


Boleo: A postcolonial feminist reading



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The relationship between postcolonialism and feminism is often complicated and conflict-laden in its struggles against empire and patriarchy and its related social categories of oppression. The question is, *How have African women in former colonies balanced their act?* To address this question, the article focusses on *Boleo, A Setswana Novel*. Firstly, theories of post-coloniality and feminism are explored. Secondly, four creative African women writers are analysed for their take on the intersection of postcolonialism and feminism prior to reading *Boleo, A Setswana Novel*. Thirdly, the analysis of *Boleo* indicates boundary crossing and cross-border oppressions and solidarity in the struggle against apartheid that features a female protagonist and other minor characters. It is proposed that because the novel equates apartheid with sin (*boleo*), it thus constructs salvation as the concerted communal efforts of resistance and suspicion towards the institutions of the oppressor, characterised by *baitiredi* [independent or self-actualising workers], a political movement founded by Boleo. The analysis of the African novel indicates that the struggle against colonial and patriarchy gave rise to the First Things First; Second Things First and Both Things Simultaneously approaches, which are evident within African women creative writers.

Contribution: This article adheres to the journal's scope and vision by its focus on a systematic, historical, exegetical and practical reflection within a paradigm in which the intersection of philosophy, religious studies, social sciences and humanities generate an interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary contested discourse.

Keywords: postcolonial studies; Vuyani Vellem; feminism; African literature; apartheid; patriarchy; black theology; intersectionality; First Things First; African women writers; Olebile Gaborone.

Introduction: Postcolonial feminist framework

According to Vellem (2015):

[E]mpire is life denying. (p. 2)

The term postcolonial has been defined in different ways by various authors. It describes all cultures that have been affected by modern imperial movements. As Buchanan (2010) pointed out, postcolonial studies is a:

[L]oosely-applied rubric for a large variety of work (creative and critical) ... with a shared interest in the effects of colonization on the cultures of both the colonisers and the colonised. (p. 373)

It focusses on the historical movements that begin when colonisers and the colonised first get in contact; the chain response that it evokes from both parties; in all aspects of their lives; and how it is manifested in the literary production and practices of such contexts. The postcolonial framework of reading interrogates the various strategies employed by the empire to impose its domination: the multiple strategies adopted by the colonised to resist, survive, revolt or collaborate with their dominators, as well as the 'space in between' created by the 'contact zone' (Pratt 1992). Hence, the now classic definition coined by Ashcroft, Garreth and Tiffin (eds. 1989) *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*, namely that postcolonial means 'since colonialism'. This definition highlights that colonialism does not end with independence of the former colonies; rather, it continues in many different forms to this day.

According to Fernando Segovia (2005:23), 'postcolonial criticism highlights the question of geopolitics – the realm of the political at the translocal or global level, with specific reference to

1. Boleo has three uses in this article. *Boleo* with a capital B and with italics refers to the title of the book. Boleo with a capital letter without italics refers to the main character of the book, whereas *boleo* with a small letter and italics refers the meaning of the word, namely sin. *Baitiredi* can be translated as those who are self-reliant, those who are able to be independent. It is a movement started by Boleo as resistance against apartheid forces.

Note: Special Collection entitled VukaniBantuTsohangBatho - Spirituality of Black Liberation, sub-edited by Fundiswa Kobo (UNISA) and Rodney Tshaka (UNISA).

the phenomenon of imperial-colonial formations. Postcolonial criticism highlights, therefore, the relationship between the centre and periphery, metropolis and margins – in effect, the imperial and the colonial'. Holding that postcolonialism was conceived 'as a resistance discourse emerging from the former colonies of the Western empires', Sugirtharajah (2002) explains that:

[P]ostcolonialism as a methodological category and as critical practice followed later. There were two aspects; first to analyse the diverse strategies by which the colonisers construct images of the colonised; and second, to study how the colonised themselves made use of and went beyond many of those strategies in order to articulate their identity, self-worth, and empowerment. Postcolonialism has been taking a long historical look at both old and new forms of domination. Its insight lies in understanding how the past informs the present. (p. 11)

