



# A Critical Study Of Grace Ogot's "*The Green Leaves*": Exploring Literary And Cultural Dimensions

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**Abstract:** The paper presents a critical analysis of Grace Ogot's "*The Green Leaves*," examining the internal struggles and external pressures faced by the Luo community under colonial rule. It explores the conflicts between tradition and modernity, greed and morality, and the gendered roles within society. This study analyzes key themes such as the conflicts between the old customs and the new imposed laws, societal transformation, and the role of women, while also highlighting the use of literary devices, including symbolism and irony. The paper examines how Ogot weaves the cultural traditions with the post-colonial experience, crafting a narrative that exposes universal human flaws and weaknesses, stressing the need to balance custom with justice.

**Keywords:** Post-colonial, tradition and modernity, gendered role, old customs, societal change

## I. INTRODUCTION

Grace Emily Ogot, also known as Grace Ogot, was born on May 15, 1930, in Asembo, Nyanza District, Kenya, into a Christian Luo family. Grace Ogot was a pioneering Kenyan author, politician, diplomat, journalist, and nurse. She is known for shaping East African literature. Grace Ogot began writing in the 1960s, during a period when many African nations were experiencing decolonization and identity crises; doing so, she became the first Kenyan woman to be published in English. Since Ogot was a writer who emerged in 1963 during the independence of Kenya, she utilized the conflicts between the Luo people and colonialists as material for her stories. Ogot also actively participated in politics as one of the first female members of Parliament. She also became a founding member of the Writers' Association of Kenya. Grace Ogot wrote short stories, novels, and essays, often focusing on rural life, traditional customs, and the moral conflicts faced by individuals in changing societies. Her works are among the first to portray African women's voices with depth, dignity, and complexity. In the United Nations UNESCO (1975-1976), Ogot represented Kenya, contributing her assistance to the Writer's Association of Kenya. She trained herself as a nurse and midwife, both in Kenya and abroad. This experience helped her see how people from different places live and think, and it made her writing more meaningful. Her works are often about how culture and personal choices affect people's lives, especially women. "*The Green Leaves*" is among one of her significant works. In addition to her literary work, Grace Ogot actively advocated for women's rights and promoted education. Her support and contribution have helped and inspired many other African women writers to tell their own stories. By emphasizing crucial issues like fairness, and change, identity through her work, she teaches her readers to think about these issues as well. Her work also helped readers to understand about the African traditions and how the societies should change and grow.

## II. DISCUSSION

Grace Ogot's "*The Green Leaves*" was published in 1968. It is a part of one of her acclaimed collections, *Land Without Thunder*. It revolves around a rural African village in Kenya. The people of the village lived a modest life; they had their own established norms. However, after the arrival of the white men, their time-honored principles were replaced by colonial authorities, and new rules and laws were imposed. The villagers had their own way to deal with various issues, but later the white men wanted the people to change norms and follow a distinct set of norms imposed by authorities.

Through this story, Ogot passes a message about how our greedy desires and actions, like desiring to have more of what we have, can ruin us and lead to chaos in our surroundings. By portraying the villager's reaction on the Nyagar's death, Ogot says that our decisions not only affect us but also our loved ones. Grace Ogot, in "*The Green Leaves*" realistically depicts how the Luo community was going through major and intense transformations, especially in terms of gender roles, power structure, and the atmosphere of fear created by the colonial rule. As stated by Naimuddin Ansary, "Literature of Africa in the postcolonial era emerges as a mirror of the colonial power, subjugation, violence, and the resistance" (Ansary 72). "*The Green Leaves*," is a tragic story that revolves around the Luo community in a rural Kenyan village.

Nyagar, a villager, wakes up to the noises outside and notices a chaotic scene where the villagers are chasing a group of thieves. The villagers take the law into their hands without the indulgence and intervention of any authorities. They then decide to get into their cottages and explain the entire situation to the white men the next day. However, Nyagar's greed led him to the thief's body in order to usurp the money. Despite the fact the thief's body is warm and he could be alive, he continues with his plan, resulting in his death by the thief. The story ends with Nyamundhe's mourning song, questioning the villagers, customs, and the system. Nyamundhe's bemoaning demonstrates her pain and loss, which also tells us that women had limited dominance in the system. As Om Prakash Pokhrel and Chandra Prasad Ghimire observe, "Grace Ogot's short story *The Green Leaves* (1968) draws a realistic picture of a compelling exploration of gender dynamics, colonial fear within a post-colonial African setting particularly in alignment with violence and white exploitation. The central theme of the story reflects about a society that has its root grounded in patriarchy and male aggression" (Pokhrel and Ghimire 750).

## III. THEMATIC ANALYSIS

### 3.1 Tradition vs. Change

Grace Ogot's "*The Green Leaves*" depicts the tension between the rural African's customary practices and the arrival of new norms and laws of the white men. The villagers, led by Olielo, lived according to traditions that had been followed for generations, which gave them a strong sense of belonging. They relied on their own norms in order to deal with every matter or issue. However, when the new rules are imposed on them by the colonial authorities, changes arrive in their living. With this change comes a sense of fear and uncertainty. The rules, customs, and practices of the Luo people clash with the legal system of the colonial authorities. As the white officer warns the villagers, "How many times have I told you that you must abandon this savage custom of butchering one another? No one is a thief until he has been tried in a court of law and found guilty. Your people are deaf" (Ogot). According to the colonial authorities, the norms of the Luo people should be more civilized and less violent; they should include official and legal procedures for punishment, like arresting the culprits, taking help from the policemen, and so forth. Ultimately, through this theme, Ogot's message is that balance is necessary. People can respect and follow their traditions and at the same time be open and welcoming to new ideas.

