

“There Is No God in Mashonaland”: A Story of the British South Africa Company’s Atrocities in Zimbabwe in the Wake of the First Chimurenga (1896–1897)

Paul Henry Gundani

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0979-5941>

Zimbabwe Open University

Research Fellow, Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology, University of South Africa

gundanip@zou.ac.zw

Abstract

The novel *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (1897) presents the reader with Olive Schreiner’s striking and idiosyncratic exposé of the atrocities that the British South Africa Company (BSAC) perpetrated against the Shona people as punishment for revolting against the company’s settler occupation. The scorched earth measures adopted by the BSAC expose the values and aspirations that motivated its volunteer mercenaries recruited from the United Kingdom and South Africa to suppress what they believed to have been a “rebellion.” The dialogue between Peter Simon Halket, the novel’s protagonist, and a Christly “Stranger” exposes the moral decadence and greed undergirding the colonial project and further raises serious moral questions about the Christian pretensions that masked the British colonial project in Zimbabwe throughout the colonial period. In this reflective article, we interrogate the scorched earth tactics, portrayed by Schreiner, used against the Shona to weaken their resolve. Secondly, we interrogate the implications of the claim that Trooper Peter Halket, Schreiner’s protagonist, makes when he exclaims that “There is no God in Mashonaland.” Using a postcolonial approach in this article, Halket’s claim begs the following question: What role did European missionaries play during the First Chimurenga?

Keywords: British South Africa Company (BSAC); Cecil John Rhodes; Trooper Peter Halket; the Stranger; The First Chimurenga; coloniality; Christian missionaries; postcolonialism



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Introduction

In view of Cecil John Rhodes's interest in extending the tentacles of the British Empire, which followed on the heels of the Berlin Conference held in 1884, this study aims to answer the question: How has the Church developed and influenced human civilisation throughout history? At the Berlin Conference, major European powers negotiated and formalised claims for territory in Africa. Rhodes's imperial interests were camouflaged in the Rudd Concession (1888), which granted the British South Africa Company (BSAC) exclusive mineral rights in Mashonaland. Hardly a year later, the purchase of the land concession from Lippert in 1889 strengthened his position to appropriate land rights in Mashonaland. The despatch of the Pioneer Column from Macloutsie (Matlotti) in Botswana to Mashonaland in June 1890 marked the beginning of the process of the colonisation of Mashonaland by Cecil John Rhodes's BSAC. Armed with Martini-Henry rifles, revolvers, seven-pound field guns, and Maxim machine guns, the Pioneer Column set up base at Fort Salisbury (now Harare) on 12 September 1890, where they hoisted the British Union Jack. Mashonaland's fate was sealed as the white colonial masters began to impose Company rule against the Shona through demarcating and parcelling out land into farms promised to white settlers by Rhodes, the imposition of the hut tax, and the introduction of forced labour. After six years of being lorded over and of being abused by Company police, the Shona waged a campaign of resistance, which in Shona folklore is referred to as *hondo ye Chindunduma* or *Chimurenga*. The latter has gained more currency in Zimbabwean historiography due to Terence Ranger's 1967 classic entitled *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia, 1896–97*.

The historiography of the First Chimurenga is well established and dominated by three eminent former white history lecturers at the University of Rhodesia, i.e., T. O. Ranger, Julian Cobbing, and David Beach. While the three eminent historians agreed on the causes and course of the Shona resistance, they disagreed on matters about the interpretation of the causes, course, and coordination of the resistance (see Beach 1998; Cobbing 1977). The purpose of this article, however, is not to rehash or revise scholarly works on the Shona resistance but to demonstrate how literature complements history and brings nuance to the story of the First Chimurenga. My second interest has direct bearing on the discipline of Church History and missiology, i.e., to locate and examine the role of Christian missionaries during the uprisings. This curiosity is motivated by the claim made by Schreiner's protagonist, Trooper Peter Halket, who avers that "There is no God in Mashonaland" (Schreiner 1897, 261). It is unmistakable that the God that Peter Simon refers to is none other than the Christian God. It follows, therefore, that the averment is meant not only to be a condemnation of, but also an indictment against, the atrocities and injustices of the BSAC and its sponsor, the British government. Equally, there is an indirect attack on the missionaries operating in Mashonaland and Southern Africa who neglected their prophetic role of condemning colonial injustices and the excesses of Rhodes in Mashonaland. Schreiner therefore puts a spotlight on the role of the Christian mission in aiding and abetting the BSAC's violent suppression of the revolt and consolidating the process of colonisation. In Schreiner's view, the claim that

the British people were Christian and morally superior to the Shona whom they came to civilise and evangelise was not only hollow but utter hypocrisy as the violent campaign was motivated by the lure of gold, greed, and imperial glory (Schreiner 1897, 261). This article contributes to ongoing debates on postcolonialism, gender, and race by offering a nuanced understanding of the cultural, political, and social forces that shaped late 19th-century Southern Africa. Specifically, this analysis explores how Schreiner's novel critiques the hypocrisy of missionaries who claimed to bring salvation to indigenous peoples while perpetuating colonialism and its exploitative systems.

