Land*, in 1964. It is a fictional account of the colonization era from the point of view of Africans with strong female characters. Her second novel, *The Land Divided*, was finished in 1966 but was not published until 1986. This political narrative analyzes African politics and the fight for independence using a multigenerational plot structure common to

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Ogot's works. In 1968, she wrote her collection of stories *Land Without Thunder*, the topic of our present study.

In 1969, Ogot published "The Fishermen of Lake Tanganyika", her third novel, which follows the exploits of a young African woman as she struggles to survive in colonial East Africa. Her most recent novel is *The Date Palm*. In 1962, Ogot's first play, "The Bride Price" (Ng'enda Kweh), was produced at the Theatre Royal, Nairobi, by the African Theatre Workshop. It was translated from her first novel, "The Promised Land." She served as the publisher of "East African Literature" in 1972. Three years later, she co-founded the East African Literary Society, a publishing house for African writing in Kenya. Ogot died on January 6, 2007, in a hospital in Nyeri, Kenya, after cardiac arrest.

Grace Ogot's remarkable career as author and editor bridged the twentieth century into the twenty-first and earned her an intimate knowledge of Kikuyu culture, language, and society. It was born out of Kenya's oral culture and shaped by decades of storytelling tradition. Resisting Western techniques of collecting and classifying African tales, it remains a living repository of the beliefs and customs of Kenya's people.

It is interesting to work on something you feel emotionally involved in. Postcolonial studies give us, as ex-colonized nations, a space to re-read our history from different angles. History is not necessarily what others thought about us, but rather what we think we really were. Independence and decolonization are not always interchangeable, and many countries, are merely politically independent but neither economically nor culturally decolonized. It is the prototype of most ex-colonized countries.

Grace Ogot's *Land Without Thunder* has received less attention than other postcolonial literary works. It is a collection of twelve short stories that depicts many aspects of African culture and reflects the colonial spirit. The title of the collection may imply a wish for Africa (*Land*), to be freed from the white man's domination and oppression (*Thunder*). Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak are pioneers of postcolonial theory, which I used in this article. Their thoughts and orientations may overlap in some sense but diverge in another. However, they are all regarded as the most influential figures of postcolonial studies, regardless of their own ideologies and tendencies.

This article consists of three main sections. The Methodology Section presents the theory of this study, and reviews a book chapter I selected to introduce postcolonial theory. The Discussion Section provides a detailed analysis of the collection of stories through the lens of our theory. Then, the Conclusion Section sums up the analysis and gives suggestions and recommendations for future studies, in addition to the limitations.

## 2. Methodology

In this article, the analysis of Grace Ogot's *Land Without Thunder* is conducted according to postcolonial perspectives. In this section, I would like to review an interesting chapter in Lois Tyson's book entitled *Critical Theory Today* (2014). The chapter comes under the heading of postcolonial criticism, in which Tyson stated that postcolonial theory makes people aware of what links their lived experiences to the world around them at different levels: social,

psychological, political, ideological, and the like. It is a theory primarily concerned with decoding colonialist and anticolonialist ideologies (p. 417–418).

Tyson referred to cultural colonization in the British context and defined it as "*the inculcation of a British system of government and education, British culture, and British values that denigrate the culture, morals, and even physical appearance of formerly subjugated peoples.*" He also talked about cultural identity and explained how it is shaped and influenced by the practice of othering and colonialist ideology, according to which colonizers considered their culture as metropolitan and sophisticated in contrast to the natives' primitive and inferior one (p. 419). One modern version of othering is Eurocentrism, which establishes Europe and its culture as the centre of all other world cultural backgrounds using specific terminology, i.e., Eurocentric language, such as world divisions into four: 1st World, 2nd World, 3rd World, and 4th World. Such language reinforces the claim that history's beginnings are marked by European existence and arranged in terms of its colonial agenda at the expense of great ancient civilizations, such as the African, Egyptian, and Greek.

Tyson highlighted universalism as a frequent instance in the field of literary studies that comes under the umbrella of Eurocentrism, according to which all literature is evaluated in relevance to European cultural standards. Being great or not depends on whether a literary work has "*universal*" features or not. "*Orientalism*" is another version of Eurocentrism that has been practised by the imperialist powers. This concept has been discussed and developed by Edward Said, who revealed that it depicted the West positively in contrast to the East (p. 420), and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) provided a good representation of colonialist ideology. The West succeeded over successive generations in producing colonial subjects who tolerated colonialism and never believed in resistance and rebellion. Not only did they accept the fact they were colonized, but they also took for granted that they were inferior to their colonizers as well. It was, as Tyson argued, a programmed process. As a matter of fact, colonial subjects started imitating their colonizers- mimicry- and wished to be perfect copies of them in order to be accepted by the overwhelmingly invading culture. This created in them a sense of double consciousness, the state of being torn between two cultures, theirs and the colonizer's.