Undoubtedly, post-coloniality examines a relationship of unequal subjects: the coloniser and the colonised, the subject and the subjugator, the Two-Thirds World² and the First World, the South and North or the so-called developed and developing countries. Postcolonialism is a condition that has defined modern and ancient histories and communities in many different ways, and which still continues to define international relations today. The plain evidence of its continuation is the very fact that I am writing this article in the English language, when neither my father nor mother are English – and when I live in a country that has been celebrating its independence day since 1966. I am also more learned in English language than my own native languages – all because the structural powers operating at a global level have been by and large defined by our modern imperial contact of the past two or three centuries. The profound impact of post-coloniality cannot be undermined given that in modern imperialism, three quarters of populations/nations of the globe were affected by colonialism (Edward Said 1993:7–12). Moreover, colonial domination was not just about political and geographical domination through military might, but rather it was the unleashing of various strategies that sought to capture and occupy the minds, cultural, spiritual and economic spaces of the subjugated (Mudimbe 1988:2), by supplanting indigenous knowledge systems with that of the coloniser. Hence, long after the flags of colonial masters were lowered and folded away from the colonies, the cultural, economic and spiritual engines established to colonise the minds continue to roll – a factor that underlines the project of decolonising the mind. (Ngugi 1986)

As stated above, where there is a subjugator, there is bound to be a series of multipronged forms of resistance from the oppressed, which accommodates even collaborators, traitors, chameleons and sell-outs. This is well attested in the last half of the 20th century, for many colonised nations rose and fought for their independence from their colonisers and won political and geographical independence. From World War II to 1994, when South Africa held its first democratic elections, most African countries were fighting wars to uproot colonial domination. Many other wars are still raging in the continent, which are not completely separate from their postcolonial

²The term Two-Thirds World is preferred in this article, because the commonly used term, 'Third World' is an ideologically charged term that reduces and suggests that populations of the so-called 'Third World' only constitute a third of the world populations and geography, when in fact they constitute Two Thirds of the world populations and geography. 'Third World' therefore is a hidden agenda that promotes the white western world as the majority.

history, for with independence there came neo-colonialism, neo-liberal economy and independence disappointments. Post-coloniality, therefore, defines the time when colonial contact is established, the struggle for independence, liberation and post-liberation struggles of the colonised to be human. It describes a continuous relationship – however unpleasant it might be – that tends to take different phases at different times of history. For, as said above, colonising structures are much more than just political and geographical domination; rather, they include the imposition of foreign culture, politics, religion and economic structures on a less aggressive nation by another, which is obviously more aggressive. The decolonisation remains an *a luta continua* imperative to uncover the bedrock of the empire amongst formerly colonised nations. Arguing that we need to 'unmask' the persistent demons of the Empire in contemporary stage and structures, Vuyani Vellem (2015), pointed out that:

[T]o perpetuate these goals and values of the Empire colonises our mindset. Unmasking the husk of the Empire is decolonising the mindset. It is about liberating the notions, ideas, perceptions, opinions, assumptions, beliefs, models, patterns of thought, convictions and faith from the husk of the Empire. Unmasking the husk of the Empire means transformation into a new universe of meaning, a new universe of meaning that is life affirming. (p. 5)

Furthermore, the colonial arts of domination are dependent upon spinning ideologies of racism, heteronormativity, Earth-conquering and gender to authorise relationships of domination (Walther 2010:45–71). Unmasking the 'husk' of the Empire and its colonising arts demands analysis on how it interlinks with racism, gender, age, ethnicity and sexuality.

Although my description may seem to suggest perpetual opposition between the coloniser and the colonised, the relationship includes both admiration and repulsion, thereby producing hybridity, ambivalence, mimicry and desire from both sides. The aim of this article was to sketch the complicated relationship between post-coloniality and feminism as depicted in postcolonial literature in a particular nation or even continent. My focus is not on the coloniser's literature, but that of the colonised. The question is because post-coloniality and feminism involve resisting the oppressor and seeking one's liberation, how have women in former colonies balanced their act? I am not the first to ask this question amongst postcolonial writers of Africa and other Two-Thirds World subjects (Naidu Parekh & Jagne 1994). My aim, therefore, in asking this question was to contribute to an on-going conversation (Dube 2000:111–126; Peterson 1984). To explore this question, I shall be focussing on *Boleo*, a Setswana novel (*boleo* is a Setswana word for sin) written by Mr Olebile Gaborone. But because this is a subject that has been addressed by various readers, it is helpful to lay a brief background on the relationship between feminism and post-coloniality, amongst African creative (fictional) writers.