Approach to the Study

In this study, I examine views and comments articulated by social commentators and literary critics on the novel. Furthermore, I will utilise the postcolonial concept of subalternity as articulated by Spivak (2023) and Bhabha (Moore-Gilbert 2000), and Schreiner's portrayal of Shona resistance in *Trooper Peter Halket* can be critically examined for its silences, representations, and omissions. The concept of subalternity was first coined by the Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci to describe marginalised social groups in his *Prison Notebooks (1929–1935)* (Gramsci 2011). This lens foregrounds the brutal atrocities inflicted by colonisers, vividly depicting the violence and moral decadence of the colonial regime, aligning with Bhabha's critique of colonial representations rooted in ambivalence and psychic conflict as depicted in the novel. The concept was popularised by postcolonial writers such as Spivak (2023), Said (1978), and Bhabha. These scholars have used the concept of subalternity to analyse power dynamics, challenge dominant narratives, and highlight the experiences of marginalised groups in postcolonial contexts. To this end, we use the concept as a heuristic instrument to analyse Schreiner's novel. Her portrayal of subalternity largely centres on the colonial agent, Peter, whose moral awakening and pacifism symbolise a Western moral lens, echoing Spivak's concern about the silenced subaltern who cannot speak on their own terms. Schreiner's depiction of resistance is mediated through Western narratives, risking the erasure of the subaltern's agency, paralleling Spivak's argument that the subaltern cannot directly speak. Her critique exposes colonial violence but leaves the authentic voices of the Shona largely absent, echoing the "absence" and "muteness" of the subaltern discussed by Spivak and Bhabha (in Moore-Gilbert 2000).

The Plot Structure of *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*

Olive Schreiner, a white female novelist who was based in Cape Town, authored the novel in the heat of the moment, and published it the same year that the First Chimurenga ended. She became the first writer to tell the story of the ruthlessness of the British South Africa Company and the collusion of the British Empire in a brutal campaign to end the Shona uprising. The protagonist, Trooper Peter, a young working-class Briton, enlists as a mercenary for Cecil John Rhodes's Chartered Company, which is engaged in a critical moment of subduing both the Ndebele and Shona uprisings (the First Umvukela and/or First Chimurenga). Peter is among a dozen or so colleagues who

were fetching provisions of mealies and rice to the next camp. On the fateful day, he was sent out to act as a scout along a low range of hills (Schreiner 1897, 14).

Night falls before he manages to locate his fellow troopers. He decides to light a fire on a kopje, hoping that his colleagues would see it and come to his rescue (15). During a solitary night on the kopje, Peter encounters an enigmatic figure who can be interpreted as a Christ-like figure. In an encounter that can aptly be described as a Christophany, the conversation that unfolds raises Peter's consciousness to the realisation that human beings cannot eat the flesh of other human beings. Peter becomes aware of the evils of colonialism, monopoly capitalism, and British imperial expansionism, forcing him to confront his own complicity in perpetuating these systems (17). At the climax of the plot, Peter Simon Halket goes through a Damascene conversion, renounces his former beliefs, and embraces a pacifist approach to life. This newly acquired awareness leads to conflict with Peter's fellow troopers and a deeper connection with the Shona subalterns.

Apart from Peter and the Christ-like Stranger, there are other characters, such as Peter's fellow troopers and a pastor and his wife. The pastor introduces theological issues and the imperative of the prophetic voice in the struggle against imperialism. Like the Stranger, he interrogates the relevance of the church in the face of the political crisis confronting Southern Africa at the end of the nineteenth century.

Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland as a Social Critique of British Imperialism

According to Coetzee (1988, 123), "The BSAC's campaign against the Ndebele and Shona was a brutal and ruthless one, marked by mass killings, forced removals, and the destruction of entire communities." Through her novel, Schreiner manages to adumbrate the horror of the BSAC's campaign that Coetzee attests to. As Peter wondered "among long grasses, and iron-stone kopjes and stunted bush [he] came upon no sign of habitation but remains of a burnt kraal ("a Kaffir encampment"), [and] a down-trampled and now uncultivated mealie field where a month before the Chartered Company forces had destroyed a native settlement" (Schreiner 1897, 14–15). Peter Halket's personal reminiscences and his dialogue with the Stranger highlight the scorched earth approaches that the BSAC adopted in its campaign to suppress the Shona uprising. Through her novel, Schreiner depicts the moral callousness and moral decadence of the forces fighting the Shona. The novel vividly describes the widespread atrocities inflicted upon the Shona society.

Schreiner critiques the Darwinian notion of British moral superiority (Schreiner 1897, 10) and contrasts it with the barbaric deployment of Maxim guns to quell the Shona resistance (Burdett 2001; Schreiner 1897). The scorched earth means used in the suppression of the Shona uprising included the indiscriminate and disproportionate use of Maxim guns against Shona fighters, who mainly used their spears (Schreiner 1897,

43). The Maxim gun, invented in 1884 by Hiram Stevens Maxim, was a decisive factor in the BSAC victory against Lobengula in the Anglo-Ndebele War (1893–1894). It was also used in the Ndebele and Shona uprisings. It facilitated the colonisation of Mashonaland by allowing imperialist forces to brutally suppress the resistance. Through her novel, Schreiner managed to capture the horror visited upon the Shona society through the abuse of the Maxim gun. The indiscriminate use of the Maxim gun is poignantly illustrated through Peter Halket's reflections. Alone on the kopje, Peter Halket paints a vivid picture of the battles waged against the Shona.