Double consciousness led to forced migration, which itself resulted in the formation of diasporic populations that experienced, to a great extent, unhomeliness, the "*feeling of being not at home even in your own home because you are not at home in yourself and as a psychological refugee*" (p. 421). Tyson argued that hybridity is a striking feature of postcolonial identity, which is "*a productive, exciting, positive force in a shrinking world that is itself becoming more and more culturally hybrid*" (p. 422).

He also discussed the notion of nationalism and nativism, which draw clear lines between indigenous culture being dynamic and developing on the one hand, and indigenous culture being corrupted and alienated by colonialism on the other (p. 423). Thus, nationalists warn against the threatening cultural imperialism that colonizes the minds and spirits of peoples rather than their lands, and steals their identities and cultures rather than their properties and wealth. To support his analysis, Tyson gave the example of American cultural imperialism that has recently invaded the world and imposed American lifestyles and ways of thinking on natives. Surprisingly, he thought that even postcolonial criticism itself is some sort of cultural imperialism (p. 425).

Tyson listed a set of common topics and themes usually tackled in postcolonial literature, among which the following are most distinguished: the encounter of indigenous culture and that of the colonizer; exploration of the wilderness; resistance strategies; immigration; othering; postcolonial life; and collective cultural identity (p. 426). Moreover, he listed three parameters that postcolonial critics often use in their studies: the literary text being either colonialist supporting colonialism, anticolonialist resisting colonialist ideology (p. 428), or ideologically conflicted. Furthermore, Tyson referred to Tiffin's strategy of canonical counter-discourse employed by anticolonialist writers (p. 97), and explained Said's idea of foregrounding the margins of a canonized literary work (p. 432). I recommend Tyson's *Critical Theory Today* (2014) for students of literature, interested in critical theories.

### 3. Discussion

The first short story, entitled "The Old White Witch", is symbolically about the reactions of the white man to the black African natives' peaceful rebellion. The former is represented by Matron Jack and her group, and the latter by Nurse Adhiambo and her female colleagues who committed, according to Matron, a "*barbaric practice*" and went on strike for professional concerns. The old white witch refers ironically to colonial Europe, the traditional imperial power.

The use of the author's native language in many instances throughout the whole collection of stories confirms her intention to present the indigenous culture and keep it omnipresent in her work, such as pangas, Shambas, tayari, na Mama, nakwisha, fika, shamba, and Kuja. Literary works have identities: cultural, psychological, or philosophical. They are records of human experiences and struggles. In fact, this is a tradition that has been followed and a technique used by most postcolonial writers, especially the Africans, in which they attached their native culture to literature through the use of the indigenous languages.

Africans have often been associated by colonizers and ex-colonizers with illiteracy and ignorance, as [they] "*stood with blank faces staring at the books they could not read.*" They were "*walking in darkness and are governed by taboos and superstitions*". The story reveals how passively Matron, the white, perceived the black female nurses. She considered them as "*heathen and ungrateful native nurses whose hearts [...] were filled with the venom of poisonous snakes*" (Ogot, p.8-10). Matron Jack "*felt it was beneath her dignity to argue with people she regarded as primitive, ignorant and irreligious*" (Ogot, p.17).

This stereotypical image of African communities, in particular, has been created by imperial powers through their different agencies and discourses, which present them as the other and inferior in all aspects of life:

*Yet at the back of her mind, [Matron Jack] knew that there was something wicked about Africa that scared her. Its thunders were louder. Its nights had a ghostly kind of darkness. Its people suffered from all kinds of scourges.* (Ogot, p.21-22)

Matron Jack considered the black nurses as thieves, slaves and, to some extent, animals. When they decided to leave the chapel for their homes, Matron sent the workmen, whom she called "*lazy creatures,*" to "*catch them*" with "*pangas*", as if they were thieves and her own property

(Ogot, p.15-16). From the very beginning, Matron had a stereotyped image of African men and women, according to which she has shaped her code of behaviour with them. She thought, "*the African women [...] were as obedient as their men [and] that African men were little Caesars who treated their women like slaves*" (Ogot, p.17). Moreover, she developed a feeling that "*it was beneath her dignity to argue with people she regarded as primitive, ignorant and irreligious*" (Ogot, p.11).

