

BEGC -114
Postcolonial
Literatures**Block****2****SHORT STORY**

UNIT 1**An Introduction to the Postcolonial Short Story** **65**

UNIT 2**Bessie Head, 'The Collector of Treasures'** **78**

UNIT 3**Ama Ata Aidoo, 'The Girl Who Can'** **89**

UNIT 4**Grace Ogot, 'The Green Leaves'** **99**

BLOCK INTRODUCTION

This is **Block 2** of the Postcolonial Literatures (BEGC-114) titled **Short Story**. The block is designed to discuss selected important postcolonial short stories. The block consists of following five units:

Unit 1 titled **An Introduction to the Postcolonial Short Story**. This unit is designed to familiarise you with the various concepts and contexts of 'Postcolonial'. A brief overview of the evolution of the Postcolonial Short Story and the mention of some important authors and their short stories have been presented.

Unit 2 discusses '**The Collector of Treasures**' by **Bessie Head**. Various aspects of the short story along with the author's brief bio has been discussed herein.

Unit 3 presents a reading of **Ama Ata Aidoo's 'The Girl Who Can'**. The nuances of writing a story in the oral tradition as exhibited by the writer has been examined in this unit.

Unit 4 discusses the important aspects of **Grace Ogot's 'The Green Leaves'**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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UNIT 1 AN INTRODUCTION TO THE POSTCOLONIAL SHORT STORY

Structure

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- 1.3 Postcolonial Countries or Regions
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1.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit introduces you to the concept of the postcolonial world of literature.

- It underlines the importance of the native language besides the English language in the understanding of the postcolonial literature.
- It offers you a historical perspective of the evolution of the postcolonial short story as a literary genre with its major concerns.
- It introduces you to the leading texts and their writers with specific focus on women writers of the postcolonial short story.

1.1 DEFINITION POSTCOLONIAL

Postcolonial literature is the literature that has grown on the fertile soil of the pristine land, has breathed in free air and does not need to conform to the European literary traditions. When we talk of the postcolonial literature, world literature from sovereign countries like Russia, China, Japan, America and the European countries is not included in it. Instead literature from those countries only which have been the former colonies of the European countries comes within the ambit of consideration. Postcolonial literature is no longer a miniscule body representing a minority rather more and more languages, cultures, countries and ethnicities

are getting added continually to the corpus of the postcolonial genres and is rightly called the postcolonial 'literatures'. Postcolonial literature is not limited to the narrativisation of accidents between the native culture and the so called advanced European culture only. It is not just the literature written in English after the subjugated regions attained freedom from the colonial rule. It is a fusion of the ancient and the modern; it is a retelling of a grandma's folk tale by a grand-daughter. It is an attempt to explore the treasure buried in one's own home. It is an attempt to find one's moorings so as to take off from a firmer base. It is to affirm that a tree which has deep roots stands tall and attains a larger spread. Post colonialism cannot be defined in simplistic terms either by the erstwhile rulers or by the ex-ruled. The perspectives in this regard vary as widely as the regions concerned or the related ethnicities. This is not a body of literature but literatures. It is like a salad bowl or like a wilderness with myriads of flowers of different kinds. Reading postcolonial literature is a kind of experience which offers reading about original sensibilities rich in history and culture and exuding fragrance of the native soil free from the sense of oppression or subjugation or alienation.

1.2 EXPONENTS OF THE POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

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 inter relationships among the different postcolonial literatures. In this book the writers have discussed theoretical aspects of a wide range of postcolonial texts.

1.3 POSTCOLONIAL COUNTRIES OR REGIONS

Literatures from countries and regions which have been erstwhile colonies of the European countries form the body of the postcolonial literatures. These include African countries like South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Sudan and others, the Caribbean and Latin American countries like Chile, Saint Martin, Jamaica, Cuba, Trinidad and Tobago, St. Lucia, St. Kitts and Nevis, West Indies, Barbados, British Columbia, etc. Asian countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Singapore etc., Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Within the limited scope of this unit only some of the fiction writers and some women short story writers are briefly discussed below and accordingly only some of the relevant countries have been mentioned here for reference.

1.4 LANGUAGE OF THE POSTCOLONIAL

The colonial experience generated a new political equation and narratives spun around this new relationship. English became gradually the language of the educated and the literature which is essentially native in its sensibility, characterization and issues came to be written originally in English. The rise of the nationalistic fervor following independence of the slave countries from the yoke of the European rule promoted the literary works to be written originally in the native languages and then translated into English. Some writers translated their own works written originally in their native language into English. It is an irony that some of the writers articulated in their works the painful experience of

subjugation of the natives, loss of land and land rights, onslaught on culture, abrogation and replacement of the ancient political laws, mass religious conversions and oppression of different kinds by the European or mainly the English rulers in the language of the oppressor only, i.e. in English. However it is interesting to note that just as the literature of one region is different from that of the other, the kind of English spoken and used in one region is different from that used in the other. British English is no longer followed as the standard English in the erstwhile colonies, rather these regions have an English of their own. There are now many Englishes all over the world like American English, Indian English, Jamaican English, Kenyan English etc. and these regional varieties are distinct and unique in their own right.

Here is an excerpt from *Caliban's Voice*, a book written by Bill Ashcroft, an authority on postcolonial literature –

"The unshakeable link between 'our' language and 'us' has made language not only the most emotional site for cultural identity but also one of the most critical techniques of colonization and of the subsequent transformation of colonial influence by post-colonized societies ... it is incontestable that language is the mode of a constant and pervasive extension of cultural dominance –through ideas, attitudes, history and ways of seeing –that is central to imperial hegemony ... This book pivots on a moment in Shakespeare's The Tempest which has become the very symbol of the impact of a colonial language. When Caliban says to Miranda and Prospero:

You taught me language, and my profit on't

Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you

For learning me your language

he gives voice to an issue that lies at the centre of post-colonial studies."

Ashcroft further writes: *"Most of the battles fought over language in postcolonial theory stem from a confusion between language as a communicative tool and language as a cultural symbol."*

The same analogy was also brought out in 1971 by the Cuban poet Roberto Fernandez Retamar, one of the most distinguished Latin American intellectuals of the 20th century who stated:

"Our symbol is not Ariel but Caliban ... I know no other metaphor more expressive of our cultural situation, of our reality."

1.5 SHORT STORY AS A LITERARY GENRE

A short story is defined 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. Bigger is not necessarily better. In the smaller space of a short story the central theme is often conveyed more poignantly and the characters are also stoutly built up. Small is beautiful. Writers can hone their skills of writing through writing short stories. However, short story as a genre received very little critical attention. This fact is true in the context of the postcolonial short story as well and in the postcolonial critical canon the short story has been systematically sidelined. The

most important thing about short story according to Edgar Allan Poe is that it must have a compact unified effect. In its content short story may range between a highly imaginative tale and a symbolic sketch. Chinua Achebe's "Chike's School Days" and Salman Rushdie's "The Courter" are examples of postcolonial short stories.

1.6 EVOLUTION OF THE POSTCOLONIAL SHORT STORY

The postcolonial short story is a developed version or next generation version of the oral folk tale tradition and the short story 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.

In the previous block you have read at length about writings from South Africa which comprises of many nation states proud of their unique history, cultures and literatures and which shared the common predicament of being colonies of Europe in general and of the United Kingdom in particular. Having attained their liberation from the European or the English rule in the twentieth century these erstwhile colonies 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 of Africa viz. the South American countries and the Asian countries including India. Literature in these countries flourished in all its forms. Its reach spread over to various genres viz. novel, drama, poetry, story, folklore and retellings of history and classical literature. Among all these, short story occupies a very snug corner. Innumerable forms of short stories are available which include real stories, surreal stories, fantasy stories, horror stories, gothic stories, comic stories, tragic stories, ghost stories, fairy tales, animal stories, 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 can quite often be identified as related to a particular time period, geographical location, community and tribe etc. These stories invariably remind the reader of the interesting and captivating features of oral literature. In the present unit we will discuss some of the representative postcolonial short stories. Major postcolonial short story writers will be discussed and we shall also discuss those short story writers who besides writing in their native language not only translated their own stories into English but have also written some of their stories originally in English. Among these writers we shall particularly discuss postcolonial African women short story writers.

1.7 KEY CONCERNS IN THE POSTCOLONIAL SHORT STORY

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 are some of the key issues addressed in the postcolonial short story. The large scale enslavement of the men of the native tribes by the whites in the Caribbean, yoking these black slaves like animals to row the ships, 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 their 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 aborigines were living in a perfectly harmonized society with their own set of laws, rituals, customs, family systems, power equations, occasions of celebration and methods of festivities which were different from those of the white people. The whites considered their way of living as uncivilized and tried to replace it all with their own life style and way of looking at things. This bigotry and sense of false supremacy was met with tough resistance and generated hateful and violent clashes. French psychiatrist Frantz Fanon in his 1961 book *The Wretched of the Earth* analyzed the dehumanizing effects of colonialism upon the individual and the region and has also discussed the implications of building up a movement for the process of decolonizing the individual mind and the nation. Through, a critique of imperialism and nationalism it is established that the process of decolonizing was as much through violence as was the process of colonization. Nonetheless negotiated colonizing and negotiated decolonizing are the truths of the existing world. These real experiences and many other related sagas provided fertile soil for the postcolonial story whether it was based on facts or was for greater part fictionalized. During the process both the so-called 'civilised' and the 'savage' underwent a transformation and there emerged the 'new man' who paved the way towards turning the world into a global village. Postcolonial story is the story of the decolonized man making his own destiny by knowing himself and reconstructing himself. It is also the story of realization by the colonizer that the colonized, dehumanized 'thing' is as much human and as much evolved as the colonizer himself. Decolonization 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. This search gave birth to a large body of literary treasure. Whether the postcolonial writers reveled 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 diverse glorious indigenous cultures, utopia of equality, their faith in human dignity and ambivalent moods of hope and despair. The journey of the postcolonial story thus 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 indigenous structure was systematically attacked by shaking people's faith in their religion, societal and community laws, traditional medicines and healing therapies, everyday routine and above all education. A system of granting titles, advantageous positions, higher social status and participation in administration was put in place for those who renounced the aforesaid in favour of adopting a whites-centric perception of the world. English was made the compulsory medium of education which struck at the root of analytical and critical thinking, promoted rote learning, suppressed inquisitiveness, caused hesitation in speaking and

generated slave mentality. It turned an entire generation of the so-called educated into obedient clerks and yes-men. The teaching learning environment at the schools was artificial and far-removed from the home environment relegating the mother tongue to a secondary position. These concerns were later voiced by postcolonial writers in various essays and short stories. An envious environment with a spirit of unhealthy competition which pitted the children against one another in schools was promoted. It systematically killed the spirit of unity and cooperation and infused a sense of achievement in betrayal against their own brethren. The missionary schools devised many ways of ensuring that nobody spoke the native language. Punishment was imposed for using the mother tongue and children were rewarded for doing well in the English language. Scientific spirit and mathematical acumen which are language neutral attributes among children were purposefully ignored. The colonial policies hit at the root of the faiths, beliefs and value system of the natives and at their self confidence and sense of national pride. From this insecure sense of self and nation emerged the postcolonial short story.

1.8 POSTCOLONIAL WRITERS –AN INTRODUCTION

The postcolonial writers were all from among the subjugated class of natives; they were born to the colonized population, had the privilege to get educated and learn the language of the colonizer which in most of the cases was English, wrote in their language and continued to write more fearlessly and with greater authenticity even after their country got political freedom. Like Caliban, they used the language to their own advantage as a tool to expose the cunningness, meanness, greed and cruelty of the colonizers or the colonizing nation while also, at times, acknowledging the constructive modernization and advancement brought by the colonizers. There were only a few exceptions in the form of the white writers who like Sinclair, the British writer represented those who migrated to the common wealth countries to settle there permanently and wrote about the colonial experience from the point of view of the oppressed. They rejected the colonial hegemony and recognized endless possibilities in the indigenous potential and the storehouse of immense knowledge inherited and developed through generations.