The term 'double oppression' or, sometimes, 'triple oppression' is often used to describe the condition of women in former colonies. They are doubly oppressed for they are under the yoke of colonialism and patriarchal oppression – of their own cultures and that of their colonisers. But it is also said they are triply oppressed for they are under the yoke of their national and foreign patriarchal cultures in addition to imperial oppression. These terms 'double' or 'triple' oppressions are just the tip of the iceberg, because colonial oppression always involves multiple oppressions of race, ethnicity, religion, class, sexuality and gender amongst others (Mohanty, Russo & Torres 1991:1–47). Feminism defines a movement of men and women, who are committed to exposing the workings of patriarchy and its intersection with various other forms of oppression and to devise multiple strategies of resistance and empowering women and men. Arguing that feminism is:

[O]ne of the most important social movements of the past two centuries and the social movement which has brought about the most enduring and progressive transformation of human society at a global scale. (Buchanan 2010:166)

Buchanan (2010) said its primary concerns could be summarised into four categories, namely to:

1. elucidate the origins and causes of gender inequality;
2. explain the operation and persistence of this state of affairs;
3. delineate effective strategies to either bring about full equality between the sexes or at least ameliorate the effects of the ongoing inequality;
4. imagine a world in which sexual inequality no longer exist. (p. 166)

In addition to these, it should be stated that feminism also seeks to investigate how gender inequality works hand in glove with other social categories such as race, ethnicity, age, class, disability, sexuality and post-coloniality, amongst others. Feminism, in other words, is intersectional (Archer Mann 2012:7–13) and appears in various forms for various women in different contexts, eras, races and strategies of resistance.³ Womanist is often used to mark African American and other women of African descent, gender and race struggles. Postcolonial feminism defines those whose commitment to gender justice equally involves commitment to dismantling the structures of empire and colonialism. Because the imperial agenda often uses racism, gender, age, class, ethnicity, sexuality and culture to articulate an ideology of domination, a postcolonial feminist approach is an 'intersectional approach'. Intersectionality defines a multidimensional approach that seeks liberation by recognising and analysing how various social categories work in synergy to promote the oppression of the other. The major contradiction between postcolonialism and feminism pertains to the strategy of

³There are different types of feminisms such as liberal, radical, marxist, socialist, cultural, developmental, echo and third-wave feminisms, amongst others (Archer Mann 2012:12–138). Although they may all recognise the problematic of patriarchal-centred structures and their impact of women, they utilise different frameworks of analysis and propose different solutions.

resistance adopted, particularly towards the cultures of the colonised. For example, whilst postcolonial subjects resisted the coloniser by asserting the relevance and reverence of their cultures, economic and political structures, early feminism called upon women to reject established cultures, literary canons, interrogate history, religion, etc. – virtually every aspect of life and show that it has been conceived from a patriarchal point of view that suppresses the presence, contribution and subjectivity of women. On the contrary, postcolonial resistance required colonised men and women to affirm their cultures, economies, political structures – given that the colonial ideology of domination proceeded by dismissing the cultures of the colonised by labelling them as pagan, childish, devilish, uncivilised, barbaric and only worth to be replaced by the civilised cultural systems of the coloniser (Ngugi 1986:4–33). For colonised women to name their own cultures as patriarchal and deserving to be re-imagined in this context was heard to be dangerously befriending the colonising ideology. The fact that feminism was championed from Western countries did not help the situation, for such a take could not easily distance itself from appearing as consorting with the enemy, the coloniser. Commenting on this uneasy relationship, Adichie (2014) said:

[A]n academician told me that feminism was not our culture, that feminism was un-African, and that I was calling myself a feminist because I had been influenced by Western books ... Of course ... it shows how that word feminist is so heavy with baggage, negative baggage: you hate men, you hate bras, you hate African culture, you think women should always be in charge. (pp. 11–12)

It is well documented that during the struggles for independence, Two-Thirds World women were asked to adopt a method of 'First Things First' (Peterson 1984:35–46). That is, they should focus on resisting colonial oppression with their fellow male citizens, instead of insisting on freedom from patriarchal oppression. The latter was perceived to spoil solidarity amongst the colonised. 'First Things First' articulates how feminism and postcolonial concerns were sometimes at great conflict, although they shared a number of similar concerns such as, amongst them, fighting for justice and freedom. So what should Two-Thirds World women do? Should they go with the 'First Things First' approach and hope that when the struggle for independence is won they will automatically earn both gender and national empowerment? Or, would women have to begin addressing second things (patriarchy) second after independence? How should postcolonial feminists of colonised areas proceed? Should they prioritise and focus on one form of oppression or focus on both of them? If so, how? Whilst these questions characterised the context of the struggle for liberation and as time proceeded, the feminist discourse has come to embrace intersectionality of various struggles as a more helpful way of imagining and working for a more holistic liberation and building strategic coalitions with various groups struggling for justice.