She might have internalized such passive attitudes from books she had read, lectures she had attended, or folk stories she had heard. Maybe, one of those which indicates the sense of inferiority was the belief that black people are dirty and contaminated, "*It was said, for instance, that each time the Pastor was asked for a cup of tea at Dr Joseph's house, Mrs. Joseph boiled the cup afterwards, or soaked it in Jeyes for twenty-four hours*" (Ogot, p.11), and that they are stupid and have "small brain". It was planned to depict colonized peoples in an unfair way. Another example of othering in this story, is Dr. Joseph, the white highly educated, who shared with Matron Jack the same embarrassing attitudes towards black Africans:

*It will be a good thousand years before you can apply your English training to these native hospitals. When you are talking about nurses carrying bedpans, you think of some well-educated English women with four years' nursing training. You forget the simple fact that these young girls only wear a thin veneer of civilisation. Scratch them deep enough and you find a real savage.* (Ogot, p.19-20)

The next story, *The Bamboo Hut*, started with establishing an implicit comparison between the colonizer and the colonized. It referred to the former with "Lake Victoria" and to the latter with the "Hill of Ramogi", the first as being punished by the burning sun, the symbol of a high god, and the second as sacred and glorified by God:

*The setting sun was ablaze, and its angry rays coloured the waters of Lake Victoria. Mboga's heart beat fast. He had never seen the disc of the setting sun look so big and ominous. He moved towards the foot of the sacred Hill of Ramogi, where his forefathers had from time immemorial worshipped God and pleaded with the ancestors.* (Ogot, p.27)

The story is about Mboga, the chief of his tribe, who wished to have a son, for more than twelve years, to become the heir to the Kadibo people. When he got the child, he addressed him, saying, "*You will be called 'Owiny' after the second son of Ramogi. You will live long, and in my old age you will hold the staff of Ramogi in your right hand to rule your people*" (Ogot, p.30). *The Bamboo Hut* reflects the importance of religious beliefs for the indigenous community, and gives accounts of its social traditions and cultural backgrounds. Mboga was the father of sixteen girls, yet he preferred to have a son on whom he could rely when he gets old. Moreover, he had nine wives, and he might have more. These are signs of a purely patriarchal society in which women were considered no more than housekeepers and sexual tools.

Achieng', one of Mboga's nine wives, gave birth to a twin: a girl and a boy. To satisfy her husband, the Chief, she decided to leave the girl baby near the well and only take the boy back home. Although the story is an indigenous production, it contributes to the large planned wave of stereotyping African people and portraying them as being savage, primitive, and pitiless. It is

almost the same for the remaining stories of this collection, in which the natives were depicted passively and associated with a sense of inferiority, not only because the imperialist discourse has propagated that, but also because some indigenous elitists have deliberately participated in the Western propaganda, as our writer, Ogot, has done.

The Hero short story presents Dr Eric Sserwadda as the prototype of his people's saviour who "*meant to a people whose main aspiration was to govern themselves*" and that, thanks to him, "*the country had moved a big step forward towards capturing back the land that belonged to them by right*" (Ogot, p.42). It reinforces the idea of the nation's need for a true leader to be emancipated from colonization and postcolonial tragedies.

In *The Green Leaves*, natives strongly rejected and opposed the white man and his unfair policies and laws, which he forcibly imposed upon them:

*But the white man's laws are different. According to his laws, if you kill a man because you find him stealing your cattle or sleeping in your wife's hut, you are guilty of murder — and therefore you must also be killed. Because he thinks his laws are superior to ours, we should handle him carefully. We have ancestors — the white man has none. That is why they bury their dead far away from their houses.* (Ogot, p.95)

Contradictorily, the white man warned the natives against defending one's family, honour, and property and described this as a "savage custom", while he himself committed terrible genocide and massacred innocent and armless people. All that matters to the oppressors is domination and wealth, regardless of the cost, whatever it is. However, this usually required colonial discourse to legitimize the process.

In *The White Veil*, Achola and Owila were an African couple from Kenya, an ex-British colony where natives were left with a heavy colonial legacy. Owila, the fiancé, asked Achola to get rid of their conservative style of dating, full of traditional spirit; maintaining, "*you insist that we can only meet in a bar and when you come to the house you insist that you can't ...*" He supported his claim with referring to the harmonious relationship between John and Miss Hannington, whom he considered the best model for lovers:

*Well, I don't want to live in the past,' Owila snapped. 'I have just realised that I have been a big fool. You think you are more holy than Miss Hannington. Yet she spends the night in John's house quite often and she is a regular Sunday School teacher as well as being an ordinary teacher like you. And I bet that she is in John's house now.* (Ogot, p.114)

Owila tended to mimic the European way of love, life, and existence. However, Achola, the one defending the native identity and culture, strongly rejected the proposal and justified her attitude against mimicking the other saying: "*But John and Miss Hannington are Europeans,*" and "*We cannot put our feet in their shoes*" (Ogot, p.114).