1.9 CANONICAL TEXTS

Some of the foremost texts which carry a discourse on racist undertones and take up the issues of political and cultural independence termed as postcolonial are mentioned here. These canonical texts paved the way for the postcolonial movement which offered to the world a body of literature diverse in content but unified and unique in its appeal. *The Empire Writes Back* by Bill Ashcroft and others is considered the seminal text for a critical understanding of the postcolonial genre. *Things Fall Apart* a novel by Chinua Achebe from Nigeria is about the influence of the Christian missionaries and colonialism on the Igbo speaking Umuofia tribe of Nigeria. *The Wretched of the Earth* by the French psychologist Frantz Fanon, as discussed above, presents the psychic perspective of colonization. *Midnight's Children* is a novel by the British Indian Author, Salman Rushdie which deals with India's partition and its freedom from the British rule. *Orientalism* is a cardinal text of postcolonial culture studies of the colonized

territories of Asia, North Africa and the Middle East by the Palestinian American critic Edward Said. ***Black Skin White Masks***, another book by Franz Fanon, is about effects of racism and dehumanization on the psyche of the colonized populace. ***Decolonising the Mind*** by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is a collection of essays about politics of language in African literature and the role of language in the history, culture and identity of a nation. Ngũgĩ's novel ***Petals of Blood*** set in the newly independent Kenya was a novel written by him originally in English which he himself translated into Gikuyu. He wrote his subsequent works originally in his native language, Gikuyu. ***Season of Migration to the North*** is a novel in Arabic by Tayeb Salih, one of the greatest twentieth century authors of Sudan. It shows the impact of colonial rule and European modernity on the rural culture in Sudan. ***Nervous Conditions***, a novel by Tsitsi Dangarembga, the first ever book by a black Zimbabwean woman published in English takes up gender issues besides issues of race and colonialism in the present day post-colonial Zimbabwe. ***A Bend in the River*** by Nobel laureate V. S. Naipaul from Trinidad and Tobago is among the hundred best English language novels of the twentieth century. It faithfully renders the plight of a member of the Indian community in Africa but ascribes to the African Blacks kind of a "mysterious malevolence". It is praised as a "full-bodied masterpiece" and simultaneously accused of defending European Colonialism in Africa. ***One Hundred Years of Solitude*** a landmark novel in Spanish is considered the magnum opus of the Colombian postcolonial author Gabriel Garcia Marquez. This widely acclaimed novel has been translated into thirty seven languages. Ania Loomba an Indian scholar of postcolonial studies is a professor of English literature at the University of Pennsylvania. ***Postcolonial Shakespeares, Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*** are some of her acclaimed works. ***The Inheritance of Loss*** by Anita Desai deals with the contemporary issues of multiculturalism, terrorism, economic inequalities and loss of identity. ***July's People*** is a speculative novel by the South African author Nadine Gordimer in which she predicted how apartheid would end in South Africa through a violent civil war. Another historical political novel, ***Burger's Daughter*** by Gordimer, winner of the 1991 Nobel Prize in Literature, details the attempts of a group of white anti-apartheid activists in South Africa to overthrow the colonial government. Both these novels were banned at that time by the then government in South Africa. In Block 1 of this course you have learnt about Nadine Gordimer and have read in detail her novel *July's People*.

Besides the above mentioned writers and their representative postcolonial texts there are many other writers of repute who made valuable contribution to the corpus of postcolonial fiction, some of whom are : Alfian Saath of Singapore, Saint Lucian poet and playwright Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott, George Lamming of Barbados, Canadian Indian writer Rohinton Mistry, Ayi Kweon Armah of Ghana, Pablo Neruda from Chile, Witi Ihimaera of New Zealand, Novelist Caryl Phillips born on the Caribbean island of St. Kitts, writer and scholar of racial cultural study Paul Gilroy of Britain, and one of Australia's greatest writers David Malouf.

1.10 WOMEN WRITERS OF POSTCOLONIAL SHORT STORY

To make you aware that the postcolonial writers' world consists of a mammoth body of literature which is still growing and to acquaint you with its pioneers

and star writers, some names along with their leading works are mentioned above. However, your course outline suggests that the focus here is more on women writers. In this block you are going to read short stories by three women writers, one each from the eastern, western and southern part of the African continent. For a wider understanding of the range and their global spread let us have a look at some notable women writers of postcolonial short story and fiction and their representative short stories. The three African women writers whose one story each you have to study in detail in the units which follow are not being harped upon much here. A short introduction of almost twenty other women writers and their works is given below. The postcolonial world is broadly divided into five regions, viz. Australia and New Zealand, Africa, Latin America, Asia and the rest of the world. The women writers being discussed below are grouped accordingly. It may be viewed as a list of suggested readings. As an illustration summary outline of one of the stories, namely, “Ghosts” by Edwidge Danticat and gist in a line or two each of all the ten stories in a collection of short stories, namely, *‘Bodies of Water’* by Michelle Cliff is also given below –

1.11 FROM AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

- a) Patricia Frances Grace: This Maori writer from New Zealand was the first female published writer. She has to her credit more than a dozen collections of short stories and children’s fiction. She is the key figure in the field of Maori literature in English. Her works written in the Maori language have been translated variously in French, German and English. She won many prestigious awards. Her first collection of short stories is *Waiariki*. At 82 she is still an active writer.
- b) Alice Tawhai: This short story writer of Tainui and NgaPuhi tribe of New Zealand writes under the pen name Alice Tawhai maintaining anonymity. She calls herself as one who writes in colours. She has published several collections of her short stories. Her stories present an account of bittersweet experiences of the ethnic minorities in New Zealand, a land of wonders. Her characters include circus workers, tattoo artists, sex workers, immigrants, bikies, wild children and people living on the fringe of the society. She has a natural and dream like skill for story-telling. Her stories contain compassionate humour, sensory imagery and an impressive flow and freshness of language. Writing is like painting and poetry for her. Her collections of short stories include *Festival of Miracles* (2005), *Luminous* (2007), and *Dark Jelly* (2011). Alice is widely anthologized in New Zealand.

1.12 FROM AFRICA

- a) Bessie Head: Bessie Head took up contemporary, postcolonial and gender specific issues in her stories but consciously avoided the polarity which existed among the whites and the anti-apartheid groups. Born as the child of a black South African worker and a white upper class woman she got marginalized like an outcaste in the country of her birth. You will read in the next unit about this author and her story ‘The Collector of Treasures’.
- b) Ama Ata Aidoo from Ghana: Ghana which was formerly known as Gold Coast being situated between two rivers and being on the western coast of the continent of abundance, Africa was greatly exploited by the European

countries. Not only were the forest resources and rich metals and minerals plundered but the tribal people were also hunted, chased, enslaved and smuggled to Europe and across the Atlantic to the newly discovered land of America so much so that the Gold Coast and the adjoining Ivory Coast region came to be known as Slave Coast. Aidoo's stories are her expressions of resistance as an African nationalist woman. In the story 'The Girl Who Can't' a seven year old girl is viewed as trapped in the perceived inadequacy of her body as if a fulsome body were the be all and end all of a woman's life. Her grandmother is worried that her thin legs may not prove to be capable enough to bear children while her mother who shares this skepticism thinks that the least of all that her legs can do is to walk her to school. The girl puts her legs to a surprising use when she becomes the racing champion among juniors. The grandmother carries the trophy won by her on her back like one carries children.

- c) Grace Ogot: You may read about this Kenyan author and study in detail her short story 'The Green Leaves' in one of the units which follow.
- d) Nadine Gordimer: This prolific fiction writer has to her credit twenty one collections of short stories besides thirteen celebrated novels. To name a few *Beethoven was One-Sixteenth Black and other stories*, *Loot and Other Stories* and *The Soft Voice of the Serpent and other stories* are some of the collections of short stories by her. She occupies a very prominent place in the literary canon. Among some must read stories are "Six Feet of the Country", "Once Upon a Time", "A Beneficiary", "Is There Nowhere Else Where We Can Meet", "Loot", "Africa Emergent" and "Not for Publication".
- e) Buchi Emecheta: This Nigerian author, a champion of female rights, wrote more than twenty books which include novels, plays, an autobiography, stories and other writings for children. "Apart from telling stories I don't have a particular mission. I like to tell the world our part of the story while using the voices of women," said Emecheta in an interview.
- f) Yvonne Vera: This Zimbabwean author had a writing career of only 12 years cut short by her death at the age of 40. Her first published book was a collection of short stories, *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals*. Then there followed five novels, distinguished for their poetic prose. The recurrent theme of her works is the difficult history of Zimbabwe. She occupies an important place in the postcolonial African Literature.
- g) Tsitsi Dangaremba: Writer of the acclaimed novel *Nervous conditions*, Dangaremba of Zimbabwe, besides being a novelist is a playwright, poet, activist, short story writer, publisher and a film maker. *A Family Portrait*, a collection of short stories, is the first book of short stories by her.

1.13 FROM LATIN AMERICA

- a) Edwidge Danticat: This Haitian American writer's stories mainly revolve around the themes of national identity, revolutionary struggle, diasporic politics and mother-daughter relationships. She has written many novels. *Krik Krak!* and *Everything Inside* are collections of her short stories.

Her story “Ghosts” is about the life of Pascal, a slum boy whose parents used to rear pigeons for a living in their village. People would buy these pigeons for a bizarre custom which his parents found disgusting. They moved to the outskirts of a city and started a restaurant. His brother Jules moved to Canada with his girl friend while Pascal worked as a news writer for one of the most popular radio stations, Radio Zorey. Gang leaders and other criminals used to visit the restaurant and talk freely about their activities. Once when he overheard Tiye, a one armed, bald headed gang leader it struck to Pascal that he could run a radio programme “Man to Man” on these people. He discussed his plan with his friends and many gang members also came to know of Pascal’s plan. His idea was stolen by other people and they started airing the programme on Radio Zorey. Pascal was teased by the visitors and they instigated him to take action but Pascal did not want to react. Radio Zorey building was torched by the Tiye gang and Tiye named Pascal as the mastermind. Pascal was suddenly arrested and given third degree torture in the prison cell. His family including his brother spent huge sums and made all out efforts to free him but failed. When Tiye struck some deal with the police and the judges Pascal was released. Tiye visits their restaurant again and Pascal by noticing his prosthetic arm dreams of running a radio show by the name “Ghosts” on people with lost limbs.

- b) Michelle Cliff: This Jamaican American writer of novels, short stories and prose poem stakes up issues of multicultural identity, race and gender and attempts to view history from a perspective different from the mainstream narrative. She probes the psychological and historical distortions imposed by colonialism. *Bodies of Water* (1990), *The Store of a Million Items* (1998) and *Everything is Now* (2009) are some of her books of short stories. Some of her stories contain themes of prejudice and oppression from the point of view of the immigrants. Some stories are based on historical events like the civil rights movement, the Holocaust etc. Her stories depict the common man’s courage, fortitude and determination to rise above his circumstances.

The collection *Bodies of Water* comprises ten stories with compelling social themes clustering around man’s inhumanity to man whether in a political scenario or in a historical one. The title story “Bodies of Water” is a story of an old woman reaching out to a brother from whom she was separated. The brother and sister relive, through letters to each other, their childhood days of harsh upbringing, particularly the trauma related to the early discovery of the brother’s homosexuality. “Election Day 1984” is about a spinster who reveals her involvement in a murder and explains to a new immigrant her decision to rescue a child only to give him away for his own benefit. “Burning Bush” is about the mass murder of her family by a 75 year old woman. “Columbia”, the only story with a Jamaican setting, is about a boy who is forced by his employer to kill his pet doves for food. “The Ferry” is about a boy in his teens who loses his father to alcoholism. “Screen Memory” is a story in the flashback about a girl who could pass for a white and become an actress. “A Hanged Man” is about the torture inflicted on the black slaves and the pre civil war hypocrisy. “A Woman who Plays Trumpet is Deported” is about a black American woman artist who flees America after the lynching of her brother and then dies in a Nazi concentration camp. “American Time, American Light” is the story of an elderly Vietnamese who dies in an abandoned farmhouse in New England,

America. The last story in this collection “Keeper of All Souls” portrays the itinerants’ search for a free society. The ironic fulfillment of their search lies at Sam’s altar where relics from the past of parallel lives are arranged and rearranged after their deaths by Sam, the recorder of lives and deaths.

- c) Jean Rhys: Jean Rhys was born and grew up in the Caribbean island of Dominica. She was sent for her education to England where she lived for most of her life. Her early experience in the Caribbean had given her a viewpoint for stating the case of the ‘underdog’.
- d) Andrea Levy: Andrea Levy is regarded by many as the voice of the people who migrated to Britain from the commonwealth countries after World War II. Her father belonged to the Windrush generation who arrived in Britain in 1948 from Jamaica. She was born in London in 1956. In her essay in *Six Stories and an Essay* she wrote: “The racism I encountered was rarely violent or extreme but it was insidious and ever present and it had a profound effect on me.”

1.14 FROM ASIA

- a) Anita Desai: An alumna of Delhi University Anita Desai was thrice shortlisted for Booker Prize for her novels, *In Custody*, *Clear Light of Day* and *Fasting, Feasting*. She is a professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, U.S. *The Artist of disappearance*, *Diamond Dust and other Stories*, *Games at Twilight* and *Fire on the Mountain* are some collections of her short stories. She has written half a dozen novels and a dozen collections of short stories.
- b) Mahashweta Devi: This postcolonial writer was born in Dhaka of the pre-divided India which is now the capital of Bangladesh. She settled in Calcutta, India. She wrote most of her works in Bengali. Her works are translated in many languages. Ordinary people with extra ordinary grit are the inspirations behind her writings. She has also been an activist for the rights of the marginalized people like the tribals, and the Dalits. Her works tally goes beyond a hundred.
- c) Suchen Lim: Born in Malaysia, Suchen Christine Lim is a citizen of Singapore who has written many books for children, several novels including *Fistful of Colours* and books of short stories of the unsung, unsaid and uncelebrated in Singapore titled *The Lies that Build a Marriage* (2007) and *The Man Who Wore his Wife’s Sarong* (2017).