Post-coloniality, feminism and African women's narratives

Many African creative women writers did their work under these conflicting contexts during the struggle for independence for decades.⁴ An exploration of some African women writers indicates this conflict – and will illumine their suggestions or approach to colonial and patriarchal oppression of their contexts. Some seem to have bought into the 'First Things First' approach because their works depict the women characters focussing on colonial oppression, whilst they remain silent about gender oppression. For example, in her book, *Makeba: A Biography*, Miriam Makeba presents her life story as primarily a struggle against the colonising ideology of apartheid. Many of her experiences in marriage contracts and singing career indicate that she is subjected to gender oppression, but she documents her exile, her activism and her whole life as a struggle against apartheid. Its centrality is attested by the closing of her book. Makeba (1987:249) ends with the following prayer: 'I ask that I and the people outside can be freed from exile. I ask that my people at home may be freed from bondage'. In her novel, *And they Did not Die*, Loreta Ncgobo (1990), another South African writer, seems to subscribe to the 'First things First' approach. Ncgobo's book cultivates militant women's movements and friendships. Jezile, the leading character, is a young black woman living in the barren and crowded rural lands allocated to all black South African people. From the beginning we meet her as a brave and outspoken fighter against apartheid system. However, Jezile does not question her mother-in-law's insistence that she must become pregnant and give birth to children. Instead she complies and even betrays her political activism to get 'a pass' and visit her husband, who is a labour immigrant, to get pregnant. Jezile suffers and struggles because of factors that are directly connected to gender oppression. For example, she is raped by a white master, gets thrown out of work by her white mistress for the rape, bears a child of rape, gets excommunicated from the church for the child and, finally, she loses her marriage because her in-laws accuse her of unfaithfulness. By and large, Jezile is oppressed by apartheid system, Zulu culture, church, in-laws, husband, white master and mistress, on issues that are also related to patriarchal oppression. Nonetheless, Jezile's political activism remains focussed on colonial resistance than patriarchy. Perhaps, in casting her in this dilemma, Ncgobo sought to highlight that African women are indeed oppressed by both colonialism and patriarchy, but such illumination is gifted to her readers than Jezile, who never comes to name patriarchy as the elephant in the room. In *And they Did not Die*, Ncgobo openly indicates that a black woman suffers from both apartheid and patriarchy, but she certainly puts aside patriarchal oppression, whilst fighting for freedom from apartheid – hence suggesting that when the latter is toppled, then there should be time to focus on patriarchal oppression.

4. The selected few novels here are by no means exhaustive or representative, for African creative writing has experienced an explosion in the past two decades. Rather the selected novels/books serve to highlight the conflict between postcolonialism and feminism during the historical context of the struggle for independence. Whilst some of the novels were written in the post-independence context, their literary setting is that of the colonial and struggle for independence.

There are certainly many exceptions to this 'First Things First approach'. In particular, Buchi Emecheta's (1979) novel *The Joys of Motherhood* hits hard on patriarchy on Nigerian cultures. Emecheta questions the social pressure that women should be mothers and the belief that it gives them social security when they age. This cultural perspective is ridiculed and shown to hold no water. Nnu Ego the main character is a barren married woman. She works very hard to fight barrenness and finally gets pregnant. She bears many children and they all grow up and go. At the end of the story, we hear that when Buchi Emecheta's (1979) died:

[S]he lay on the roadside thinking that she has arrived home. She died there, with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her. ... so busy had she been building up her joys as a mother. (p. 224)

Nnu Ego also dies poor. This is direct and strong critique of Nigerian patriarchal cultures. The implied author is saying mothering is not a security for a woman's life and to hold on to this thinking is an illusion. The implied author is in fact saying childbearing sanctions many Nigerian women to die in poverty as they invest all their resources in bringing up children. To emphasise this point, we hear that Nnu Ego (1979:224) was later installed to the status of a goddess, but 'Nnu Ego did not answer prayers for children to all women who prayed for fertility'. The approach here hardly subscribes to the 'First Things First' approach. Emecheta focussed more on attacking patriarchy than the colonial history of Nigeria (the temporal setting of the book covers 1909–1950s), thereby undertaking an approach that could be defined as Second Things First. In so doing, *Joys of Motherhood* could still be the other face of the same coin.

The ideal balancing act, one that addresses both patriarchal and colonial oppression, is championed by Tsitsi Dangarembga (1988:1) in her novel, *Nervous Conditions*. The latter is set in colonial Rhodesia (present day Zimbabwe). Adopting an evident move from the 'First Things First approach', the narrator opens the novel with a shocking confession: 'I was not sorry when my brother died'. It becomes clear, as the novel continues, that the brother is a symbol of patriarchal power, which stands for the perpetuation of the marginalisation of women. And now with the advent of colonial education and new economic structure, the brother prevents women from entering this new system. And insofar as the brother stands for patriarchy, then his death is welcomed!