Then he saw the skull of an old Mashona blown off at the top, the hands still moving. He heard loud cry of the native women and children as they turned the maxims on to the kraal: and Then again, he was working a maxim gun, but it seemed to him it was more like the reaping machine he used to work in England, and that what was going down before it was not yellow corn, but black men's heads; and he thought when he looked back they lay behind him in rows like the corn in sheaves. (Schreiner 1897, 40)

Peter also remembered a battle where he “had worked a Maxim Gun in a fight when some hundred natives fell and only one white man had been wounded” (Schreiner 1897, 43).

Apart from the use of the Maxim gun, colonial forces also resorted to exploding dynamite against women and children hidden in caves (40), burning the grain that the colonial forces could not carry away (Schreiner 1897, 38), and the destruction of Shona compounds (Schreiner 1897, 75). All these violent methods were designed to starve the Shona fighters and their dependents to force them to surrender. As a result, the Shona were “forced to live on roots and herbs” (Schreiner 1897, 75). To compound it all, the colonial campaign against the Shona uprising was characterised by flogging, shooting, and hanging of prisoners of war (Schreiner 1897, 79). Peter refers to the “nigger” shot by the colonial forces. “They say he sat as still as if he was cut out of stone, with his arms round his legs; and some of the fellows gave him blows about the head and face before they took him off to shoot him” (Schreiner 1897, 80). Schreiner attributes the moral decadence of the colonial forces to Cecil John Rhodes's imperial ambition. Peter's reference to him as “death on niggers” (Schreiner 1897, 81) is therefore apt. However, Schreiner makes it clear that British imperialism was inspired by capitalist greed. Colonial settlers disregarded all moral scruples because of the lure of gold. According to Schreiner, the colonial society that Rhodes had set up suffered from an obsession with making money. So, Peter says, “Why, if God Almighty came to this country, and hadn't half-a-million in shares, they wouldn't think much of him” (Schreiner 1897, 89). Through the conversation between Peter and the Christ-like Stranger, Schreiner represents the moral compromises inherent in imperialism.

Through her narrative, Schreiner highlights the colonial regime's exploitation of indigenous tribes through excessive taxes, land dispossession (Schreiner 1897, 29, 63), and disease-induced famines (like locusts and rinderpest), leading to internecine hostilities with the imperial power (Chrisman 2000, 136). Schreiner's portrayal of these

events challenges the myth of the civilising mission and exposes the dehumanising consequences of British imperialism.

Schreiner's use of irony, satire, and hyperbole creates ardent imageries of colonial critique. Using symbolic and historical weight, *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* is thus an allegory about BSAC's brutal colonial policies in Matabeleland and Mashonaland. It clearly exposes the "damned impertinence" of colonial ideology that justified the subjugation of indigenous peoples (Schreiner 1897, 14). Furthermore, Schreiner's novella *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* employs literary devices to make a "telling critique of British colonialism [i.e., brutal realities]" (Burdett 2001, 126). The inclusion of photographic evidence in the first edition's frontispiece, depicting the Chartered Company men behind the corpses of three hanging spies, shocked readers and was subsequently removed (Burdett 2001, 126). Schreiner further uses Peter's conversations with "Jesus" to ground the narrative, highlighting the fiction's basis in fact. The three were not the only ones hanged by the BSAC and its complicit British troops. Various leaders of the Shona uprisings, such as Gumboreshumba Chingona (Sekuru Kaguvi), Charwe Nyakasikana (Mbuya Nehanda) Chinengundu, Chiwashira, Chingaira Makoni, among others, were hanged. The year 1897 marked the end of the Shona uprisings following the capture of Charwe Nyakasikana (Mbuya Nehanda) and Gumboreshumba Chingona (Sekuru Kaguvi), who were the coordinators of the resistance. Both Mbuya Nehanda and Sekuru Kaguvi were executed in April 1898 after being found guilty of the murder of two colonial officials. Beach (1998) regards the BSAC authorities' accusation and treatment of Mbuya Nehanda as an injustice against a Rhodesian woman. This begs the question that the next section discusses.

What Is a Rebel?

In the colonial mindset, the viciousness of Rhodes's military machinery and his imperial supporters was justified by the fact that the Shona had rebelled against British rule. Hence, in defence of the BSAC interests and beneficiaries of colonisation, Peter refers to the Ndebele and Shona as "good for nothing rebels" (Schreiner 1897, 91). This leads to the Stranger's question, "What is a rebel?" (Schreiner 1897, 42). Peter's answer displays the vacuousness of imperial ideology buttressed by colonial jingoism and white arrogance. He answers, "A rebel is a man who fights against his King and his country. These bloody niggers here are rebels because they are fighting against us. They don't want the Chartered Company to have them. But they have to. We will teach them a lesson" (Schreiner 1897, 42–43).

However, Schreiner questions Rhodes's justification of the violent and brutal pogrom against the Shona and disagrees with the normative belief of the time that the Shona "rebelled" against legitimate authority. Not satisfied with the answer, the Stranger asks a follow-up question: "You were given the land? And the people of the land—did she (i.e., British Empire) give you the people also?" Peter looked a little doubtfully at the

Stranger. “Yes, of course, she gave us the people; what use would the land have been to us otherwise?” (Schreiner 1897, 42).