1.15 FROM THE REST OF THE WORLD

- a) Doris Lessing: Born in Iran to British parents, Doris Lessing spent her formative twenty five years in southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) before coming to Britain. She is winner of the 2007 Nobel Prize in Literature. Her stories in her collection of short stories titled *African Stories* are set in Zimbabwe. She has written at least twenty books of short stories. Her first novel *The Grass is singing* was published in 1950. During her long period of creative writing from 1950 to 2013 she wrote a whole range of fiction and non-fiction including Drama, Poetry Collections, Cat Tales, Autobiography, Memoirs and Essays.

- b) Wena Poon: Wena Poon is a writer of short stories in English and is settled in the U S. She is the true representative of her generation — multi-cultural, transnational and continental. Her stories are set in London, New York, Singapore, Hong Kong, Hanoi and all over.
- c) Alice Munro: Alice Munro, the Canadian short story writer, is the recipient of the 2013 Nobel Prize for literature. Her works do not fall strictly in the category of the postcolonial but this author is the most faithful to the genre of the short story. Her stories are straight from life; they grow on her experiences. She explored relationships in her stories most of which are very short. She has a unique and terse way of understanding things and saying them.
- d) Jhumpa Lahiri: Jhumpa Lahiri is an American postcolonial novel and short story writer of Indian roots. Experiences of the Indian immigrant in America form the bedrock of her writings. Her collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, 2000. Another of her short story collections, *Unaccustomed Earth* won the Frank O'Connor International short story award, 2008. *The Lowland* and *The Namesake* are her other notable works.
- e) Elleke Boehmer: Elleke Boehmer, a professor of World Literature in English at the Oxford University is one of the founders in the field of postcolonial studies. Boehmer is known internationally for her well researched study on the after effects of the colonial rule. Her short story collections are *Stories of Women* (2005), *Sharmilla and Other Portraits* (2010), and *To the Volcano* (2019) about which J.M. Coetzee remarked, "...with passion and intelligence, and rare moral insight, Elleke Boehmer traces the scars left on the psyche by the tortuous histories of the South."

1.16 COMPREHENSION EXERCISES

- a) What do you understand by postcolonial literature? How is it different from other literature?
- b) Who are some of the pioneers of postcolonial short story? Write about any two representative short stories.
- c) Chart the growth of postcolonial short story.
- d) What are the major issues generally discussed in the postcolonial short story?
- e) Write a note on the language of the postcolonial literature.
- f) Discuss any five African women writers of the postcolonial short story.
- g) Discuss the contribution of the non-native writers to the postcolonial literature.

1.17 LET US SUM UP

- Postcolonial literature is the literature from those countries which have been the former colonies of the European countries. It encompasses many languages, cultures, countries and ethnicities and is rightly called postcolonial literatures.

- Postcolonial literature is essentially native in its sensibility though the language is English.
- Postcolonial short story is the modern day version of the oral folktale and it presents a fusion of the native culture and the colonial experience.
- The postcolonial writers are either from the subjugated educated class of the natives or from the Europeans who migrated to the common wealth countries to settle there permanently and wrote about the colonial experience from the point of view of the oppressed. They rejected the colonial hegemony and recognized endless possibilities in the indigenous potential and the storehouse of immense knowledge inherited and developed through generations.
- The postcolonial short story challenges the colonial as well as the patriarchal authority. 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 and large scale enslavement are some of the key issues addressed in the postcolonial short story.
- Postcolonial story is the story of the decolonized man making his own destiny by knowing himself and reconstructing himself. It is also the story of realization by the colonizer that the colonized, dehumanized 'thing' is as much human and as much evolved as the colonizer himself.
- There is a long list of postcolonial fiction writers, both men and women which include writers like Ngugi wa Thiongo, Chinua Achebe, Nadine Gordimer, Salman Rushdie, Pablo Neruda, David Malouf, Grace Ogot and so on.
- In the end women writers of postcolonial short story are discussed under five regional categories to help you understand the global spread of the postcolonial literature.

UNIT 2 BESSIE HEAD, 'THE COLLECTOR OF TREASURES'

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
 - 2.1.1 The Writer's Bio-brief
 - 2.1.2 Story of *The Collector of Treasures*
- 2.2 Characters
- 2.3 Historical Classification of Men
- 2.4 Redemptive Powers of Female Solidarity
- 2.5 Oral Storytelling
- 2.6 Dikeledi's Crime
- 2.7 Animal Imagery in the Story
- 2.8 Check Your Progress: Possible Questions (with answer key)
- 2.9 Select Reading List

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we will learn about Bessie Head. We will discuss her position as a significant writer whose attempts to chronicle life in Botswana have yielded powerful creative output.

After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- Learn about the life and works of Bessie Head
- Investigate the living conditions of women
- Understand the reasons for oppressive masculinity
- Find the redemptive powers of female solidarity
- Locate the story in the tradition of oral literature

2.1 INTRODUCTION

2.1.1 The Writer's Bio-brief

Bessie Amelia Emery Head (1937-1986) was a significant voice amidst the notable writers of sub-Saharan Africa. She wrote several novels and short stories. Some of her 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). Bessie Head was born of mixed parentage in South Africa. It is important to note, dear student, that under Apartheid (South African policy of racial segregation), a mixed-race marriage was considered illegal in South Africa at the time of her birth. Her mother, Bessie Amelia Emery, was a white woman and her father, a black groom employed by her family. Their alliance was not welcomed by the society. Her mother was admitted to a mental asylum because of her liaison with a black man and she subsequently gave birth to Bessie Head

there. Due to apartheid, it was illegal for people of mixed races to marry each other. Her mother was admitted to a mental asylum during her pregnancy and as a result, Bessie Head was born there. She was sent to a foster family who rejected her when they realized that she was coloured. Children of mixed parentage were considered coloured children and they found no solidarity from either the white supremacists or the subjugated black population. She was raised in an orphanage and later tried her hands at teaching and journalism. Dear student, it is of utmost importance to understand that being a coloured person, Bessie Head struggled with acceptance and it shaped her writings as well. When she felt alienated by South African milieu, she sought refuge in Botswana and that's where she found her literary voice. She lived in rural Botswana and observed the lives of poor and disenfranchised women. She learned that the black women are doubly marginalized; as black subjects suffering under colonial rule as well as women suffering from deep rooted patriarchy. This theme found prominence in Head's literary output. Alice Walker regenerated interest in Head's writings by hailing her as one of her "favourite uncelebrated foreign writers...whose work deserves more attention in this country."

1.1.2. Story of *The Collector of Treasures*

The story 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 realizes that she will not be able to see the mundane things like cattle grazing in the fields, bushes, and forest from her jail cell. As the woman is ushered into the jailhouse, late in the evening, her crime is revealed. The guards talk to each other and introduce her as the husband killer of Puleng village.

It is revealed that her name is Dikeledi Mokopi and the wardress wryly tells her that she will be in good company since her cell mates include four women who have been convicted of killing their respective husbands. The wardress calls it a fashionable amongst women to kill their husbands these days. Her tone suggests lack of empathy and understanding of the social or domestic reasons for these women to murder their spouses.

In her conversation with her cellmates, we learn that Dikeledi literally means tears. Her very birth was associated with tragedy, as her father expired when she was born. She was named after her mother's tears. The name can be seen as a metaphor for her life. Her childhood and her married life were both sorrowful. She recalls it as she learns the life stories of her companions. Each of her cellmates had killed her husband. Dikeledi had castrated the private parts of her husband and her new cellmate, Kebonye had done the same to her respective husband. Kebonye's story had been a harrowing one too. She lived with an abusive husband who often subjected her to sexual violence. He was an education officer at a school. There was rampant sexual abuse of schoolgirls by their male teachers. He was himself guilty of abusing these young girls. When he impregnated one of the young students and Kebonye found out about it, she killed him to finally put the abuse at rest. The short and matter of fact discussion between the cellmates sheds light upon a few things. Firstly, nobody is surprised that sexual abuse of young girls is routine at the hands of teachers and other personnel in authoritative roles. Secondly, Kebonye as well as Dikeledi suffer in silence for a prolonged duration before gathering enough strength to kill their respective husbands.

Finally, none of the women entertain the idea of approaching civic authorities or police to help them out, implying that taking recourse to institutional law and justice is not a possibility. Women's position in society is shockingly marginalized and their human rights are abused with impunity by chauvinistic men.

The prison where Dikeledi was lodged was a rehabilitation centre where the inmates were encouraged to perform small acts of labour to earn some money and to keep their prison sentence constructive. Men would build bricks, shoes, cultivate vegetables and women would knit, sew, weave baskets etc. It was soon revealed that Dikeledi was a talented woman. She knit intricate designs on a sweater in a few hours earning everyone's admiration. She told Kebonye that she took pride in hard work. In absence of a supportive husband, she sustained her family by thatching people's roofs, knitting, sewing, weaving baskets etc. She earned money and respect from her fellow villagers. At the end of her first day in prison, Dikeledi remarks to herself that although her life is sad, she has found a treasure in friendship and solidarity of Kebonye and other inmates. Having a sordid life, these moments of compassion are her only treasures that she collects and holds close to her heart.

The writer goes on to discuss men in her society and states that there are two kinds of men. The first kind is at the same psychological level as animals such as dogs, bulls and donkeys. He is predatory, cruel and selfish in nature. He dominates women and sexually abuses them with no regard to creating a family life. He takes no responsibility for the children he produces. With violence and a tendency to cater to his own sexual appetite, he causes women to abort some time. Unfortunately, these kinds of men are in the majority, according to the writer. She then follows up with an analysis about these men. She presents a division of history to understand men, patriarchy, and their behaviour. She says in pre-colonial days, the elders of the tribes laid out conventions and taboos for everyone to follow. The rules were patriarchal in nature. They put men in a superior position and women in a subordinate one. The unruly men were kept somewhat in check due to the rigid societal norms. These norms were, however, very general and did not take into account specific problems.

Second phase is identified as that of colonialism. The colonial powers ensured that most of the men spent their lives toiling in mines in distant lands. They were cut off from family, community, and societal values. They worked for a pittance and suffered greatly for it. The moral framework ensured by society eroded as a result of this.

The final phase, i.e. the independence of the nation didn't help these men either. Freedom from colonial rule saw its own complexities. Salaries and purchasing power grew exponentially. But the newfound financial independence came with reckless power for these men. Now they had no societal rules or colonial rules to discipline themselves with. They became dizzy with power and cared for none except themselves. Dikeledi's husband, Garesego Mokopi was an example of this kind of man. He now had enough money and resources to womanize. He moved from one extra-marital affair to the next without providing for his wife and three sons.

The second kind of man used financial and constitutional freedom to reinvent himself. He was a caring family man who used his time, money and emotions to sustain life around him. He lived a life of happy domesticity by nurturing people

who came into his contact. One such man was Paul Thebolo, Dikeledi's neighbour. He was a kind husband and an upright member of the community. He laughed easily, took good care of his family and contributed to the community by lending a helping hand to anyone who needed it. Most importantly, he treated his wife as an equal partner in their marriage. He loved and respected her. It is evident from Dikeledi's discussions with his wife Kenalepe. When Kenalepe learns that Garesego was brutish in his relationship with Dikeledi, she offers to share her husband with her. In a very unconventional measure, she tells Dikeledi that she must learn for herself how fulfilling sexual relationships could be between two individuals who respected each other. Although Dikeledi never redeems this offer, it depicts the depth of female friendship that is shared between the two women. Dikeledi keeps this offering as a treasure in her heart.

She makes peace with her austere life marked by hard work and good friends. The tranquility of her frugal life is ruptured when she needs 20 rupees for her eldest son's school fees. She requests her husband Garesego, who accuses her of having an extra-marital affair with Paul and refuses to pay her. He believes that men only help women who sleep with them and conversely, women only do household chores for men they're sleeping with. His own perverted mindset prevents him from seeing selflessness in others' good deeds. His chauvinism is reinforced when Paul Thebolo comes to accost him. He starts the rumour that his wife is Paul's concubine to degrade Paul's social standing in the village. The base men in the village relish the gossip because it reduces a good man like Paul to their level.

To assert his dominance over his first wife and to spite Paul Thebolo, Garesego decides to pay for his son's school fees. He sends a message to Dikeledi that he will visit her, and she should keep a hot meal and bath ready for him. Dikeledi understands that he wants a sexual favour in return for the payment. She feeds him and when he goes to sleep, she castrates him. She asks her son to call the police and surrenders herself peacefully. She is assured by Paul that he will take care of her children. The story ends with this assurance.

2.2 CHARACTERS

Now that we have undertaken a brief analysis of the story, it behooves us to familiarize ourselves with the main characters. It will assist us in understanding their motives, strengths and flaws, among other aspects.

Dikeledi - Dikeledi is a tragic figure who is literally named after her mother's tears. She is married to an abusive husband who abandoned her and their three children. She uses ingenuity and industry to eke out a respectable living for her small family. Her kindness and willingness to help others wins her the friendship and regard of many people. Amidst wretched penury, she forges strong bonds with her friends. Her husband demands sexual submission from her in return for a small sum of money she needs for her son's school fees. Unwilling to bow down in the face of her sexual, social, and financial humiliation, she kills her husband by chopping off his genitals. Even prison cannot diminish her spirit as she goes on to make friends, gathering their loyalty and love as treasures of life. She has a harrowing life, but she still manages to find beauty in it.