Indeed, it is the death of the brother that opens the way for Tambu, the sister, to realise her potential. Funds become available for her to be sent to school. The implied author is very careful, however, to avoid equating feminism with neither Euro-culture or Western values, nor Zimbabwean culture with liberation. Thus, the book critiques gender discrimination in both cultures whilst it confronts colonial oppression to its face. The author does not encourage the uncritical consumption of school education and church practices because they are Western colonial institutions, but

neither does the author advocate total rejection. Tambu adopts a position of negotiating with the powers that are available whilst she forges her way ahead. For example, the death of a brother is celebrated in so far as it is a method of subverting patriarchal oppression in Shona cultures and a path to liberation. But Tambu negotiates her way through Western patriarchal and colonial institutions such as mission schools, church and family. Critical thinking is underlined as an imperative tool for women in *Nervous Conditions*. One is called to understand the structures of patriarchy and colonialism and to adopt a position of negotiating with the enemy as a strategy of going ahead. Thus, Tambu resists her mother's extreme fear that Western education would steal her child away – psychologically – whilst at the same time Tambu listens and heeds her mother's warning, who identifies Englishness with a disease that is causing Nyasa (Tambu's educated cousin) to break down. Nyasa breaks down because she reads too many Western books that alienate her from her cultures. Further, Nyasa's radical activism against the long-established structures of patriarchy and colonialism is unhealthy. Unlike Nyasa, Tambu, the main character, resists both oppressions whilst negotiating her way forward with the same powers. In this way, she offers one postcolonial feminist strategy of resisting and surviving double colonisation.

In these four writers, Makeba, Ncgobo, Emecheta and Dangarengwa, we encounter different strategies of postcolonial African feminisms. There is the 'First Things First' approach that focusses on colonial oppression to the exclusion of gender discrimination (Makeba & Ncgobo). There are the 'Second Things First', characterised by those who critique African traditional cultures exposing their patriarchy (Emecheta) and refuse to treat their traditions as innocent or sacred cows, but do not give equal criticism to colonialism. And those who criticise both forms of oppression seem to cultivate an ideal postcolonial feminist space in their works (Dangarengwa). However, the way we focus, amongst these four different approaches, we would agree that in all the models we find African women as active agents of their destinies within their communities and given circumstances. One can hardly say they appear as passive helpless beings who are awaiting their men to redeem them. What are the implications of this portrait to African postcolonial feminism? What is its meaning? I will return to this point later. Right now we need to turn to *Boleo: A Novel*, written by a Botswana man, and look at the portrait of women characters. Where does his characterisation fit in the above-tabulated models?

Boleo: Characterisation of women and African postcolonial feminisms

Boleo is one of the three novels of Olebile Gaborone. It is named after its main character, Boleo, which means sin. In Gaborone's novel, *Moseka Kgwana* (1995), one finds male characters dominating in the story. In *Setilhoa a Thaba* (1988) one finds extremely gendered women characters, whose lives are dependent on men for survival. Those who succeed

as professional women pursue gendered jobs such as knitting, home economics (domestic science), etc. *Boleo's* main character (Boleo) is thus radically different from his other two novels. Here we find Boleo, the protagonist, portrayed as a fearless visionary, border-crosser, political activist, community trainer and leader.

Postcolonial setting

The novel is set in Tlokweng, a village that is about 10 km from the South African border. It is also set in Botswana and South Africa during the apartheid era for the story involves crossing the borders several times. *Boleo* [Sin], *Dikeledi* [Tears] and *Tshepo* [Hope] are three teenage girls who decide to drop out of school, cross the border and seek work to earn money in South Africa. As soon as they enter the South African land, they are welcomed by the overt and cruel practice of apartheid – which I regard as a colonising ideology of exploiting black human resources through an ideology of racial superiority of whites. Attacked for no apparent reason, save for their black colour, the three girls flee into different directions and land in the farms of white people. What is notable here is that Tshepo/Hope disappears and is never found. Boleo arrives in the white farm of Classen. She finds a big celebration because the white farmer's son had bravely shown a black servant and his child their rightful place. The white son shot both of them dead, because the black child had taken the feeding bottle of a little white girl and started sucking it. They both die for it and the owner of the farm does not allow his servants to be buried in his land. This short story is a parable of apartheid, as a structure that uses racial superiority to deny black people the fruits of the land (milk) and even the right to be buried in the land where they worked and lived. Boleo begins to work in this farm that has already been painted as a deadly space for black people. She picks tomatoes for 9 months and never gets paid. This, perhaps, is the first hint why she is named Boleo – Sin: Through her experience the reader is brought to understand that apartheid is a sinful political and economic system, which depends on exploiting the black masses on the bases of their skin colour.⁵ This sin is the reason for the sorrow and suffering of black people – *Dikeledi* [tears].⁶ Where there is sin, there is need for *hope* [Tshepo] and salvation.