For the reader to understand the purpose of the conversation between Peter and the Stranger on what a “rebel” is, one must infer that, for Schreiner, the term “rebel,” in the context of Mashonaland, goes beyond simple semantics and requires a thorough and unapologetic epistemological inquiry into the circumstances leading to Rhodes’s grant of the Charter from the British monarch. Historical evidence abounds on the subterfuge used by Rhodes to get the British Charter over Mashonaland (Gundani 2019).

The Land Question in *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*

The land question features strongly in Schreiner’s novel. This adds realism to the novel, considering the centrality of the land to the occupation of Mashonaland. Land offers constituted the major incentive to would-be settlers, police, and volunteer fighters such as Peter Halket. The latter is made clear in the following paragraphs.

He considered his business prospects. When he had served his time as a volunteer, he would have a large piece of land given him, and the Mashonas and Matabele’s have all their land taken away from them in time, and the Chartered Company’d pass a law that they had to work for the white men: and he, Peter Halket, would make them work for him. He would make money. (Schreiner 1897, 29)

Again, as Peter reminisces on his experiences in Zimbabwe, he says,

Well, when I heard that the Company was going to have a row with the Matabeles, I thought I would volunteer. They said there was lots of loot to be got, and land to be given out. (Schreiner 1897, 63)

Later, the Stranger refers to the whole land of Mashonaland as central to the question:

The stranger asked, “Who gave you your land?”

Peter answered, “Mine! Why, the Chartered Company?”

The stranger then asked, “And who gave it to them?”

Peter answered, “Why, England, of course. She gave them the land to far beyond the Zambezi to do what they liked with, and make as much money out of it as they could, and she’d back’em.”

“Who gave the land to the men and women of England?”, asked the stranger softly. “Why, the devil. They said it was theirs, and of course it was”, said Peter. (Schreiner 1897, 89–90)

Criticisms and Expositions of Imperialism's Dark Underbelly

The competing ideals of Christianity, science, and capitalism made colonialism a confusing process, not only for the missionaries and Christians but for the whole of Europe.

Olive Schreiner's novel *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*, however, offers us a critical and nuanced view that redefines missionaries considering the advances of colonialism, racism, and sexism. British imperialism was complicated by the inclusion of racism, as supported by the concept of evolutionary science. Thus, Schreiner's critique of the dehumanising effects of British imperialism and the differences between races was a fight against a religiously sanctioned ideology. *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* thus represents a powerful critique and an interrogation of the competing interests of colonialism with its related alignments of racism, sexism, as well as Christianity and its teachings on love and justice, alongside capitalism and its interests in imperial expansion.

Civilising Mission Based on Christianity

Peter's answers to Christ's questions about Christianity reveal the civilising mission's failure to uphold moral superiority. According to Mizoguchi (2006, 47),

Peter's painfully simple answers to Christ's questions about the very definition of being Christian betray that civilising mission based on Christianity, which is supposed to signify the colonisers' moral superiority to the colonised, is totally missing in Peter. Being a Christian is a mere label to distinguish those who are entitled to the land they appropriate and those who deserve to be dispossessed of the same land.

Stranger: "Are you Christians?"

"Why, of course we are!", said Peter. "We're all Christians, we English. Perhaps you don't like Christians, though...."

"Is the Chartered Company Christian also?" the stranger asked. "Yes, oh yes", said Pater.

"What is a Christian?" Asked the stranger.

"Well, now you really do ask such curious questions. A Christian is a man who believes in Heaven and Hell, and God, and the Bible, and in Jesus Christ, that he'll save him from going to Hell, and if he believes he'll be saved, he will be saved."

"But here, in this world, what is a Christian?"

"Why?", said Peter, "I am a Christian—we're all Christians." (Schreiner 1897, 46-47)

The conversation contrasts the self-interest of exploiting and profiting from the “flesh and blood” of Southern Africa and its people, pointing out the irony of his support for Armenian nationalism while criticising Southern Africa’s “niggers” for not wanting to submit to Company rule (Schreiner 1897, 20). This is compared with self-sacrifice, underscoring the hypocrisy of British colonialism (Schreiner 1897, 20).

Schreiner uses the Stranger as a foil to critique British values and actions. The character presents a utopian community characterised by equal treatment and love among members, challenging prevailing views on non-Western cultures’ emotional complexity (Ruskin 1865, 12). The stories highlight the capacity for love, loyalty, and racial solidarity among Southern Africa’s native population (Fanon 1952, 31).

In her dedication to Sir George Grey, Schreiner appears to advocate for British imperial rule, but her words critique the British public’s failure to uphold Christian values and humanitarian principles (Ashcroft 2016, 123). Schreiner exposes the gap between the British civilising mission and its implementation through Jesus’s stories. The pastor’s comment adds spice to the story as missionaries seemed to have acted complicitly to the tendencies of speculators and monopolists with regard to exploitation and disregard of humanity and shared heritage (Schreiner 1897, 4, 28).