Garesego - Garesego is a chauvinistic man who feels entitled to his wife's complete sexual submission without providing her with any real sense of home,

love, and security. He believes in male supremacy and abuses his wife constantly before leaving her and moving on to greener pastures. He keeps several concubines without committing to any of them. He is driven by a false sense of superior ego and doesn't think twice before abusing or physically assaulting his wife. His new job enables him to spend freely but not once does he reconcile his financial abundance to his own responsibilities as a parent and a husband. He is described as a 'female prostitute' by the narrator for his propensity to seek attention and to parade his sexual conquests.

Paul Thebolo- Paul is described as a 'poem of tenderness'. He is in a symbiotic relationship not only with his wife but also with the rest of the village. Paul is an icon of the evolved man that the narrator refers to when she talks about the binary of the kinds of African men. You may refer to later units to learn more about this. He is presented as a foil to Garesego's character. Unlike Garesego, he loves and cherishes his wife and family. When he notices the good in people, he acknowledges it. His honest compliments and generous provisions to his less privileged neighbours are indicative of his character as a pillar of the community. At the same time, his refusal to copulate with Dikeledi is indicative of his character as a man of integrity. He becomes the epicentre of the village community as uneducated men come to him seeking help with their forms and correspondence and, educated men come up to him to discuss contemporary politics. He confronts Garesego when the latter indulges in malicious speculation about his relationship with Dikeledi. Although Garesego and many villagers indulge in denigrating him, he doesn't stop caring and providing for her household. He proves that he is a virtuous man when he promises to send Banabotho to school and provide for Dikeledi's children while she suffers her prison sentence.

Kenalepe- Kenalepe is Dikeledi's bosom friend and Paul's wife. Her arrival in Dikeledi's life marks the only time of bliss in Dikeledi's otherwise tragic life. She was beautiful and vivacious and liberally shared her good fortune with her friend. They became keepers of each other's intimate secrets. She offers to loan her husband to Dikeledi so her friend can experience a rewarding sexual experience. She is utterly confident that neither Paul nor Dikeledi will misuse this proposition. She is a little naive since the constant bliss of her life doesn't provide her with depth of thought. She was blessed with fawning parents and a loving husband who adores her thoroughly. Her soulful friendship with Kenalepe is one of the few joys in the latter's life.

Kebonye - Kebonye is Dikeledi's cellmate in the prison. She is guilty of the same crime as Dikeledi. Tired of her husband's abusive ways, she castrates him with a razor. She shares her own harrowing tale in a straightforward manner. Her account adds to Dikeledi's own testimony as a woman who has suffered from a brutish man. He kicks her in her private parts when he wants to sleep with her. He also rapes and abuses his young students and impregnates them. Kebonye is finally exhausted from his abuse and castrates him. Her story is aligned with Dikeledi's to underscore the plight of disenfranchised women caught in unequal marriages. They don't have any legal or social escape from brutal husbands. The only option left to them is either to suffer throughout their lives or to kill their husbands and end the abuse.

Banabotho - Banabotho is the eldest of Dikeledi's three sons. He passed his school exam with Grade 'A'. To Dikeledi's joy and pride he is qualified to have a secondary education. However, his school fees proves to be a struggle for her

and works as a catalyst for the events to come. In the absence of a sturdy father figure, he could have become a wastrel, but he sees his mother struggle to afford a good education for him and his brothers. So he puts his heart and soul into his studies.

Wardess- The wardess of the prison in which Dikeledi is lodged represents the public attitude towards female criminals. Instead of attempting to understand the context and reasons behind Dikeledi's crime, she treats her with wry sarcasm. She tells her that there are other women who have committed the same crime so she'll be in good company. She casually reduces the crime to a new fad amongst women. Her indifference and callous disregard to her inmates shows the systemic apathy towards women.

Sundry villagers - Bessie Head portrays the simple joys and stark prejudices of rural life with equal ease. Most of the villagers lead lives of poverty and although they share the joys and sorrows of each other's lives but they are also quick to slander Paul and Dikeledi's relationship. They delight in cruel gossip especially about Paul Thebolo since they are envious of his superior moral standards.

2.3 HISTORICAL CLASSIFICATION OF MEN

Bessie Head undertakes a socio-historical classification of men in the African society. She says that there are two types of men. The first kind is a selfish, cruel, irresponsible male who acts without any consideration to others. He sexually subjugates women and does not fulfill any responsibilities towards his progeny. He is reduced to the level of base animals who copulate with the females of their species without any regard to her consent and who don't nurture their young. She uses the imagery of animals like dogs, bulls, and donkeys to illustrate her argument. She further analyses historical treatment meted out to such men in three-time spans. In ancient tribal societies, before colonialism, elders of the community created social mores, taboos, and moral guidelines which influenced people's attitudes and behaviours. The moral framework was broadly created for the entire community and was extremely male centric. Women were considered secondary and therefore their needs, aspirations, and rights were neglected.

The colonial invasion did no favours to this category of men. The imperialist policies dictated the African men to work in perilous conditions in South African mines, often away from their families and children. The racial policies and discriminatory taxation ensured that African men were reduced to migrant labourers who led isolated lives for long durations of time. This led to the breakdown of family life and traditional community in their original tribes. The ancient stronghold of tribal morals and customs saw deep erosion as a direct result of this male exodus.

Independence from colonial rule, presented a unique opportunity to rediscover and recreate the nation and the community. However, a long postcolonial degradation had robbed these men of any moral integrity. They found new forms of employment and financial excesses, but they were free from any social or systemic obligations. Instead of finding an opportunity to alter their lives and rebuild their communities, they used the money and freedom for reckless decadence. Garesego is presented as an example of such men. He used his money and influence to indulge in sensual pleasures while neglecting his wife and children.

Garesego can be contrasted with the second category of men. The second kind of man, according to Head, can be exemplified by Paul Thebolo. He was enlightened enough to create and nurture his family as well as his community. He is kind and generous towards his family and his neighbours. His house becomes the epicentre of political discussions, evening gatherings, and general bon-homie amongst the villagers.

Women, however, have been excluded from this categorization as doubly marginalized. Colonialism stripped them of their rights as citizens and they were subjugated as being inferior to men during all three periods of history that Head discusses. Women like Dikeledi weren't benefitted by any socio-political changes accompanied by independence. Their condition as doubly repressed is made amply clear by the women characters of the story. Even women in improved circumstances, like Kenalepe are kept out of important spheres of power such as local politics and world affairs. Paul's marriage with Kenalepe might be blissful but it is by no means egalitarian. In an increasingly unequal society, men and women are both victims of oppression.

2.4 REDEMPTIVE POWERS OF FEMALE SOLIDARITY

Bessie Head creates a model of female solidarity as can be experienced in the rural world of Dikeledi and Kenalepe. Conventional patriarchy and postcolonialism had collectively rendered women virtually powerless in an uneven world. The lives of women are restricted to domestic quarters. The world of employment, politics, current affairs etc are beyond their means. This exclusion from decision making and financial empowerment worsens the conditions of women. Women like Dikeledi cannot have a dialogue with the systemic patriarchy because they aren't 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.

When Dikeledi's husband deserts her and their three children, she takes recourse to the cottage industry of sewing, knitting, thatching roofs to financially sustain her family. She has no access to formal education or formal employment. When she hears Paul discuss world politics with other male members of the village community, she realizes that there is a larger world around her and education provides access to it. Unlettered women like herself are excluded from it. She savours these details with her friend as she mentions that 'a completely new world opened up' as she heard these lively political discussions. Women only get conversational scraps about politics and philosophy while men are given the liberty to participate in policy making. Although Kenalepe was born to loving parents and married to a progressive man, her role in life is restricted to the domestic sphere; birthing children, cooking and caring for her family. As far as Dikeledi and her ilk 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 friendship she strikes with Kenalepe and other women, including Kebonye. The poignancy in the story stems from Dikeledi's unfaltering optimism regardless of unmitigated cruelties she is subjected to. Her grit and determination are a testimony to her unflinching belief in basic human kindness. Her willingness to share, and to help others creates the bedrock of her relationship with the people around her. The deep friendship between women is a potent salve against perpetual alienation that women like Dikeledi feel.

2.5 ORAL STORYTELLING

'In reality, all I simply did was record stories that had happened and had been told to me and described to me. Most of the stories there are based on reality, they are not inventions. They happened, they are changed. They are decorated, they are interpreted. But there's a basis there in fact, in reality.' (Head)

Bessie Head wrote in an exclusively oral tradition of storytelling. Dear student, if you read the story aloud, you will notice it has a different auditive flavour. It will feel like a true story that you have heard from the narrator. Botswana, like many other African countries, had a rich tradition of oral literature that included folktales, songs, proverbs etc. Bessie Head uses real incidents and fictionalizes them for her anthology. *The Collector of Treasures*, itself is based on a real incident that she learned about. The fictional world draws upon the oral history and uses it to provide relevant social commentary. It becomes the voice of the marginalized African women and enables the reader to comprehend their lives without fetishizing their poverty or race. The act of storytelling implies participation. The act is based on sharing. The individual's life experiences must bear lessons for the community. Dikeledi's story is thus, the story of several other women who suffer years of patriarchal abuse and are finally pushed to commit acts of violence.

The oral gossip between Dikeledi and Kenalepe is different from the informed conversation between Paul Thebolo and his friends. However, both are valid forms of oral tradition. Dikeledi's tale of her life with the richness of experience sheds copious amounts of light on the rustic life and women's subordinate position in it. She borrows from an oral culture when she narrativizes her own experiences to characters within the story. As her own introduction, she tells Paul proudly, 'all my friends know that I'm the woman whose thatch doesn't leak.' She repeats it to her new friends in the jail cell. The simple sentence highlights her resourcefulness in the face of a bleak life and her pride in it. The manner of speaking is anecdotal. With 'everyone knows' she establishes the beginning of her story. It lays the ground for the forthcoming veracity of her story as that of a sustained struggle. She doesn't take a new husband or choose to be someone's concubine to survive, she worked hard and gave what little she had generously. Her conversations with Kenalepe are marked with the unbridled joys of sharing each other's lives. While neither has access to books or formal education, their conversations are rife with emotional knowledge and a desire to learn more. Idle gossip or the manipulation of truth is the other side of the story for village life. People speculate about Dikeledi's relationship with her neighbour. They also chastise Garesego for not paying the fees of his own son. However, the reasons are never charitable. The reason is to establish conjugal control on Dikeledi's sexuality.

2.6 DIKELEDI'S CRIME

According to Craig McKenzie, 'Dikeledi's act should not be perceived as an arbitrary act of retribution but as a socially determined act'. To examine this statement, one must retrace the story as a work of fiction based on real incidents Bessie Head had documented from her life in rural Serowe. Her engagement with real women and their daily struggles garbed in the familiar strains of a short story provide valuable insights in the female domain. *The Collector of Treasures* is a fictionalization of a gruesome incident that actually took place in rural Serowe. Head understands the need to flesh out the story around the incidents in order to provide context to the women who are compelled to commit crimes.

Dikeledi's crime can only be comprehended within the framework of her travails in a lop-sided system where women have no social or political currency. She is housed in the company of four other women who have committed the same type of crime. At this juncture it is of critical importance to note that her cellmate Kebonye killed her husband in similar vein, and for similar reasons. Her husband was a serial rapist. After raping and impregnating several of his charges at the rural school, he was finally killed by a desperate Kebonye. Like Garesego, he was guilty of committing sexual crimes against defenseless women and getting complete exemption from any kind of punishment. Men slip through the biased legal system which does not hold them responsible for crime against women. Women like Dikeledi and Kebonye are emblematic of many disempowered women who suffer for years before acting against their tyrants. In the story called 'Life', from the same collection, the husband gets a prison sentence of merely five years after murdering his wife. Compare the quantum of justice in 'Life' with that of 'The Collector of Treasures' where Dikeledi gets a life term for killing her abusive husband. This highlights the institutionalized bias against women criminals versus male criminals. It also raises doubts on the very definition of the idea of crime.

To the community, sexual crime against young female students by an education officer is not a matter of legal significance. The parents of the raped teenager come to Kebonye's house to complain about her husband instead of reporting the matter to the police. Similarly, Dikeledi doesn't bring the issue of conjugal negligence and marital rape in the judicial purview. Sexual crime committed by men is conveniently out of the sphere of the legal justice system. Women like Dikeledi and Kebonye are expected to suffer in silence. Bessie Head talks about the breakdown of communal conventions of the tribes before colonization. The old tribal structure was corroded by colonialism. Hence, there isn't the tribal hierarchy of elders who, hypothetically, could have dealt with men like Garesego. In the absence of redressal at the community level and at the legal level, vulnerable women such as Dikeledi find themselves forced to commit acts of violence to be freed of oppression. Garesego ruptures the peaceful purity of Dikeledi's life with her children and friendly neighbours. Dikeledi's crime is her act of revolt against the perpetual maltreatment she receives at the hands of her husband.

Bessie Head's story encourages the reader to see Dikeledi's crime as a part of the marginalized women's resistance. In a complex world marred by patriarchy, erosion of traditional tribal value-systems, and postcolonial exploitation, her final act of violence is her refusal to conform to the status quo. Her crime can not be treated as an ordinary crime committed by an individual. Her crime is her statement against misogyny and society's failure to correct it.