The story depicts how colonized people were torn between the indigenous culture and the overwhelming colonial one, and how they suffered from identity crises. This is exactly what was going on in Achola's mind as she started questioning what she used to believe was firm, sacred, and undiscussable:

*Maybe she had been a fool and old-fashioned as Owila had told her. If that is what Owila wanted, if that is the only thing that could make her keep him, she would give in, perhaps once or twice. She would write to him tomorrow and apologise and offer to make amends. (Ogot, p.17)*

Caught in confusion and loss, Achola recalled her tribal commandments according to which "A girl must be a virgin on the day of her marriage. This is the greatest honour she can bestow upon the man she is marrying and upon her parents" (Ogot, p.120). Virginity signified virtue, and the bedsheet was akin to a certificate of honour for her people. Yet, the "tears [that] blinded her" reflected her dilemma of identity crisis because Owila was asking her for a "high price" that she could not afford. It was a matter of tradition, religion, and thus identity. The following extract portrays Achola's state of double consciousness that produced in her an unstable sense of self:

*Achola had long miserable days and touchy sleepless nights that robbed her of the health and gaiety of youth [...] This was a kind of sickness that was eating all her heart away, burying the past and blotting out the future she had so carefully planned. People who saw her walking thought she was alive, yet in her heart Achola knew she was a sick woman, moving into a big town among thousands of people without really seeing them. (Ogot, p.122)*

They were Achola's social and religious obligations that created such psychological trauma, as Bese and Heidarzadegan (2016) argued, "Race, ethnicity, class, gender, and religion are among the many reasons why people have to struggle to cope with the state of double-consciousness" (p. 32). It is the internal conflict between a person's imposed cultural identity and his native one (Pittman, J. P. 2016, as cited in Broughton, K. N., 2022, p.6).

The old woman, referred to as the prophetess, echoed Achola in her refusal of mimicry, and considered her "a noble woman" who "unlike other educated women" had not mimicked "the white man's way" (Ogot, p.1130). In fact, virginity in this story stands for the cultural identity of colonized nations and oppressed people whom the imperial powers have sought to overtake, corrupt, and rape.

Most of the stories included in this collection are descriptive accounts of Kenyan natives and their culture, and they are full of indigenous connotations such as names of tribes, religious figures, and traditional customs and traditions. Apparently, Ogot's main concern behind her work was to document, preserve, and transmit her ancestors' cultural heritage to the coming generations. In fact, the writer presented an anti-colonial discourse in most of her stories, as she resisted colonial stereotyping of Africans.

The next story, *Night Sister*, sheds light on the misery that natives have experienced during colonization. They were robbed of their resources and wealth. Moreover, they were deprived of their basic rights, such as education and healthcare:

*In the village where I was brought up, several women gave birth without anybody even knowing about it. People were only surprised to see the baby. There was no one else but the village midwife — no modern medicines to relieve the pain and make them sleepy. Women who cried during childbirth in the village were scorned by their fellows. (Ogot, p.179)*

The short story of Tekayo is entitled after its protagonist, who looked up and saw an eagle with a massive piece of liver in its claws. The piece, from which fresh blood was still flowing, fell to the ground after he struck it. He could not wait any longer and grilled it over a wood fire. It was delicious to the extent that he licked the fat fluid on his fingers and wished for a bit more. Tekayo was obsessed with an animalistic desire for that same liver, and started a long search for it. Armed with his spears, Tekayo hunted almost all the animals, prey and predators, in Ghost Jungle, where he thought, "*The animal with that delicious liver must surely be in that jungle,*" but his efforts had gone with the wind since their liver taste was different.