Boleo's first journey into apartheid South Africa comes to an end one day when her white master takes her to Johannesburg to sell tomatoes. At the market, she raises her eyes and sees someone familiar – Dikeledi. They are both very excited to see each other after their sudden painful parting, when they first entered South Africa. The two girls are too happy to see

5. Similarly, the 1985 Kairos Document described the State Theology of the apartheid government as sinful, calling rather for prophetic church and theology that stand for justice and with all the oppressed. According to the Kairos Document, 'State Theology is simply the theological justification of the status quo with racism, capitalism and totalitarianism. It blesses injustice, canonises the will of the powerful and reduces the poor to passivity, obedience and apathy ... The god of the South African State is not merely an idol or false God, it is the devil disguised as almighty God – the Antichrist' (1985:12–13). This definition of sin is quite consistent with *Boleo: A Novel's* understanding of sin.

6. See Dube (2015:1–11), where I explore how the earliest missionaries cultivated the concept of sin in order to justify their gospel of redemption. In this colonial context, sin was equated with Setswana African cultures.

each other, forgetting that they are at work. This earns them a brutal beating from their white masters. Both girls bleed and faint from the beating. When they wake up, they are both hospitalised. With the help of a black South African nurse, Mooki, they escape from the hospital and start their journey back to Botswana. On the way back, they meet a young white boy, who begins beating them the moment he sees them, most probably because they are black. This time Dikeledi and Boleo fight back. They beat him until they are satisfied that the boy is dead, although he comes back to life later. Satisfied that the boy is dead, they escape back home, to Tlokwen in Botswana. This fighting back and their determination to kill a white boy in fact foreshadow Boleo's new agenda, namely resisting colonial oppression until it sees its last day. But like the white boy, who comes back to life, colonial oppression would also prove illusive to kill. The struggle continues.

Homecoming

Boleo arrives home on the day of her father's funeral. Soon after her arrival, it becomes evident that Boleo's journey to apartheid South Africa has been a life-changing experience. She is a fearless social critic, self-reliant visionary, political activist and self-styled community leader. Her vision is way above many people in her village. Let us look at some of the characterisation of Boleo and how it addresses patriarchy and colonial oppression. I shall be asking if this characterisation pays tribute to both or falls back to the 'First Things First' approach?

Using her experience from the farms owned by whites, Boleo begins an elaborate vegetable garden. This attracts the interests of many villagers who wish to grow their own vegetables. Boleo thus holds meetings where she trains and teaches people the skills of growing vegetables. Within a short space of time most villagers begin to eat fresh vegetables from their own gardens. The group meets occasionally at her house and it is called *Baitiredi*, that is, those who are self-reliant, or if you like, independent. The success of their gardens leads them to consider selling vegetables together. Around this time, Boleo receives a visitor, Mooki, the nurse who helped them to escape from the hospital in South Africa arrives. She has run away because the South African apartheid government had begun to suspect that she was subversive to their oppressive system.

At this point of the story, it becomes clear that the black and white relationships of apartheid South Africa exist even in the village of Tlokwen in Botswana. Kotsiri, a white South African farmer, who has been running a vegetable outlet, experiences the impact of Boleo's activism. His customers dry up for people are now, *Baitiredi*, self-reliant subjects. Mr Kotsiri thus visits the Kgosi (King) of the village, gives him some gift and tells the leader that his gift could be better if it were not for his ailing business. The Kgosi is thus bribed to intervene for Mr Kotsiri's benefit. Kgosi calls a village meeting where he issues an order that all gardening should cease, for it wastes valuable drinking water. The Kgosi also

tells them that he issued a trading permit to Kotsiri and people should buy his vegetables instead of growing their own. Boleo protests openly in a public meeting saying that Kotsiri's permission does not have to condemn them to dependence. Kgosi's word, however, is law. But this doesn't end Boleo's determination to mobilise her people to be *baitiredi*, self-reliant subjects. With the suggestion of Mooki, the nurse, word is sent that no one should buy from Mr Kotsiri's vegetable shop anymore. He is forced to quit his business and return to South Africa.