2.7 ANIMAL IMAGERY IN THE STORY

Head borrows motifs from the world of animals to comment upon the social behaviour of male characters. Dikeledi and the women of rural Botswana are constantly imperiled by the barbaric behaviour of the patriarchal men. Emboldened by newly found economic abundance, misogynistic men like Garesego believe that they can prey upon defenseless women. The declining power of the tribal customs and traditions enables predatory men such as Garesego to reject any sense of responsibility and to lead a selfish hedonistic life. The narrator uses animal imagery to underscore the bestial nature of such men. Head categorizes him with animals like bulls, donkeys, and dogs, since he doesn't assume any responsibility for his progeny and he has no respect for women. She furthers the imagery by suggesting 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 herself. Threatened by Dikeledi's humble prosperity, he baits Paul to confront him. He goes to Dikeledi's house to 'mark his territory' like an animal. On the other hand evolved men such as Paul symbolize empathy and compassion and therefore, have become a poem. Essentially, Head's usage of animals like bulls, dogs, cocks etc. is to establish the lack of societal principles of dignity in marriage and family which form the base of the community in Serowe.

2.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (QUESTION WITH ANSWER KEYS)

- i) Is Dikeledi's crime unique or representative?

One needs to situate Dikeledi's crime in the widespread domestic violence and abuse faced by African women. Within the context of the story, we see how there are at least five women in Dikeledi's cell who are sentenced for committing similar crimes. Discuss the implications of a growing number of women who have chosen to refuse sexual manipulation and violence at the hands of their husbands. Since there is no viable scope of justice in the formal legal system, and the traditional system of tribal justice has been weaned, the only recourse left for the cornered women is to take their husband's lives.

- ii) Examine the potential of female solidarity in 'The Collector of Treasures'. Inclusive feminist consciousness permeates the works of Bessie Head. In times of severe distress, Dikeledi is supported by her kind neighbours in a symbiotic relationship. True friendship is forged between Dikeledi and Kenalepe. Locate the tangent of their relationship as it starts with neighbourly reciprocity and evolves into love and respect for one another. Explore the mutual accord among fellow prisoners lodged in the same cell as Dikeledi. Their misfortune and empathy for each other binds them in a reassuring relationship.

- iii) How does Bessie Head classify the types of men in the society?

Head engages in a socio-historical classification of men into two categories across three distinct periods of time, pre-colonial, colonial, and post-independence. Read the relevant unit to analyse the male characters in the

story according to this categorization. Evaluate the life choices made by Garesego in the wider context of men's position in the village community. Also, look at the rampant sexual crime committed by men in the position of power. Men like Kebonye's husband and Garesego hold important public offices and yet they abuse their positions to exploit women.

- iv) Examine the male chauvinism prevalent in the African society in light of the story,

'The Collector of Treasures'.

Bessie Head's 'The Collector of Treasures' is peopled with chauvinistic men who have sexual exploits with complete impunity. Garesego is the stereotype of such men. He marries a much younger woman and leaves her and their children to fend for themselves. Explore the idea of his toxic masculinity and how it harms him as well as people around him. Revisit the relevant section to understand how male oppression is not an isolated phenomenon. It is a byproduct of socio-political changes and postcolonial restructuring of the society in men's favour.

- v) Critically comment on the title of the story, 'The Collector of Treasures'.
'The Collector of Treasures' refers to the central protagonist of the story; Dikeledi. Remember, she is optimistic in the face of astute poverty, husband's abuse and abandonment, and skewed gender dynamics. However, she remains optimistic and cherishes whatever little tokens of kindness and friendship life offers her. She lays more emphasis on these moments of syncretic harmony rather than myriad oppressions she is subject to.

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UNIT 3 AMA ATA AIDOO, ‘THE GIRL WHO CAN’

Structure

3.0 Objectives

3.1 Introduction

3.1.1 The Writer’s Bio- brief

3.1.2 Story of *The Girl Who Can*

3.2 Characters

3.3 Role of Adjoa as a Child Narrator

3.4 Oral Storytelling

3.5 Narrativizing Mother’s Silence

3.6 Agency of Adjoa’s Self

3.7 Walking and Running as Metaphors for Tradition and Modernity

3.8 Check Your Progress (Questions with Answer Keys)

3.9 Summing Up

1.10 Select Reading List

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we will learn about Ama Ata Aidoo’s life and works. We will examine her works as distinct literary representations from Ghana. We will situate the short story, ‘The Girl Who Can’ within the larger oeuvre of women writers of Africa. After reading this Unit, you will be able to: learn about the life and works of Ama Ata Aidoo.

- comprehend ‘The Girl Who Can’ as a story written in oral tradition.
- understand the role of society and culture in placing reproductive expectations at the very core of women’s lives.
- situate the power dynamics within matrilineal families.
- understand the strength of female solidarity in uplifting women in the vastly changing cultural milieu.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

3.1.1 The Writer’s Bio-brief

Ama Ata Aidoo was born in 1940 to progressive parents, Mfantse Chief, Nana Yaw Fama and Mme Elizabeth aba Abasema Bosu, in central Ghana. Her father firmly believed in the importance of learning and established the first school in her village. She was amongst the first students to enroll in that school. Her family belonged to the matrilineal tradition and she grew up recognizing the female authority and potential. Her parents’ progressive views ensured a constant influx of travelling artists, wandering prophets, and communal gatherings in their household which influenced her worldview. Her unique family life enabled her

to develop a nuanced understanding of Ghanaian culture, colonialism, and women's position in the society. At a young age, she decided that she wanted to be a poet and published her first short story when she was nineteen years old. She studied literature at the university of Ghana and subsequently worked there as a lecturer. She was appointed as the Minister of Education in 1982 and she resolved to make free education accessible to all. When she realized that she could not achieve her aim, she resigned from active politics and moved to Zimbabwe to develop a career as a full time writer. She also taught at the African Studies Department at Brown University.

Aidoo's notable works include, *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965), *Anowa* (1970), *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977), *Someone Talking to Sometime* (1986), *An Angry Letter in January* (1992), *The Girl Who Can and Other Stories* (1997). She was awarded the 1992 Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book (Africa) for *Changes: A Love Story* (1993). She also went on to found The Mbaasem Foundation in 2000 to provide much needed support to the development and growth of African women writers and to promote their work.

3.1.2 Story of *The Girl Who Can*

The Girl Who Can and Other Stories is Aidoo's second book of short stories published in 1997. The anthology has stories with strong female protagonists. There are various issues and concerns addressed in all the stories. Most of them deal with maternity and reproductive issues, feminism, societal definitions of gender roles, misogyny, influence of postcolonialism etc. Most of the stories are written in a clear and conversational prose, drawing from the oral literary tradition of the Fanti people. The conversational writing style of Aidoo enables us to witness the lives of the characters very closely.

The Girl Who Can is a short story written in an oral style. The very first line 'They say that I was born in Hasodzi; and it is a very big village in the Central Region of our country, Ghana' sounds like an anecdote orally recounted by the young narrator. Written in first person narrative, it deals with the life of a seven years old girl, Adjoa who lives in a house with her mother whom she calls Maami and her grandmother whom she calls Nana. Adjoa is a bright young girl who finds it hard to express herself without being silenced or ridiculed. She is often perplexed at the duality of Nana's approach. She is either met with a shocked Nana who forbids her from repeating her statements sometimes, and other times she finds Nana racked with laughter over their childlike innocence and repeats them to her friends and neighbours. Young Adjoa is confused at this hypocrisy of the grown-ups. Her thoughts are stifled as she doesn't know if she should express herself or be quiet.

Moreover, Nana and Maami constantly discuss the state of Adjoa's legs to her consternation. Nana finds them too thin and long for a girl destined to become a mother. She is concerned about the fact that in future Adjoa's thin legs may not be able to support strong hips for childbearing. Here, it is important to remember that Nana believes that the blame for being born with thin legs rests with Adjoa. It is squarely her fault for not being born with thicker legs and fleshy calves. The present skinny state of her legs is constantly lamented as they are considered useless. At such instances, Nana refers to her daughter's poor choice of a husband who is not in the picture. It reduces the mother to helpless tears as she finds it unbearable to reflect upon her unfortunate marriage.

Adjoa is herself curious about the entire issue. Being a child, she doesn't understand what childbearing legs look like and wishes to see them. Since she is perfectly capable of walking long distances and running fast, she doesn't find any shortcoming in her own legs. She walks to her school daily. It is estimated to be five kilometres away from her own village but unlike others, Adjoa doesn't mind walking so far because she enjoys her time at school. As an unlettered woman herself, her mother firmly believes that a school education would greatly benefit her daughter. She wants Adjoa to rise above ignorance and acquire knowledge for self- advancement.

The major breakthrough in the story comes when Adjoa is selected as a runner for her age group, to represent the school in district sports events. The news is met with disbelief at her home and Nana marches to the school to confirm the veracity of it. To Adjoa's great surprise, she finds that Nana takes up washing and ironing her school uniform daily indicating her acceptance of Adjoa's new role as an athlete. When she wins the award for the best all- around junior athlete, Nana carries the trophy on her back with great pride. The undue concern regarding Adjoa's thin legs is finally dispelled. Her thin legs may not support childbearing hips, but they can enable her to run very fast and be a good athlete. The trifecta of the three generations of women in the house end the story on distinct notes of a newly found sense of pride and contentment. While Nana is proudly exhorting her granddaughter's achievement, the mother is overwhelmed at her child's success and absolution from the blame of birthing a girl with thin legs. Young Adjoa is perplexed at this change in the adults'behaviour but rejoices in her newly discovered agentive self.

3.2 CHARACTERS

After reading the story, we must undertake the exercise to familiarize ourselves with the main characters. All the characters have distinct perspectives towards their lives and issues and it would help us understand their motives better.

Adjoa

Adjoa is the narrator and the central character of the story. She is a seven years old girl and presents the events with her childlike innocence and natural curiosity. Her forthright opinions and guileless observations about the world around her enable us to see her small village from a child's eyes. In the small family comprised of her mother and grandmother, she struggles to understand the world inhabited by the adults. She is alternately told to keep her thoughts to herself or she is made to repeat them for the adults' amusement. When she wins a sports tournament regardless of grandmother's constant lament about her legs, it reaffirms her faith in her own self. She is able to achieve respect, recognition, and her grandmother's pride using the same legs which were considered useless.

Nana

Nana is the head of the tripartite household. As the matriarch, she represents the traditional outlook in the story. As the leader of the house, she is dominant but loving towards her daughter and Adjoa. At the same time, she taunts her daughter for marrying unwisely. She provides a frank commentary on the social position of women as mothers. Adjoa is outspoken and has the imagined disability of being born with long and thin legs. To the grandmother these qualities won't let

her be a mother. She draws a parallel between children born with disabilities and Adjoa who has legs too skinny to support childbearing hips. However, her character evolves with her granddaughter's victory as a runner. Her perception about women's role in life alters as she examines new possibilities and potential in Adjoa's future.

Maami

Mother is a quiet character who acts as a bridge between Adjoa's restive curiosity and her own mother's orthodoxy. She lives with a strong sense of repentance as she is constantly reminded that she did not choose a husband wisely. To compound her grief, Nana berates her for birthing a girl with perceived deformity of thin legs. Despite being admonished by her mother for being a failure as a mother, she resists the idea that her daughter is useless as a girl. Since she was denied a formal education, she understands the need and significance of it. Going against Nana's wishes, she enrolls Adjoa in the school so that she does not lead a life of ignorance. The story ends with her state of speechlessness. We shall discuss that in greater detail in subsequent units.

3.3 ROLE OF ADJOA AS A CHILD NARRATOR

Ama Ata Aidoo uses the seven years old Adjoa as the narrator of her story. Although she is a small child, she is extremely observant and intuitive. She watches the world around her keenly and presents a unique worldview to the reader using simple vocabulary. Her doubts and questions about her village life seldom elicit comprehensible responses from the adults. She is often given contradictory advice by Nana. She is alternately told to either be quiet or to repeat what she has already said for the purpose of adults' entertainment. They find her ideas so preposterous that she is repeatedly told to 'never, never, but NEVER to repeat that.' The abrupt dismissal comes without any accompanying reason. She is never told why she mustn't utter a few things and conversely why she must repeat others only to have adults laugh at them. Her predictable discontent at this duality leads to a vociferous internal monologue.

Although Adjoa might have stifled her voice, her inner monologue is as perennial as ever. She tells herself, 'when I think back on it now, those two, Nana and my mother, must have been discussing my legs from the day I was born. What I am sure of is that when I came out of the land of sweet, soft silence into the world of noise and comprehension, the first topic I met was my legs.' The exasperation of Adjoa is legitimate because the discussion is so relentless, it might have started at her very birth. Her exaggeration does not make her an unreliable narrator. On the contrary, it is a mark of the oral tradition. She doesn't see the world from the adults' perspective and hence leads to a clearer account of the daily rhythms of the village life.

Adjoa shows great insight in understanding that her small, all female family had divided opinion on the state of her legs. She finds her two 'favourite people', Maami and Nana arguing about her thin spindly legs. As the narrator who is the center of her mother's and grandmother's love and concern, she wishes to assure them that her legs are not of any consequence. Yet, she lacks the linguistic finesse of her grandmother to make a compelling argument.