Christianity on Trial: The Role, Involvement, and Influence of Missionaries in the First Chimurenga

Schreiner was baffled by the notion that the British Empire was a Christian nation, particularly when it went on its business to conquer and colonise other nations and peoples. The dialogue between the Christ-like Stranger and Pater Halket exposes the moral and religious contradictions and hollowness of the claim that the British are Christians.

What Schreiner finds lacking among the British settlers is the deep reflection of their Christian faith in the new context where they arrogated to themselves the status of masters over the indigenous people of Mashonaland.

The Christ-like figure encountered by Trooper Peter is an expression of the abandonment of roles by missionaries to stand in the place of Christ among potential converts. In other words, missionaries in the First Chimurenga played a crucial role in shaping the attitudes and actions of the colonisers, perpetuating systems of oppression and domination (Chitando 2001, 80–94).

However, this benevolent facade belied a more insidious agenda, as missionaries were often complicit in the exploitation of indigenous cultures and the destruction of traditional ways of life (O’Toole 2015). They viewed African cultures as “heathen” or “pagan,” seeking to disrupt them by promoting Christianity and European customs, which they believed were superior (Schreiner 1897, 100). The success of Christianity, they imagined, was going to legitimise the colonial project. Thus, the interests of

missionaries during the First Chimurenga were often tied to those of colonial powers, seeking to further colonial expansion and legitimise British rule in Africa (Kaoma 2016).

“There Is No God in Mashonaland” (Schreiner 1897, 261)

Schreiner’s novel raises the point that Mashonaland was being regarded as a mission field with the justification that no religion, spirituality, or morality existed there. The statement itself is an oxymoron as it mocks the colonial actions of attested Christians upon the peaceful and co-habitable heathens. According to Walls (cited in Nkomazana and Setume 2016, 130), “missionary occupation in Mashonaland was intimately associated with the establishment of British rule.” It is understandable why the protagonist in Schreiner’s novella argued that “There is no God in Mashonaland.” The so-called absent God could only refer to the Christian God, and not to the Shona God. Both settler and missionary believed that the Shona had no consciousness of a supreme being. In 1894, Fr. Hartmann (S.J.) wrote, “Among the Mashonas there are only very faint traces of religion. They have hardly any idea of a supreme the Mashonas are united as a commonwealth by nothing except the unity of their language” (Ranger 1967, 55). This perception is consistent with Chidester’s (2000) research findings that white explorers, traders, colonial administrators, and missionaries treated Africans as people without a religion. This perception was symptomatic of the paternalistic view embedded in and consistent with the imperial sense of superiority over everything in Africa.

Rather than portraying a just, fair, forgiving, and empathetic God, what Christian settlers, troopers, and missionaries managed to portray and represent was a *deus otiosus* inured to the wanton and callous vortex of colonial violence and insulated from the desperate cry of the oppressed Shona people. Yahweh, the Christian God, was “hidden” from the callous militarism that accompanied colonial expansion and the violent suppression of the Shona in Zimbabwe. The Christian God’s desertion of Mashonaland exposes the hypocrisy and emptiness of the claim that British people, Rhodes and his soldiers included, were “Christians.” One is reminded of the sarcastic challenge by Elijah to the prophets of Baal implying that their god was powerless or absent (1 Kgs 18:27): “Cry out, for he is god; either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.” Similarly, because of the powerlessness of the Christian God, the Shona people who rose in defence of their land rights, their spiritual, political, and economic sovereignty and dignity were left at the mercy of a rabid imperialist, Cecil John Rhodes, supported by British and South African accomplices.

The Stranger’s retort to Peter reveals Schreiner’s cynicism about Rhodes’s imperial and brutal campaign of repression against the Shona. She interrogates Rhodes’s false sense of divine right over Mashonaland and asks, “Is the Chartered Company God, that everyone knew should bow before it and before it every head bent? Would you, the white men of England, submit to its rule one day?” (Schreiner 1897, 43).

The Church's Deafening Silence in the Face of Injustice in Mashonaland

When questioned by his wife why he condemned the attempted invasion of Transvaal by the BSAC forces led by Leander Starr Jameson, the pastor, who represents Christian conscience, responds as follows:

My wife, if I believe that certain men whom we have raised on high, and to whom we have given power, have done cowardly wrong, shall I not say it? Shall a man keep silence, when he sees oppression, to earn money for God? (Schreiner 1897, 118)

In a scathing critique of the myth of Anglo-Saxon superiority over other races, the pastor says:

We who had hoped to stand first in the Anglo-Saxon sisterhood for justice and freedom, are not even fit to stand last. (Schreiner 1897, 124)

Contrary to the principled stand taken by the pastor, Christian missionaries in Mashonaland chose to keep quiet in the face of a violent suppression of the Shona uprising orchestrated by BSAC police, supported by the imperial forces from both England and South Africa. The deafening silence can be explained by several factors.