Finally, Tekayo found his target: it was his eldest son's daughter, Apii, whom he "*gripped her neck and strangled*". I preferred to cite this extract without paraphrasing to keep the same loaded feelings of disgust and fear that it certainly raises in the readers:

*[The little girl] gave a weak cry as she struggled for the breath of life. But it was too much for her. Her eyes closed in everlasting sleep, never to see the beauty of the shining moon again. The limp body of the child slipped from Tekayo's hands and fell on the floor with a thud. He looked at the body at his feet and felt sick and faint. His ears were buzzing. He picked up the body, and as he staggered out with it, the air seemed black, and the birds of the air screamed ominously at him. But Tekayo had to eat his meal. He buried the body of Apii in a nearby anthill in a shallow grave. The other children were still playing in the field when Tekayo returned with the liver in his bag. He roasted it in his hut hastily and ate it greedily. And alas! it was what he had been looking for for many years. He sat lazily resting his back on the granary, belching and picking, his teeth. (Ogot, p. 55-56)*

In general, Grace Ogot's collection is an anti-colonial literary work. It reflects images of sharp discrimination and hard oppression against indigenous people. Moreover, it depicts the struggle of the natives for their culture and identity. However, the work seems to support certain colonial aspects to some extent. For instance, the presentation of Tekayo as animalistic, savage, and cannibalistic would distort the indigenous African culture that is primarily hers, too. I think it is fictional and imaginative, rooted in the stereotypes that Westerners propagate about Africans. It should be part of the white man's colonial discourse and not of an African elite's contribution.

In addition, devoting a whole story, *Karantina*, to undermining Egypt, the biggest cultural pillar in the Middle East, would also be regarded as a colonial discourse itself. Dora, Angelina, Alice, and Milka, who "*had never been inside a plane before*", were black African women going on a holiday to Europe. Their plane landed in Egypt, "*the gate of the Orient, half African half Arab*" for a night, and there they started criticizing whatever Egyptian came into sight.

The beginning was with the airport waiting room that was, for them, cold and uncomfortable, and then the officials who were rude and corrupt, as "*one of the men in brown overalls sprang up and dragged [one of the women] by the arm away from the queue*" (Ogot, p.165). The cashier also seemed to the black women without "*a trace of life on his face; it looked as though he hated what he was doing.*" One of them mocked the health deskman as she compared him to "*an Egyptian Sphinx*". Dora also mocked the ambulance that took her to the Quarantine, and described it as nothing but "*a dingy, grey van which had no windows standing nearby*" and "*a Black Maria*"



designed for prisoners. With "a big iron gate," the Quarantine Hospital, she went on, was "an oblong stone building" surrounded by "high thick walls which reminded Dora of Fort Jesus at Mombasa" (Ogot, p.71).

After both the ambulance driver and the porter asked the woman for money for normally free services, she was received by "barefooted" nurses wearing "badly creased smocked uniforms" (Ogot, p.72). Then, she provided a terrible description of her room in the quarantine that I think was exaggerated:

*There was not a single window open, and the smell of dust hit Dora's nose as she entered the room. She struggled with the window facing the corridor and pulled it open inwards. Then she pushed up the wooden blind that kept out the light. One look at the room was enough to drive her out of it. The dust had accumulated in all the four corners; cobwebs were everywhere; the sheets had obviously been slept in; and there was a black mark on the pillow which must have been left by someone's greasy hair. (Ogot, p.75)*

Even the breakfast she had was poor and unhealthy, and "in her mind, she could see numerous fly eggs on it, which made her tummy queasy". The phrase "in her mind" implies that most of what she claimed might be elusive and imaginative, and based on wrong assumptions. Dora might be suffering from obsessive-compulsive disorder. Surprisingly, in *Karantina*, Ogot seems as if she spoke on behalf of the imperial powers that usually ascribe primitivity and backwardness to Arabs.

Heidarzadegan (2020) claimed that the passive stereotyped image usually associated with Arabs is primarily the production of [Western] media (p. 38). Liu (2022) argued that it was a sort of othering Arabs, and referred to Orientalism, which he defined as being:

*...a way of imagining, emphasizing, exaggerating, and distorting differences between Arab peoples and cultures as compared to those of Europe and the U.S. It often regards Arab culture as exotic, backward, uncivilized, and sometimes dangerous [...] The West constructed the East as extremely different and inferior, and therefore in need of Western intervention or "rescue". (Liu, 2022, p. 69)*

### 3. Conclusion

Grace Ogot's work, *Land Without Thunder*, presented conflicting ideologies through a discourse ranging from anti-colonial to colonial. The former was clear in the depiction of the oppression and discrimination against indigenous people, and of both the physical hardship and psychological trauma, they endured and experienced during and after colonization. The latter was part of her establishing stereotyped images of African and Arab communities as cannibalistic, violent, and of an inferior race.

My analysis of this collection of stories was selective as it was almost restricted to the stories heavily infused with postcolonial aspects. Some of them were more loaded with gender-oriented issues, and thus I recommend that they be studied, in future works, from feminist

perspectives. A psychoanalytic analysis of the collection is also recommended due to the psychological depths it carries.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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