Dear student, you must have noticed that the child narrator doesn't provide a social commentary about hunger or social issues out of context. This is a story

set in rural Ghana. Since the child is merely seven years old, she only tackles issues that directly impact her. When she leaves food in her plate, she is met with Nana's disappointment for being insensitive to the famine victims. Thus, she is able to connect with the larger reality of others in Ghana who are struggling for adequate nourishment.

At the same time, the usage of the child narrator limits the narrative since she can't describe her mother's silences. She articulates the incomprehensible silences within the context of her mother's supposed failures in marriage and birthing a girl with thin legs. She understands the implications of the hushed protests and defeated tones, but she doesn't possess the requisite socio-political vocabulary to analyze them. It is left to the reader to grasp the implications of absences in the otherwise straightforward narrative. The narration doesn't falter when dealing with the absent father figure. It is hinted, through breaks and silences in Adjoa's narration, that he was an inadequate husband although neither Nana nor Maami emphasize it. The women only household comes to life with the direct perspective of a child. As Nana Banyiwa Horne says, 'By making the girl-child the narrative voice in this story, Aidoo makes the reclaiming of voice for girl-children a universal prerogative.'

3.4 ORAL STORYTELLING

"We cannot assume that all literature should be written. One doesn't have to be so patronising about oral literature...the art of the speaking voice can be brought back so easily...We don't have to write for readers, we can write for listeners."
(Aidoo)

Dear student, we have discussed the role of Adjoa as a child narrator in earlier units. The story starts like an anecdotal account of a little girl. She directly addresses the reader in a familiar tone of an acquaintance. The emphasis on words enables the reader to visualize the authoritative and wizened Nana, incredulously staring at the young Adjoa after she has made an observation, 'you say what?'. The self-deprecating modesty with which she says, 'as far as I could see' or 'that I don't know' highlight the orality of the tale told by a child narrator.

The repetition is not redundant. The stress on 'Never, ever, but NEVER' paints the picture of a conversation between the young curious Adjoa and her wiser, no-nonsense grandmother. The orality of the tale makes it universal. Usage of local proverbs in conversation, such as touching wood in a gesture of superstition, is instrumental in reinstating the orality of the story. Aidoo herself says, "...I haven't tried to speak the Queen's English. I've always tried to let the flavour of my African background come through in terms of the idioms and so on"

Adjoa is the narrator but she isn't ubiquitous. She sees and remarks upon looks, silences, and sounds of her family life but leaves her mother's and grandmother's thoughts to speculation.

The girl child navigates the world of adults and absorbs more than she expresses. Her silent remarks to herself about the elders' ambiguous behaviours are reminiscent of the universal childhood experiences. Since the story borrows from oral literary traditions, Aidoo doesn't reveal the name of the grandmother who is the hierarchical head of the three-member family. She is referred to as Nana for the entire length of the story. The mother is referred to as Maami. They are

defined by their socially determined names. Any independent identity they have is secondary to their gendered identity as mothers and daughters. Within the scope of the story, the scope of their character is fixed by the young girl who is telling the story. The reader hears the secrets that the storyteller divulges and is free to speculate about the gaps and silences. As Ghanaian scholar Abena Busia says for Aidoo, “She is a consummate storyteller. We do not so much ‘read’ her stories as listen to them, or rather, overhear them.

3.5 NARRATIVIZING MOTHER’S SILENCE

Ama Ata Aidoo presents Maami as the mother with small acts of courage and hushed silences. She inhabits the small world of the trinity as she is poised between Nana and Adjoa. The quiet mother has limited authority of her own in the domestic space. Aidoo deftly deals with Maami’s disenfranchisement with half sentences, long looks, and small acts of valour such as speaking up for her daughter. She is found guilty of choosing an irresponsible husband and birthing a girl whose legs are too thin and long. Her protests about Adjoa’s legs are stifled in the grandmother’s presence. The absent father is always referred to as a ‘man like that’. A considerate Nana, who is sharp of observation, fails to see grievous harm she subjects her daughter to. In the absence of men, the tyranny is held by the parochial tradition that is quick to assign blame to women. Even the matrilineal families can assign blame to women and hold them responsible for circumstances beyond their control. Women such as Maami find it difficult to assert their opinions in contempt of the conventional wisdom.

It is pertinent to note that Maami herself never silences her own daughter. The stringent act of censorship and disciplining is solely grandmother’s prerogative. Maami pushes for her child’s right to a formal education. In an argument about the role of education, grandmother finds futility and wastage of time. Maami firmly believes in enlightening powers of formal education. Her state as an unlettered woman leads her to live a life of ignorance and darkness. She doesn’t want her child to be deprived of learning. Maami’s silences are indicative of her own disadvantaged positioning as a single mother who doesn’t have the benefits of a mainstream schooling. Her self-affirmation comes from vicariously living through her daughter and seeing her acquire life skills that Maami couldn’t afford for her own self.

Maami’s silence serves dual purpose. It demonstrates her own marginalization within the small family headed by a rigid Nana. At the same time, her small voice gives her daughter moral strength and encourages her to ask inconvenient questions. Her opinions are truncated and denied by the constant reminder of her unfortunate past. Women who don’t fit neatly into the socially prescribed roles are deliberately silenced and pushed to the margins. Adjoa’s defiance is a disruption of Maami’s silence. She speaks for herself and her gagged mother. Education and athletic ability empower her to speak out.

3.6 AGENCY OF ADJOA’S SELF

Adjoa’s legs are the focal point through which one can understand the position of the orthodox grandmother, the voiceless mother, and the young and defiant grandchild. The central dilemma is one that is based on traditional perception of women’s role in the society as mothers. The matrilineal family of the three women

lives in domestic harmony for most aspects except Adjoa's legs and the mother's husband. The constant refrain in the house is that of a future problem about Adjoa's reproductive self. According to the grandmother, Adjoa's very existence would be a failure if she can't become a mother. In the matrilineal tradition, it is the women's imperative and responsibility to ensure continuation of the family line. While the birth of a girl child is a welcome occasion in the household, her importance rests on her ability to reproduce. Her hypothetical transformation from a child into a mother connects her with the strong matrilineal tradition of ancestors, mothers, aunts, and companions. Her future inability to do so, arouses feelings of fear and failure amongst her mother and grandmother. Her identity is reduced to her gender and her gender is defined by her ability to bear children. Here, it is important to note that Nana's worry is rooted in the anxiety of the socio-cultural expectations from women. She doesn't speak from an individualistic desire for Adjoa to have children. Her fretting situates Adjoa in the Ghanaian milieu of her time as would-be mothers.

Adjoa's positioning as a young, school going child is in stark comparison with her grandmother's and mother's. The generational distance allows her to speak, think, and act without the restrictions faced by her mother and grandmother. Armed with all the myriad advantages of a formal education, she wished to reassure her elders that her body is alright. Being raised in an all girl household, she values the nurturing affection of her mother and grandmother but she is also able to register the oppression of the elderly over the younger members. Her own life is not cushioned with comforts. We read that she must walk over five kilometers to reach her school daily. She doesn't complain about it like the rest of her schoolmates for she finds school a refreshing break in her life. With a child's simplicity, she concludes her school going experience into one sentence; 'school is nice'. She doesn't brag about winning in races in her school to her family until she is selected to run for the junior section of the district games. The extraordinary feat about Adjoa's running is not her winning but that of the dramatic shift it brings in the perception of her legs at home. The news of her selection draws remarkable responses at home, since Nana starts repositioning her legs as something useful.

Adjoa is able to claim her subjectivity and redefine herself because of generational distance and the benefit of formal education. At seven, she uses logic and deduction to understand that childbearing wouldn't likely be a problem for her since her mother and grandmother have been able to give birth. Although it isn't mentioned in the story itself, the reader can understand the biological determinism inherent in the soundness of this logic. She comes from a tradition of strong and nurturing women. She repeats to the reader that she had faith in her body all along even though she doesn't say it out loud for fear of ridicule. Her self-affirmation comes from being able to find newer and perhaps, more fulfilling potentials of her body.

3.7 WALKING AND RUNNING AS METAPHORS FOR TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Female solidarity between the authoritative grandmother and the precocious Adjoa is represented by the tropes of walking and running in the story. Nana's attempt to first verify and then support Adjoa as a junior runner for the sports tournament leads to evolution of one's understanding of her character. She re-examines

Adjoa's legs as the ones that are capable of performing other glorious functions even if they aren't thick enough to support her as a future mother. She steals glances at them as if assessing their worth in the fresh light of this discovery. Her efforts to wash Adjoa's school uniform and iron them with a charcoal iron borrowed from a neighbour point to her desire to assist Adjoa in her newly discovered aim. She irons the school uniform with such determination that it shines with stiffness. Her contribution towards enabling Adjoa's full potential points to the larger female communal support for each other.

Nana's choice in taking pride in Adjoa's appearance and bearing witness to her feats of athletics connect the two ends of the family hierarchy. The long walk from home to school and back is the confluence of grandmother's tradition and Adjoa's modernity. Grandmother chooses fresh clothes from her old brass bowl to walk to school every day while she sends Adjoa in a stiffly ironed school uniform. She walks a little behind Adjoa and other children to distance herself from them. She pointedly tells Adjoa that she doesn't care for athletics but is secretly won by the idea that her grandchild could be a successful runner. The novelty of running brings with it a sense of introspection of the traditional structures of culture.

When Adjoa wins every race she participated in, Nana carries the shiny trophy home. She carries the 'gleaming cup back. Like they do with the babies, and other precious things'. Running and winning at something that tests an individual's strength and endurance is the true subversion in the story. The patriarchal structures that define women solely in the roles of wives and mothers crumble by Adjoa's running and Nana's walking by her side. Adjoa's victory brings her closer to a self-awareness which opens new prospects for her and girls like her. Her resistance comes from action since she isn't allowed to use words that might disrupt the societal order. The conventional gender roles of mothering are replaced by a choice that is symbolized by running. Her ability to win accolades for winning opens new avenues for her future self and marks the beginning of a new order in which girl children aren't confined to a single function.

3.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (QUESTIONS WITH ANSWER KEYS)

- a) What do you think of the child narrator in 'The Girl Who Can'?

Ama Ata Aidoo uses the first-person narrative of the seven years old Adjoa in 'The Girl Who Can'. While it makes the narration a tad simplistic, it appears to be real and reliable since the central conflict of the story surrounds the narrator and her imagined incapability to bear children. Since the narrator is a young child, there is no ambivalence in her understanding of the world around her. Explore the self-reflexive nature of the narrative. Although the young narrator is forbidden to voice certain opinions, she doesn't stop herself from introspecting them. Explore the distinctness of a child narrator as compared to an adult one.

- b) Examine the techniques of oral literary tradition in 'The Girl Who Can'.

African literature had a strong oral heritage in the form of songs, folktales, proverbs, beating drums etc. The verbal messages which could be sung, tuned on musical instruments, and narrated from one generation to another

form the bedrock of Afante tradition. Aidoo draws upon the same tradition in her literary works. While reading the story you must have found examples of audible culture in the form or repetition, different structuring of sentences, proverbs etc.

- c) What is the role of education in Adjoa's self-emancipation?

The narrator states that other than her legs, the other topic that elicited divided opinions was Adjoa's enrollment in the formal school. It bears merit to emphasize the pivotal role that formal education plays in her life. Her long walks to school materialize into an opportunity to run for the district level sports competitions. Her victory brings a sea change in the grandmother's perception of her body and it reaffirms her confidence in her own self. In addition to that, Adjoa's formal education must have honed Adjoa's arguments to a degree. Compare Maami's lack of education to Adjoa's experience at school and the recognition it brings her.

- d) Discuss Nana's relationship with Adjoa.

Notice how the tripartite family is a part of the matrilineal tradition. With a strictly conservative grandmother at the top of the family hierarchy, and a feebly resistant mother, Adjoa finds herself loved but patronized. Nana's fierce disciplinarian is a mark of tougher times. Her love for Adjoa and her solidarity with her running is magnified by her acts of support. You must investigate Nana's change of stance towards Adjoa's education and her body in the light of her generational difference and an evolution into a liberal matriarch.

- e) What is the significance of Maami's silence in the story?

Maami's character is provided with long silences, truncated arguments cut short by a strict mother, defeated tones and a sure zeal for her child's better future. In the relevant section, you must have read about Maami's guilt at a failed marriage and Adjoa's supposed inability. Develop upon her victimhood as the site of oppression as Nana constantly admonishes her for being a failure as an individual since she failed as a wife and a mother. Regardless of her own marginalization, she works tirelessly for a better prospect for her child. Examine the implication of her silence at the end. Could her final silence be a symbol of her vindication?

3.9 SUMMING UP

To conclude our Unit on 'The Girl who Can', we must return to the Objectives outlined at the beginning of this unit. Dear reader, now you must be able to locate 'The Girl who Can' as a progressive work of literature. You must be able to investigate the reasons behind Maami's insistence upon a formal education for her daughter. The story would have made you curious to learn more about Ghanaian societies with their matrilineal structure. Moreover, Ama Ata Aidoo would have provided you a discursive space to perceive gender as a social construct which is flexible. Little Adjoa's story is a story of exploring one's potential and it must have inspired you to do the same in your own life.