The communal spirit of resistance organised by Boleo and Mooki defeats the Kgosi of the village, who is forced to withdraw from his earlier stance. Evidently, Boleo becomes a community leader who is well respected for her ideas and work. Kgosi's son marries Boleo, but this hardly silences her. As *mmabatho* or queen of the people, Boleo does not deliberate in the *kgotla* [public court] on the basis of her gender. But she continues to work with *Baitiredi*. They bear a child called Matlapeng and white church minister, Moruti Smith, wishes to have the boy in the church. Boleo rejects the invitation, saying that she has seen many white church ministers in South Africa who are as equally cruel towards black people as any South African white farmer could be.

Boleo's suspicious mind towards the church minister seems uncalled for. But when she collapses and gets sent to a hospital across the border in South Africa by the church minister, Boleo is arrested on her way back. Like many other black people, she is imprisoned without trial and tortured through electric shock. She is physically beaten up. At first, Boleo feared that they connected her to the death of a little white boy they hit and left for dead. But as it turns out, Boleo was right: the church minister is a South African white spy. His job is to keep track of all possible enemies of the South African apartheid government. He had been taking pictures of Mooki, the South Africa refugee woman, and reporting about Boleo's supposedly dangerous communist practices in the village and even pledged his commitment to help to eliminate these subversive forces. Boleo discovers his letter and how he works hand in hand with South African white apartheid regime. Her husband, like his father, who took the side of Kotsiri, does not appreciate Boleo's critical mind. He believes that church minister should be given their son, educate him to the highest level. Her husband, who is now the village Kgosi, believes that the church minister is their friend. For Boleo, however, the educational institution is even more suspect. Boleo makes no secret that formal education is an institution that seeks to turn black children's minds white, that is, colonising the minds of Batswana children. By this time her husband feels that he has had enough of Boleo's colonial resistance and seeks divorce.

With her critical mind, Boleo's character highlights that colonial sin (*boleo*) is represented by the apartheid system that exploits and oppresses black people; it teaches people to depend on white businesses and their poisonous church and school institutions. She highlights that the church and the

school function hand in glove with apartheid and should be rejected. Boleo's activism also highlights that *boleo*/sin is also dependent on co-opting indigenous leaders, *dikgosi*, who are depicted as the unsuspecting supporters of colonising structures and agents. Salvation is not only depicted as the capacity to see colonial sin at work, but also the mobilisation of people to become *baitiredi* (independent people; self-reliant; those who own their labour); the creation of alternative space and leadership; the embarking on cross-border collaboration with the oppressed (characterised by their relationship with Mooki); and the capacity to become suspicious of, if not reject, colonial institutions: the church and the school. Salvation includes the political action of resistance, characterised by the refusal to buy from the businesses of their oppressors. It is in this salvific space that *Tshepo* [Hope] is found.

Evaluative summary: Towards postcolonial feminisms

How does this characterisation of women in *Boleo* articulate a postcolonial feminist strategy? Can we call it a 'First Things First' approach? It is most akin to it, although not entirely. Boleo, Dikeledi and Tshepo are clearly subjected to equal colonial oppression as black men, but with much resistance. They are beaten, imprisoned, tortured and exploited for their colour and they fight back. Like Jezile in Ncgobo's *And They Didn't Die* or Miriam Makeba's life story, Boleo is committed to the strategies that would allow her people to be free from colonising ideologies of apartheid and class discrimination. She thus embarks on community mobilisation of *Baitiredi*, or the self-reliant people, to actualise their independence from colonising forces. But unlike Jezile, the political activist who gave in to her mother-in-law insistence that she must get pregnant, Boleo often refuses to take her husband's decision if she sees them betraying the struggle against apartheid. Unlike Jezile who still worked for the white mistress, Boleo is shown to break free and to organise the community along the same route for they become *Baitiredi*, a village of self-reliant people who do not need to buy vegetables from Mr Kotsiri.

Boleo's resistance to colonising forces is overt and not debatable. But where, if any, are Boleo's techniques of patriarchal resistance? The novel, I must say, is exceptional for portraying women's (Boleo and Mooki) thinking skills and leadership as way above that of Batswana men. The latter, exemplified by the former Kgosi and the current Kgosi, Boleo's husband, who are easily lured by colonising strategies and remain completely oblivious to the imperative need to become *Baitiredi*. Batswana men are characterised as almost passive or overtly collaborative with colonising structures and ideologies. The death and burial of her father, perhaps, is the novel's sounding knell for the dearth of male leadership. The novel is to be credited for characterising women as creating alternative spaces, where they lead community effectively without being part of the formal structures of leadership. In so doing, the novel does inaugurate some shift, for it debunks patriarchy by demonstrating that women are intelligent and capable public leaders, who can and should