Firstly, Needham, Mashingaidze, and Bhebe (1984, 98–99) offer a general explanation for missionaries' decision to side with Rhodes's BSAC occupation of Mashonaland and the conquest of Matabeleland. They argue,

It has been suggested that because of the frustration resulting from their failure, the missionaries became hostile to the Shona and Ndebele during the introduction of colonial rule. Charles Helm, Lobengula's own trusted Umfundisi (teacher), helped the imperialist, Cecil John Rhodes, to obtain a mining concession from Lobengula by deceitful means and did not protest when the whites killed Africans with the Maxim Gun. The Catholic Father Prestage (S.J.) also supported the crushing of the Ndebele in 1893. (1984, 98–99)

According to Zvobgo (2009, 18), the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa, led by Rev. A. A. Louw, reached Salisbury on 9 September 1891. He was accompanied by Sam and John Helm, relatives of Charles D. Helm, Lobengula's interpreter during the negotiations that culminated in the signing of the Rudd Concession. Two months later, Rev. Louw founded the Morgenster mission near Great Zimbabwe. There was a close relationship that existed between Rhodes and Rev. Louw to the extent that in 1892, when a drought ravaged the Masvingo region, Rev. Louw wrote to Rhodes for material support. In his letter accompanying material support for drought, Rhodes wrote, "One missionary is worth more than a hundred policemen." This assertion speaks to the sinister role that missionaries played in support of colonialism.

Secondly, churches such as the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England provided chaplains to the Pioneer Column. Notable among the chaplains were Fr.

Andrew Hartmann (S.J.) and Rev. Frank Howard Surridge of the Church of England Chaplain. The provision of chaplaincy services to the BSAC was not just an innocent form of support to the BSAC in its colonial intent but a sign of loyalty to British imperialism. The blessing of the Union Jack by Canon Balfor at Fort Salisbury on 12 September 1890 symbolised the commencement of a close bond between the Rhodesian governing administrations and the Church in Zimbabwe.

Thirdly, Davis (1978, 115) argues that “the missionaries, mostly British, were definitely men of their time. As Victorians, they had a proud and complete belief in the superiority of Western culture. Although the mission of the colonial settler and that of the missionary were not coterminous, the first decade of their relationship was characterised by a functional *modus vivendi*.”

Fourthly, missionaries found it normal and natural to identify with Rhodes because they viewed him as a beneficent and benevolent leader who had created a conducive, safe, and promising environment for them to evangelise the Shona by defeating the Lobengula. Before abandoning Empandeni Mission in 1888, Fr. Prestage (S.J.) made it clear in his writings that Christian evangelisation of the Ndebele people would only be possible after having eliminated Lobengula. Soon after the clash between Captain Lendy’s forces and a Ndebele *impi* under Umgandani Ndlovu, Fr. Prestage wrote a telegram to Leander Starr Jameson emphasising the importance of eliminating Lobengula. His justification of the war against Lobengula in 1893 was based on the belief that the evangelisation of Mashonaland would not be possible without destroying Lobengula’s tyranny over the Shona. Similarly, Rev. Isaac Shimmin wrote a letter to the *Cape Times* newspaper justifying the First Matabele War (1893–1894) against the Ndebele kingdom as a “just war.” “He argued that the war was necessary to protect the rights of British subjects, to stop Lobengula’s alleged atrocities, and to bring ‘civilization’ to the region” (Gundani 2019, 79). Hence, missionaries viewed the defeat of Lobengula and the subsequent conquest of Matabeleland as a boon for the mission in Mashonaland. Understandably, the honeymoon between Christian missionaries and Rhodes was still fresh when the Shona revolted against BSAC rule in 1896.

Fifthly, Rhodes gifted missionary societies that joined the Pioneer Column in Mashonaland farms to carry out mission activities. The list below shows major Christian missions which were set up on farms gifted by Rhodes:

1. Chishawasha Mission Farm for the Jesuits—13,000 acres
2. Epworth Mission Farm for the Connexional Methodists—3,000 acres
3. Howard Mission Farm for the Salvation Army—10,000 acres
4. St Augustine’s Penhalonga for the Anglican Church—8,000 acres
5. Umtali-based Fairfield Mission Farm for the Salvation Army—12,000 acres
6. Triashill Mission for the Marian Hill Fathers—53,000 acres
7. Morgenster Mission for the Dutch Reformed Church—20,000 acres
8. Old Umtali Mission for the Episcopal Methodist church—12,000 acres

9. Hartley Hills/Sandringham Mission (Connexional Methodists)—10,000 acres
10. Enkeldoorn Mission for the Dutch Reformed Church—8,000 acres.

Mission Land and the *Terra Nullius* Principle

Interestingly, the successes of colonialism and capitalism was predicated on the *terra nullius* concept, which essentially was a justification of Christianity based on the notion that “before the arrival of the whites, the plateau [Zimbabwe] was an empty wilderness which they were at liberty to shape as they pleased” (Chennells 1985, 32). Receiving farms from Rhodes, and not from local chiefs who were the custodians of the land on behalf of their territorial spirits, was in itself a sign of missionary paternalism towards African leadership and governance.