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UNIT 4 GRACE OGOT, 'THE GREEN LEAVES'

Structure

4.0 Objectives

4.1 Life and Works of Grace Ogot

- 4.1.1. Introducing Grace Ogot
- 4.1.2. Life History of Grace Ogot
- 4.1.3. Works of Grace Ogot
- 4.1.4. Characterization in the Stories of Grace Ogot

4.2 The Green Leaves

- 4.2.1. Introducing the Story
- 4.2.2. Text of the Story *The Green Leaves*

4.3 Analysis of the Story

- 4.3.1. Significance of the Green Leaves
- 4.3.2. Greed as the Cause of the Tragedy
- 4.3.3. Family and Social Life
- 4.3.4. Beliefs and Superstitions
- 4.3.5. Clash between Ideologies

4.4 Comprehension Exercises

4.5 Let Us Sum Up

4.0 OBJECTIVES

- The purpose of this unit is to familiarize you with the short story 'The Green Leaves' by Grace Ogot,
- to offer a brief introduction of the life and works of the author,
- to provide a detailed analysis of the story,
- and to help you appreciate it as a piece of postcolonial fiction by looking at it from the point of view of the natives as well as from the point of view of their so-called civilized white masters.

4.1 LIFE AND WORKS OF GRACE OGOT

4.1.1 Introducing Grace Ogot

Grace Ogot (1930-2015) is one of the pioneers of postcolonial literature of East Africa. This Kenyan woman short story writer led the revolutionary trend of creative writing in East Africa which till the 1960's was conspicuous by its absence although African literature was at that time a well established genre. In the 1962 Makerere Convention this absence was painfully observed by Grace Ogot and Ngugi wa Thiongo who took it upon themselves the responsibility to ensure due share of the East African literature in the canon of the postcolonial African literature. The East African postcolonial literature thus has a comparatively shorter history although the region abounded in native literature in the form of a rich oral tradition including local narratives, tales of ghosts, mythological tales,

historical tales of valour, bedtime stories etc. and in the form of some religious books, primitive laws, history chronicles etc.

4.1.2 Life history of Grace Ogot

Grace Ogot 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. Her marriage in 1959 to Bethwell Ogot, a historian of Kenya, helped Grace Ogot pursue her career as a writer with a greater zeal as her husband's knowledge and interest in the history and oral tradition of the Luo people fanned her creative imagination further. 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.

4.1.3 Works of Grace Ogot

Ogot was the first published woman writer of East Africa. Initially she wrote in English but soon she started writing and publishing her stories both in English and in Luo. Collections 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.

4.1.4 Characterization in the Stories of Grace Ogot

Grace Ogot's depiction of women in her works is a peculiar one. She has shown the female characters as strong willed but within their limited sphere in a patriarchal set up. Ogot has expressed her faith in a solid family structure at the centre of which is the male authority but the woman wields her sway and enjoys her independence within her own space. Ogot is often criticized for accepting patriarchy as her ideal for a strong society. The man-woman relationship is defined within the institution of marriage. Her women characters do not rise in revolt against the patriarchal order, rather they respect the system and feel snug and content within the family hierarchy.

4.2 THE GREEN LEAVES

4.2.1 Introducing the Story

The 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. The interference of the European masters is in direct conflict with the authority of the head of the clan. Distrust develops between the members of the hitherto unified tribal community. Ogot explores in this story the themes of native laws, cultural practices, superstitions, gender roles, greed, concept of crime, family and relationships.

Read and enjoy the text of the story 'The Green Leaves' given below. An analysis of the story follows the text.

Grace Ogot, 'The Green Leaves'

4.2.2 Text of the Story *The Green Leaves*

It was a dream. Then the sounds grew louder. Nyagar threw the blanket off his ears and listened. Yes, he was right. Heavy footsteps and voices were approaching. He turned round to wake up his wife. She was not there. He got up and rushed to the door. It was unlocked. Where was Nyamundhe? "I've told her time and again never to leave my hut without waking me up to bolt the door. She will see me tomorrow!"

"Ero, ero, there, there!" The noise was quite close now—about thirty yards away. Nyagar put a sheet round his well-developed body, fumbled for his spear and club, and then left the hut.

"Piti, piti, Piti, piti." A group was running towards his gate. He opened the gate and hid by the fence. Nyagar did not want to meet the group directly, as he was certain some dangerous person was being pursued.

Three or four men ran past the gate, and then large group followed. He emerged from his hiding-place and followed them.

"These bastards took all my six bulls," he heard one voice cursing.

"Don't worry—they will pay for it," another voice replied.

Nyagar had caught up with the pursuing crowd. He now realized that three or four men he had seen run past his gate were cattle thieves. They rounded a bend. About thirty yards away were three figures who could only be the thieves.

"They must not escape," a man shouted.

"They will not," the crowd answered in chorus.

The gap was narrowing. The young moon had disappeared, and it was quite dark.

"Don't throw a spear," an elder warned. "If it misses, they can use it against us."

The thieves took the wrong turning. They missed the bridge across the River Opok, which separated the people of Masala from those of Mirogi. Instead they turned right. While attempting to cross the river, they suddenly found themselves in a whirlpool. Hastily they scrambled out of the water.

"Ero, ero," a cry went out from the pursuers.

Before the thieves could find a safe place at which to cross the river, the crowd was upon them. With their clubs they smote the thieves to the ground. The air was filled with the howls of the captured men. But the crowd showed no mercy.

During the scuffle, one of the thieves escaped and disappeared into the thick bush by the river.

"Follow him! Follow him!" someone shouted.

Three men ran in the direction in which he had disappeared, breathing heavily. The bush was thick and thorny. They stood still and listened. There was no sound. They beat the bush around with their clubs—still no sound. He had escaped.

Another thief took out his knife and drove it into the shoulder blade of one of the

pursuers who fell back with the knife still sticking in him. In the ensuing confusion, the thief got up and made straight for the whirlpool. To everybody's amazement, he was seen swimming effortlessly across it to the other side of the river.

Nyagar plucked the knife out from Omoro's shoulder and put his hand over the wound to stop the bleeding. Omoro, still shaken, staggered to his feet and leaned on Nyagar. Streaks of blood were still running along his back, making his buttocks wet.

One thief was lying on the grass, groaning. As the other two had escaped, the crowd were determined to make an example of this one. They hit him several times on the head and chest. He groaned and stretched out his arms and legs as if giving up the ghost.

"Aa, aa," Omoro raised his voice. "Let not the enemy die in your hands. His spirit would rest upon village. Let him give up the ghost when we have returned to our huts."

The crowd heeded Omoro's warning. They tore green leaves from nearby trees and covered the victim completely with them. They would call the entire clan in the morning to come and bury him by the riverside.

The men walked back in silence. Omoro's shoulder had stopped bleeding. He walked, supported by two friends who volunteered to take him home. It was still not light, but their eyes were by now accustomed to the darkness. They reached Nyagar's home—the gate was still ajar.

"Remember to be early tomorrow," a voice told him. "We must be on the scene before the women start going to the river, to stop them."

Nyagar entered his home, while the others walked on without looking back. The village was hushed in quiet. The women must have been awake, but they dared not talk to their husbands. Whatever had happened, they thought, they would hear about it in the morning. Having satisfied themselves that their husbands were safely back, they turned over and slept.

Nyagar entered his hut, searched for his medicine bag and found it in a corner. He opened it, and pulled out a bamboo container. He uncorked the container, and then scooped out some ash from it. He placed a little on his tongue, mixed it with saliva and then swallowed. He put some on his palm and blew it in the direction of the gate. As he replaced the bamboo container in the bag, his heart felt at peace.

He sat on the edge of his bed. He started to remove his clothes. Then he changed his mind. Instead he just sat there, staring vacantly into space. Finally he made up his mind to go.

He opened the door slowly, and then closed it quietly after him. No one must hear him.

He did not hesitate at the gate, but walked blindly on.

"Did I close the gate?" he wondered. He looked back. Yes, he had closed it — or it looked closed.

"He must have a lot of money in his pocket," Nyagar thought.

Apart from a sinister sound which occasionally rolled through the night, everything was silent. Dawn must have been approaching. The faint and golden gleams of light which usually herald the birth of a new day could be seen in the east shooting skywards from the bowels of the earth, he said aloud. He knew that stock thieves sold stolen cattle at the earliest opportunity.

"The others were foolish not to have searched him." He stopped and listened. Was somebody coming? No. He was merely hearing the echo of his own footsteps.

"Perhaps the other two thieves who had escaped are now back at the scene," he thought nervously, "No, they can't be there—they wouldn't be such idiots as to hang around there."

The heap of green leaves came in sight. A numb paralyzing pain ran through his spine. He thought his heart had stopped beating. He stopped to check. It was still beating, all right. He was just nervous. He moved on faster, and the echo of his footsteps bothered him.

When Nyagar reached the scene of murder, he noticed that everything was exactly as they had left it earlier. He stood there for a while, undecided. He looked in all directions to ensure that no-one was coming. There was nobody. He was all alone with the dead body. He now felt nervous. "Why should you disturb a dead body?" his inner voice asked him. "What do you want to do with money? You have three wives and twelve children. You have many cattle and enough food. What more do you want?" the voice persisted. He felt even more nervous, and was about to retreat when energy stronger than his will egged him on.

"You have come this far for one cause only, and the man is lying before you. You only need to put your hand in his pockets and all the money will be yours. Don't deceive yourself that you have enough wealth. Nobody in the world has enough wealth."

Nyagar bent over the dead man, and hurriedly removed the leaves from him. His hand came in contact with the man's arm which lay folded on his chest. It was still warm. A chill ran through him again, and he stood up. It was unusual for a dead person to be warm, he thought. However, he dismissed the thought. Perhaps he was just nervous and was imagining things. He bent over the man again, and rolled him on his back. He looked dead all right.

He fumbled quickly to find the pockets. He dipped his hand into the first pocket. It was empty. He searched the second pocket—that, too, was empty. A pang of disappointment ran through his heart. Then he remembered that cattle traders carried their money in a small bag strung with a cord round their neck.

He knelt beside the dead man and found his neck, from which hung a little bag. A triumphant smile played at the corners of his mouth. Since he had no knife with which to cut the string, he decided to remove it over the man's head. As Nyagar lifted the man's head, there was a crashing blow on his right eye. He staggered for a few yards and fell unconscious to the ground.

The thief had just regained consciousness and was still very weak. But there was no time to lose. He managed to get up on his feet after a second attempt. His body was soaked in blood, but his mind was now clear. He gathered all the green leaves and heaped them on Nyagar. He then made for the bridge which he had failed to locate during the battle.

He walked away quickly—the spirit should not leave the body while he was still on the scene. It was nearly dawn. He would reach the river Nigua in time to rinse the blood off his clothes.

Before sunrise, the clan leader Olielo sounded the funeral drum to alert the people. Within an hour more than a hundred clansmen had assembled at the foot of the Opok tree where the elders normally met to hear criminal and civil cases. Olielo then addressed the gathering.

“Listen, my people. Some of you must have heard of the trouble we had in our clan last night. Thieves broke into Omogo’s kraal and stole six of his ploughing oxen.”

“Oh!” the crowd exclaimed.

Olielo continued, “As a result, blood was shed, and we now have a body lying here.”

“Is this so?” one elder asked.

“Yes, it is so,” Olielo replied. “Now, listen to me. 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. You all know that such a person must be cleansed before he again associates with other members of society. But the white man’s laws are different. According to his laws, if you kill a person 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.”

“This is what we should do. We shall send thirty men to the white man to tell him that we have killed a thief. This group should tell him that the whole clan killed the thief. Take my word, my children. This white man’s trick work only among a divided people. If we stand united, none of us will be killed.”

“The old man has spoken well,” they shouted. Thirty men were elected and they immediately left for the white man’s camp.

More people, including some women, had arrived to swell the number of the group. They moved towards the river where the dead thief lay covered in leaves, to await the arrival of the white man.

Nyamundhe moved near her co-wife. “Where is Nyagar? My eye has not caught him.”

His co-wife peered through the crowd and answered, “I think he has gone with the thirty. He left home quite early. I woke up early this morning, but the gate was open. He had left the village.”

Nyamundhe recollected that as they entered the narrow path which led to the river, their feet felt wet from the morning dew. And bending across the path as if saying prayers to welcome the dawn, were long grasses which were completely overpowered by the thick dew. She wanted to ask her co-wife where their husband could have gone but, noticing her indifference, she had decided to keep quiet.

"I did not like the black cat which dashed in front of us when we were coming here," Nyamundhe said to her co-wife.

"yes, it is a bad sign for a black cat to cross one's way first thing in the morning."

They heard the sound of a lorry. They looked up and saw a cloud of dust and two police lorries approaching.

The two lorries pulled up by the heap of green leaves. A European police officer and four African officers stepped down. They opened the back of one of the lorries and thirty men who had been sent to the police station by the clan came out.

"Where is the clan elder?" the white officer demanded.

Olielo stepped forward.

"Tell me the truth. What happened? I don't believe a word of what these people are saying. What did you send them to tell me?"