be fully respected. This is particularly poignant if the novel is read against the Setswana culture for it holds that '*ga dinke dietelelwa ke manamagadi di ka wela ka mamena*' [i.e. 'women cannot be leaders, save if the community desires to be driven down a deadly cliff']. But the novel paints women as strong public leaders, much better than all male leaders. Is this a postcolonial feminist strategy of portraying women as capable social agents and leaders? If it is the case, then how do we interpret the divorce? Boleo gets divorced by Kgosi, her husband, for refusing to hand their son to the church minister. One recalls Jezile, in Ncgobo's novel, another ardent activist who also got divorced. Should we read divorce as indicating the parting of ways with colonised and patriarchal systems? Should we read divorce as a rejection of marriage as a patriarchal institution that can no longer accommodate these women leaders? Amongst the various possible interpretations, Boleo and Jezile's divorce rightfully highlight the unresolved complexities of postcolonialism and feminism struggles for justice.

In the light of historical evidence, which shows that African women who were actively involved in wars of independence did not automatically earn their gender rights, it is difficult to view *Boleo's* proposed model of liberation as a holistic strategy. One yearns for *Boleo's* open and direct attack on patriarchy, for at the end of the struggle for independence, when the common colonial enemy was 'no more', most African women were asked to occupy their traditional roles of subordination. Sisonke Msimanga (2017:234) has described this historical experience in three trite sentences: 'First you fight. Then you win. Repeat'. I am thus inclined to conclude by saying, regardless of its positive portrait of women as social agents and political community leaders, *Boleo's* approach befriends the 'First Things First' model. Yet, there is a shift from established patriarchy, characterised by the death of the father, Kgosi and the husband's incapacity to provide leadership towards political liberation from colonising forces. This shift comes as the implied author suggests that women have provided indisputable leadership in the struggle for liberation whilst the indigenous leaders (*dikgosi*) were mostly sell-outs and collaborators. The father, as the representative of patriarchal power, is thus dead and getting buried upon the return of Boleo. Be that as it may, its attack on patriarchy is somewhat indirect and does not get the full and overt attention of Boleo, compared with her unapologetic confrontation with apartheid. The novel's attack on patriarchy thus comes as the implication and consequences of Boleo's political leadership. The death and burial of her father perhaps is the novel's sounding knell for the death of male leadership – that patriarchy must go. The unspoken attack on patriarchy is to be suspiciously viewed.

In sum, it would seem Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel *Nervous Conditions* offers one of the best postcolonial feminist strategies, amongst the above analysed novels. In her approach, both patriarchal and colonial forces are given equal attention. The novel entertains no illusion of perfect

indigenous cultures or origins. Thus, it draws from both Zimbabwean and English cultures whilst the oppressive colonial and patriarchal ideologies are not entertained. *Baiteredi*, the self-reliant community of *Boleo*, needs to take this extra mile to cultivate a liberating postcolonial feminist space for women and men of Southern Africa. Yet, read together and within their contexts, all the five novels provide us with an archive of the postcolonial feminist discourse – whether it is the ‘First Things First’; ‘Second Things First’ or ‘Both Things Simultaneously’ approach. In the novel *Boleo*, Boleo found *Dikeledi* [tears/sorrow] and returned home with her.

As the novel closes with Boleo’s commitment to the political liberation subjugating her to divorce, we are challenged to seek and to find *Tshepo* [Hope]. Any lost and not found persons are unfinished stories, inviting our commitment to finding them. Because *Tshepo*, hope, was never found, there is no closure; no forgetting; no stopping for we are invited to keep on thinking about her, remembering her, searching for her, and working for her reappearance in the horizon of our lives. *Tshepo* is, therefore, the character indicating the *a luta continua* space of liberation – as a space for spirituality of continually seeking justice to and with all the oppressed members of the Earth Community. It is a space that invites us to bring our gifts to the congregation of *baitiredi* in working for salvation of the Earth Community. As long as one member of the Earth Community is denied justice, somewhere and somehow then we remain within the space of ‘*a luta continua*’. The novel *Boleo* thus invites us to join the voices of those who challenge us to build more holistic, inclusive and intersectional liberation. *Tshepo, the hope for justice, has begun to be actualised in the community of Baitiredi, who invite all of us to work for hope, for salvation.* As we seek for *Tshepo*, we remember Vellem Vuyani, to whom this article is written in his honour, and for the passion he held for the liberation of black people and the Earth community as a whole. In his untimely passing Vuyani S. Vellem (2015:1) (born December 1968 and died December 2019) energises us to seek and work for *Tshepo*, to remain within the space of *a luta continua*, for he underlined, that ‘unmasking the universe of the Empire is the task of Black Theology of liberation as a theology of life’.

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