Naboth Story (1Kgs 21:1–16) as Allegory for the Colonisation of Mashonaland

Through the Christ-like Stranger, Schreiner offers a critique of the morality of colonialism and the role of Christianity in justifying imperialist occupation of Mashonaland. The Stranger recounts the story of Naboth the Jezreelite (Schreiner 1897, 113–114) and uses it as an allegory for the occupation of Mashonaland. As if preaching to a church congregation, the Stranger says, “My friends, Naboth has a vineyard in this land; and in it there is much gold; and Ahab has desired to have it that the wealth be his” (Schreiner 1897, 115). Using rhetorical questioning and expostulation, the Stranger asks,

Shall the story of Ahab king of Samaria profit us when we know not the story of the Ahab’s of our day; and the Naboths of our land be stoned while we sit at ease. (Schreiner 1897, 117)

Unlike Prophet Elijah, who condemned Ahab’s insatiable greed in favour of Naboth’s inheritance, Christian missionaries in Mashonaland treated the quest for freedom by the Shona and the crushing of their hopes by the imperial forces with deafening silence. They abandoned the prophetic route of condemning Rhodes. Churches and mission societies that sent representatives to Zimbabwe failed in their priestly and prophetic mandate to contextualise the biblical imperative contained in Naboth’s narrative. Schreiner’s application of Naboth’s story is not only prophetic but constitutes the earliest written contextual theology on the colonisation of Zimbabwe. She stands out as a trailblazer in the critique of British imperialism and its twin colonial surrogates in the form of the BSAC and the churches. Through an apt biblical text, she was able to condemn Zimbabwe’s “original sin,” i.e., land occupation, and the subsequent spoliation visited through racial colonial laws.

The missionaries’ acceptance of farms from Rhodes, and not from local chiefs, not only legitimised the colonial occupation of Mashonaland but also evoked the doctrine of *terra nullius*. According to Sen (2017, 966), “Broadly understood as the imperial tendency to treat tribal or indigenous land as ‘no one’s land’, the *terra nullius* principle treated the land occupied by indigenous communities as ‘empty.’” Such an approach by

missionaries aided and abetted the dispossession of the Shona people by the BSAC. Furthermore, mission occupation of the farm grants was undergirded by a belief that such land was open to improvement.

Through their silence, missionaries provided moral legitimacy to the rule of the BSAC over Mashonaland. Their deafening silence was motivated by their parochial vested interest in evangelising the Shona. That explains the actions of missionaries such as Fr. Richartz (1898), who went out of his way to make Chishawasha an intelligence centre for the BSAC during the war of resistance and invested time and energy towards the conversion of Kaguvi and Charwe before they were executed rather than playing a prophetic role. Missionaries focused only on their priestly role at the expense of the Church's prophetic role.

By keeping quiet when they should have sounded the alarm, Christian missionaries became accomplices to the BSAC's crimes. In his critique of the unfortunate alliance between imperialism, capitalism, and Christianity, Banana (1981) writes, "A phenomenon integral to both imperialism and capitalism is the myth of master races created, as it were, by some divinity to rule other races. Curiously enough, this divinity is very often the God of Christians."

Schreiner, a "Prophetess" of Hope: Expressing the Power of Hope of Victory against Imperialism

Schreiner's novel presents a powerful critique of British colonialism through the character of Peter, who is exhorted by the Stranger to convey a series of messages to various groups, including the Queen, intellectuals, and the working classes. "Jesus" implores Peter to condemn their complicity in ignoring the cries of the oppressed and entrusting the country to those whose primary concern is gold (Fanon 1952, 32). Despite initial hesitation, Peter, in an element of his "going native" (Clayton 1997, 98), protests the capture and execution of a "nigger spy," refusing to condone the murder of another person (Schreiner 1897, 43). Peter's actions are rooted in his conviction that all human beings are equal and deserving of dignity, regardless of race or social status. As Fanon notes, "colonialism is predicated on a fundamental disregard for human life and dignity" (Fanon 1952, 31), and Peter's actions demonstrate a profound self-abnegating affection and sympathy for his fellow human being.

Shona anticolonial mythology claims that just before being executed, Charwe Nyakasikana uttered a chilling warning against British imperialism: "*Mapfupa angu achamuka*" (My bones will rise). The utterance has been interpreted in Zimbabwean nationalist discourse as prophesying the impending prosecution of the Second Chimurenga (1964–1979). In that context, the statement must be understood within the religio-cultural belief in the spirit of vengeance, where *kupfuka* means to avenge the killing of an innocent person. In that context, while the Second Chimurenga is believed to be the epitome of anticolonial vengeance against the unjust colonial pogrom waged

against indigenous Zimbabweans, its overarching purpose was to liberate Zimbabwe from colonial clutches. A more nuanced interpretation, however, may view Mbuya Nehanda's words as a metaphor of revival, renewal, or spiritual rebirth. The latter resonates with Schreiner's optimism in a revived Zimbabwe. This view is reflected in the Stranger's prophetic vision he shares with Peter Halket.

Tomorrow's sun shall rise, and it shall flood these dark kopjes with light, and the rocks shall glint in it. Not more certain is that rising than the coming of that day. And I say to you that even here, in the land where we stand, where today the cries of the wounded and the curses of revenge ring in the air, even here, in this land where man creep on his belly to wound his fellow in the dark, and where an acre of gold is worth a thousand souls, and the reef of shining dirt is worth half a people and the vultures are heavy with man's flesh—even here that day shall come. (Schreiner 1897, 73–74)

Following his Damascene conversion at the kopje, Simon Peter Halket becomes an unlikely advocate for a wounded captured black man (Schreiner 1897, 111). He decides to adopt an approach of radical pacifism and not only defends, but feeds and releases the black man who was captured by his fellow troopers and was going to be executed the next day on the pretext that he was a spy. The Damascene conversion of Peter Simon Halket and the pastor's reference to Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3 reflect Schreiner's optimism and hope that one day Zimbabwe would be blessed with peace, justice, and racial reconciliation. Mugabe, just like Schreiner's pastor, referred to "beating swords into ploughshares." One wonders whether it was sheer coincidence that on 4 March 1980, following the first democratic elections in Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe based his reconciliation speech on the same biblical verse. One can only wonder whether Robert Mugabe had read Schreiner's novel.