Olielo spoke somberly and slowly in Dholuo, pronouncing every word distinctly. His words were translated by an African police officer.

"I sent them to inform you that we have killed a thief last night."

"What! You killed a man?" the white officer repeated.

"No, we killed a thief." Olielo maintained his ground.

"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. Your people are deaf." The white man pointed at Olielo with his stick in an ominous manner.

"This time I shall show you how to obey the law. Who killed him?" the white officer asked angrily.

"All of us," answered Olielo, pointing at the crowd.

"Don't be silly. Who hit him first?"

The crowd was getting restless. The people surged forward menacingly towards the five police officers.

"We all hit the thief," they shouted.

"If you want to arrest us, you are free to do so. You'd better send for more lorries."

"Where is the dead man?" the white man asked Olielo.

"There," Olielo replied pointing at the heap of leaves.

The police moved towards the heap. The crowd also pushed forward. They wanted to get a glimpse of him before the white man took him away.

The last time a man had been killed in the area, the police took the corpse to Kisumu where it was cut up into pieces and then stitched up again. Then they returned it to the people saying, "Here is your man—bury him." Some people claimed that bile is extracted from such bodies and given to police tracker dogs; and that is why the dogs can track a thief to his house. Many people believed such stories. They were sure that this body would be taken away again by the police.

The European officer told the other police officers to uncover the body. They hesitated for a while and then obeyed.

Olielo looked at the body before them unbelievably. Then he looked at his people, and at the police. Was he normal? Where was the thief? He looked at the body a second time. He was not insane. It was the body of Nyagar, his cousin, who lay dead, with a sizable wooden stick driven through his right eye.

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

As the tension mounted, the crowd broke up into little groups of twos and threes. The women started to wail; and the men who had killed the thief that night looked at one another in complete disbelief. They had left Nyagar entering his village while they walked on. They could swear to it. Then Olielo, without any attempt to conceal his tear drenched face, appealed to his people with these words, "My countrymen, the evil hand has descended upon us. Let us not break up our society. Although Nyagar is dead, his spirit is still among us."

But Nyamundhe did not heed the comforts of Jaduong Olielo nor did she trust the men who swore that they had seen Nyagar enter his village after the incident with the thieves. She struggled wildly with the police who carried the corpse of her husband and placed it at the back of the lorry to be taken to Kisumu for a post mortem. A police officer comforted her with the promise that a village wide inquiry would start at once into the death of her husband.

But Nyamundhe shook her head, "If you say you will give him back to me alive, then I will listen.

Nyamundhe tore her clothes and stripped to the waist, she walked slowly 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

The nights will be cold and long.

Oh! The son-in-law of my mother

I have no heart to forgive,

I have no heart to pardon

All these mourners cheat me now

Yes, they cheat me

But when the sun goes to his home and

Darkness falls, they desert me.

In the cold hours of the night

Each woman clings to her man

There is no-one among them

There is none
There is no woman who will lend me a
Husband for the night
Ah, my lover, the son of Ochieng
The son-in-law of my mother.

4.3 ANALYSIS OF THE STORY

4.3.1 Significance of the Green leaves in the Story

The green leaves gain special significance because it is the shifting of the green leaves from the body of the thief to the body of Nyagar which has given the story its shocking and surprising turn. The emergence of Nyagar's face from underneath the green leaves instead of the thief's remains an unresolved enigma for the people of the entire clan as well as the white police officer, the agent of 'law'. 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 people of the clan. The headman who is a cousin of the deceased and who is the symbol of unity and a unanimous voice himself becomes the prime murder suspect in the eyes of Nyamundhe, the widow of Nyagar. The integrated Luo society of the village starts falling apart. The green leaves are generally symbolic of life and resurrection and a source of happiness and optimism. But in the story the green leaves become symbolic of death, disintegration, discord and distrust among the people of the tribe. The policeman consoles and assures Nyamundhe by saying that they will question each and every man in the village in order to find out the culprit. The reader can easily visualize that soon there would be a spree of accusations, counter-accusations and witch hunting corrupting the psyche and shredding to bits the very fabric of the society.

4.3.2 Greed as the Cause of the Tragedy

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. Nyagar knows that he does not need money as he is sufficiently rich with three wives and twelve children, many cattle and enough food and that he lacks nothing. It was pure greed of easy money which lured him towards his doom. Greed, one of the basic flaws of human nature, becomes the prime cause of Nyagar's undoing. Nyagar does not justify his need for money rather he himself mentions that he is sufficiently rich and has absolutely no need to steal money from anyone yet he feels compelled to go secretly in the night to search the pockets of the 'dead thief' and rob him of whatever money he carried on his person.

Nyagar exhibits his knowledge about the behaviour of the cattle thieves and in his heart of hearts feels proud about his superior insight in seeing what nobody else could see. He knows that the thieves sell the stolen cattle at the earliest opportunity and keep their money in a small bag strung with a cord round their neck. But in reality Nyagar is impulsive and lacks both prudence and experience. Sitting at the edge of his cot in his hut, he had already started undressing in order to retire to bed when it struck him to go stealthily and rob the dead thief. He is so

much blinded by greed that he does not reflect on why the man's body was still warm. Instead of applying common sense that the man could be alive he attributes the phenomenon to some superstition. 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.

4.3.3 Family and Social Life

It is common among the men in these tribes to have more than one wife at the same time. Polygamy is not just a prevalent custom, it is also a symbol of a man's social status within the tribe. The man occupies a separate hut and one of the wives would go to his hut in the night. Spears, knives and clubs are their weapons and it is the duty of the men to provide protection to the families in the village and to also 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. With experience comes wisdom and the elders are highly respected for it. The old man had rightly warned the hunting party not to throw the spear which the thieves could aim back at them whereas Nyagar who was convinced within himself that the thief whose pockets he was going to search was dead could not think that the warm hand of the man could mean that the man was not dead but alive. Instead, he started imagining that there was something unnatural and ominous in the dead man's hand being warm. He did not apply reason and common sense and was caught completely unawares when the dead thief fatally attacked him.

Hunting in the primitive tribe is a community activity. Hunting is just hunting and it doesn't matter whether an animal is being surrounded and 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. The events which unfold their ignorance and hearts of darkness take place on a dark moonless night. The thief had failed to spot the bridge across the river in the dark night and fell into the hands of the blood thirsty crowd. In the story the white masters attempt to create a bridge between the laws of the 'primitive society' and the laws of the 'civilized society'.

Natural topography marks the boundaries and defines territories. River Opok and river Nigua serve as the natural borders which divide the villages. The dead are buried near the river bank outside the village. The tribals are children of Nature. Activities like swimming come naturally to them. One of the thieves could swim through even a whirlpool effortlessly. Their desire is limited to having several wives, many children, many cattle and enough food.

The concept of a self-contained nuclear family is alien to the tribal community. It is a community in which a wife even in the death of her husband acknowledges his relationship with his parents and other members of the extended family like his mother-in-law (her own mother) and empathizes with them for their loss as well. She visualizes 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 Nyamundhe vents out is both frenzied and somewhat customary. The verse format of the dirge allows the woman mourner some breathing space to express her personal loss. Nyamundhe tears her dress and strips to her waist as she walks behind the lorry. She laments not only the loss of her lover but also

realizes the loss that Nyagar's parents shall suffer keenly. She does not fail to empathize with her mother who shall also be saddened at the death of her daughter's husband. The way she addresses her dead husband shows that in the Luo society relationship is of utmost importance. She mournfully imagines the lonely bleak rainy days and the dark and long winter nights awaiting her remaining life. She is sorry for her cursed fate and realizes 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. The men will soon forget her plight and the women in the balmy company of their husbands will not bother themselves to think about her miserable state of loneliness. Perhaps there exist in Dholuo folk songs for every occasion. The song of lament which Nyamundhe sings is one of those songs. In India also such a custom is very common. During the funeral procession women follow the hearse to a point, generally upto the pond outside the village. Women lament in a sing-a-song tone the cessation of the different relations the departed person had cherished with the various members of the family. During the thirteen day period of mourning hordes of relatives visit the house in which death has occurred and women relatives with their faces hidden behind veils start to sing and weep aloud simultaneously just when they are within the boundary of the village. There are many folk songs detailing the funeral procession, the cremation, the period of mourning, sense of bereavement and personal loss and about the futility of life.

4.3.4 Beliefs and Superstitions

There are many superstitions which these tribal communities nurse and observe. Death is not the end of existence rather according to them 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 them to protect themselves in the same way as one would keep weapons. Nyagar swallows some ash and also scatters some in the direction of the gate of his house to ward off the ghost. The sound of the dogs barking in the night is considered a bad omen. Also, it is a bad sign for a black cat to 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 whom she could not find anywhere.

Providence plays an important role in the story. Earlier Nyagar was ensuring that nobody saw him search the dead man's pockets but when he realized that he was alone with the dead man he felt nervous. He experienced an uncanny fear. He did not realize that true fear resided not in the man being dead but in the man being alive. As mentioned above, thieving and adultery 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 and as such is rightly hunted down according to their primitive law. By an analogy someone who robs or attempts to rob a thief is a worse thief and deserves to meet a similar fate. Here Nyagar's intention to rob the dead cattle thief had providentially sealed his fate. His angry resolve, regarding his wife who had left his hut in the night without waking him up to lock the door, to make her pay

dearly for her mistake the next day is fulfilled in the most unexpected way. Nyagar's words of warning—"She will see me tomorrow" for his wife Nyamundhe attain an ironic flavour when we find that Nyamundhe actually rushed to see Nyagar's dead body when the green leaves were removed off the face of the corpse.

One of the villagers told Nyagar to, "Remember to be early tomorrow," when he saw Nyagar enter his house. These prophetic words of the villager assumed specific connotation as the following morning Nyagar was there on the scene before everybody else. He, in fact, replaced the thief. The echo of his own footsteps followed him like the echo of his bodeful fate. Certain activities are men-centric and killing or handling the dead body or burying it is one of such activities. Women are kept out of it. Women do not even dare ask their men about it. As long as a dead body is lying in the village and has not yet been duly disposed off, activities like eating, drinking and fetching water remain suspended.

4.3.5 Clash between Ideologies

The corruption of the innocent thoughts of the aboriginals by the imperial oppressor is hinted at through the gradual and systematic surrender to such cardinal flaws as greed and distrust. Nyagar's inner voice forbade him from going ahead with his plan to rob the dead thief but an unknown energy propelled him and he dismissed his voice of reason saying, "Don't deceive yourself that you have enough wealth. Nobody in the world has enough wealth."

The 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.

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.

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 whites possess by use of which they are able to find out the killer. The tribes find the idea of post-mortem of a dead body too uncanny as for them it is either ghostly or sacred and in both the cases the dead body must not be tampered with.

The Head of a 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. He is like a toothless tiger. 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 consider even the Headman blameless in her husband's murder.

4.4 COMPREHENSION EXERCISES

- a) Write a note on Grace Ogot as a postcolonial short story writer.
- b) What do you know about the family life of the people of the Luo tribe?
- c) What is the significance of the title of the story?
- d) Describe the circumstances which led to Nyagar's death?
- e) Comment on the position of the Headman of the tribe.

- f) Give an account of the events that took place in the night.
- g) What is the significance of the lament by Nyamundhe at the end of the story?
- h) What happened after the green leaves were removed from the dead body?
- i) Comment on the practice of patriarchy in the Luo tribe.
- j) Bring out the author's point of view on human greed.
- k) Do you think the story describes degeneration of values in the tribal society?
Comment.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

- 1) Grace Ogot (1930-2015) is one of the pioneers of postcolonial literature of East Africa which has a comparatively shorter history although the region abounded in native literature in the form of a rich oral tradition.
- 2) Grace Ogot was born in a Christian Luo family and 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.
- 3) *Ogot was the first published woman writer of East Africa who wrote both in English and in Luo. Collections of her short stories appeared under the titles *Land without Thunder* (1968), *The Other Woman* (1976) and *The Island of Tears* (1980).
- 4) Ogot has expressed her faith in a solid family structure at the centre of which is the male authority but the woman wields her sway and enjoys her independence within her own space.
- 5) The story 'The Green Leaves' is included in the collection of short stories titled, *Land Without Thunder*. Ogot explores in this story the themes of native laws, cultural practices, superstitions, gender roles, greed, concept of crime, family, relationships and conflict between the native African and modern European ideologies.
- 6) *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 people of the clan. The integrated Luo society of the village starts falling apart. The green leaves are generally symbolic of life and resurrection and a source of happiness and optimism. But in the story the green leaves become symbolic of death, disintegration, discord and distrust among the people of the tribe.
- 7) Greed, one of the basic flaws of human nature, becomes the prime cause of the main character's undoing. He himself mentions that he is sufficiently rich and has absolutely no need to steal money from anyone yet he feels compelled to go secretly in 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 on 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. Providence plays an important role in the story.

- 8) Hunting is a community activity. According to the primitive laws of the tribe, thieves and adulterers are regarded as animals and if one kills any of them he is not considered guilty of murder.
- 9) The concept of a self contained nuclear family is alien to the tribal community. Polygamy is common. The tribes have a unified living which is threatened by the white invasion.
- 10) The 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.



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