### 3.2 Role of women

Dr. M. Rameshwor Singh and Dr. Ph. Sanamacha Sharma assert, "The Luo society is essentially patriarchal. The head of the family feels proud to possess several wives, many children, numerous cattle, and rich produce from his land. Polygamy is not just a prevalent custom; it is also a symbol of a man's social status within the tribe" (Singh and Sharma 4901). This observation highlights a recurring theme in "*The Green Leaves*," where Grace Ogot illustrates that, although women in the Luo community hold significant roles, their authority and power remain limited. The role of women is defined by traditional gender boundaries. Generally, the women were considered to be secondary to men in decision-making and leadership. Women did not have much say in the legal and political aspects. They were excluded from direct participation or involvement in these matters. Most crucial decisions related to justice and punishment were taken by the men. This division highlights the patriarchal nature

of Luo society, where women are expected to remain submissive and supportive instead of playing a decisive role in important matters. Nevertheless, Grace Ogot does not portray women as completely powerless. For instance, Nyamundhe, although she is mostly missing from the events of the story, becomes significant later on through her grief following Nyagar's death. Nyamundhe's role at the end symbolically represents the women, whose voices have been silenced and who are excluded from any decision-making yet forced to bear the painful and deepest emotional burdens and outcomes attached to it.

### 3.3 Symbolism

In "*The Green Leaves*," literary devices play a major role. It adds depth to the narrative and enhances its meaning. The most crucial literary device is the 'green leaves' itself. Basically, green leaves signify peace, growth, and life. However, in the story, its role has been swapped, as the green leaves wrap death, mysteries, and secrets. The green leaves, though appearing vibrant and alive conceal the truth. It hides the body of a person who is not even dead yet and later covers the dead body of Nyagar. Consequently, the green leaves have been used to illustrate death rather than life. This duality is captured by Dr. Hanna Ngomdir, who states, "Green Leaves, from which the story takes its title, presents the most recurring and meaningful image in the narrative. On a literal level, they are used to cover the body of the individual presumed dead before burial. However, on a symbolic level, they represent the complex integration between life and death, concealment and revelation" (Ngomdir 1).

The burial scene examines another symbolism. The burial of a dead body is not just a normal action or practice, but it is considered to be a tradition. The funeral, or burying the body of a person, is considered to be an action of showing respect and honor to the dead. However, in the story it becomes a way of escaping from the truth and punishment. The death of Nyagar delineates what consequences are to be faced if a person ruins their morality. For instance, Nyagar's greed led him to approach the corpse; he neglected the signs that he might be alive, which consequently led to his death. The burial scene affirms how the villagers were afraid to face the situation and the reaction of the white men. They didn't even come to the conclusion of whatever happened with Nyagar and decided to quickly bury the body.

### 3.4 Irony

Another literary device used in the story is irony. One of the striking uses of irony is displayed when Nyagar, one of the villagers who has beaten up the thief for stealing, ends up dying because he was trying to steal. Another ironic scene is when Nyagar, who is rich enough, approaches the thief's body in order to steal. Even though after receiving signs, like the thief's body being warm, which indicates that he is alive, but driven by greed, Nyagar continues with his plan neglecting the signals. So, the decision or the plan that was meant to benefit him actually leads to his death. The dramatic irony in this situation is the readers are aware of his actions and the ludicrous consequences attached to it, but Nyagar, the character, remains blind to the danger. Another use of irony is when the villagers cover the dead body of the thief, thinking he is dead, but he turns out to be alive. They followed their own norms and dealt with the situation according to them in order to bring peace and justice, but it ended up bringing chaos, guilt, regret, pain, and loss in the community. As highlighted by Dr. M. Rameshwor Singh and Dr. Ph. Sanamacha Sharma, "The title is ironic in suggestion as the green leaves which are generally associated with the beauty and bounty of nature get associated with a hideous killing and sow the seeds of suspicion on one another among the members of the clan" (Singh and Sharma 4902). This conveys how Ogot uses irony not only through events but also symbolically via the title to reflect the tragic disintegration of communal trust and harmony.

## IV. CONCLUSION

*The Green Leaves* is a masterpiece of cultural identity, change, and morality. Grace Ogot' presents a story of a rural African village during the colonial time and how the traditional rules and norms clash with the laws imposed by the colonial authorities. The clash signifies that justice is not just about rules but about understanding what is fair. Through highlighting this, Ogot' dives into the theme of justice. The story emphasizes the concept of greed. Nyagar's tragic death showcases how greed and desire can lead to one's own downfall. It also portrays the position of women, through the character Nyamundhe, and how they had a limited role and did not have any say in the political and legal areas but were expected to carry the emotional burdens. The use of symbolism by the author, especially through the green leaves and burial practice, reveals the hidden realities of life and death. Therefore, Grace Ogot's work is not merely a story of rural Kenya but about human nature, cultural change, and the lasting

importance of moral values in a society. It teaches us to embrace our own traditions and customs but also be open and welcoming towards the new changes, revealing that true progress lies in balancing both.

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