Fundamental Weaknesses and Contradictions in Schreiner's Novel

According to Mizoguchi (2006, 50), Schreiner "believed an ideal solution to the atrocity in the colonial conquest in Mashonaland was the British government's intervention which would diminish the power of speculators and guarantee franchise, education and land (as Peter says earlier) to the Africans within the system of the colony" (Mizoguchi 2006, 50). Schreiner thus tended to view Britain as "the guarantor of her ideals of a good government" (Schreiner 1897, 101). "What lies underneath is her paternalism, her difficulty in regarding Africans as an independent and autonomous agency capable of defining their own political agenda" (Mizoguchi 2006, 50). While she showed sympathy for the plight of the locals, stereotypes continue to perpetuate and reinforce dominance as reported by one reviewer of her work that "one is sorry to see so many inflated nothings put in the mouth of his [Trooper Peter's] Saviour" (Stanley 2014, 73). Readers find hypocrisy and double standards in her discourse of white masterhood and black subjecthood (Chrisman 2000, 136).

However, Schreiner seems not to be concerned about who should rule Africa, but how it should be ruled. This is so because she believed that "colonialism was founded on a

system of racial hierarchy, which posited that white Europeans were superior to black Africans” (McClintock 2013, 12). This “aristocracy of mind” syndrome was believed by most Britons, and they were determined to perpetuate this ideology through education, law enforcement, and cultural institutions. The novella critiques Cecil Rhodes’s colonial policies while acquiescing to Britain’s right to rule over the colonies. This dichotomy is exemplified in her dedication to Sir George Grey, who embodies incorruptible justice and broad humanity. The novella, however, betrays her own complicity with dominant ideologies of Darwinism and evolutionary science.

Conclusion

This article explored the atrocities committed by the BSAC against the Shona and Ndebele people during the First Chimurenga. Schreiner raises critical questions on the role of European missionaries in perpetuating colonial oppression. The scene of the fictive novel is within the 19th-century context when colonialism, capitalism, and Christianity’s competing interests meant missionaries would group with those of their own race. Schreiner’s novel critiques the hypocrisy of missionaries who claimed to bring salvation to indigenous peoples while perpetuating colonialism and its exploitative systems. Like Trooper Peter, some missionaries were mercenaries for Rhodes’s Chartered Company during the First Chimurenga. Schreiner portrays Peter’s moral crisis as he becomes aware of the brutal consequences of British colonialism and begins to question his own complicity in perpetuating these systems. The article also critiques Schreiner’s representation of the BSAC’s atrocities, including “mass killings, forced removals, and destruction of entire communities” (Coetzee 1988, 123; Stanley 2014, 72). This exposes the “dark underbelly” of imperialism and highlights the brutal consequences of British colonial oppression. In all, Schreiner uses satire and rhetorical strategies to expose the brutal consequences of British colonial oppression. The article concludes with a powerful critique of missionaries, raising important questions about their role in perpetuating colonial oppression. The reason why Schreiner’s novel was rejected by the literary world (Chrisman 2000) is clear: Its author, Schreiner, was “born too early.” She was a trailblazer against imperialism whose ideas were not understood. The conclusions made here are context-specific and need not be generalised across Africa. Although Christians abetted and aided British imperialism and settler colonialism in Mashonaland during the period under review, we acknowledge that Christian missions and colonialism were not coterminous.

Schreiner’s novel explores themes of colonialism, identity, morality, and spiritual growth, using Halket’s journey as a catalyst for social commentary and critique. The novel’s portrayal of Trooper Peter as a cipher for colonialist and patriarchal ideology serves as a powerful indictment of the missionaries’ complicity in the colonial project. By examining Schreiner’s novel through this lens, this article reveals the complex interplay between missionary involvement in colonisation and its enduring impacts on postcolonial Africa. Schreiner’s novel emerges as a powerful rhetorical intervention justifying indigenous uprisings against colonial oppression. Her literary trajectory of

using *the theory of the text as a site of struggle* (Gates 1989, 53) demonstrates her commitment to using storytelling as a means of resistance against oppressive power structures. From the close relationship that was forged by the mission societies and churches referred to above, it is not surprising that they behaved in an acquiescent, subservient, and obsequious manner to the BSAC and the British Empire when the latter adopted scorched earth methods to suppress the First Chimurenga. The church's decision to remove its prophetic mantle created a dangerous quadruple helix characterised by greed, gold, guns, and a truant god.

Study Findings, Contribution to Knowledge, and Future Studies

This article sheds light on the role played by Christian missionaries in perpetrating colonial atrocities and their complicity in Zimbabwe's First Chimurenga, unveiling ideational dichotomies of silence within violence.

It contributes to postcolonial literary analysis and highlights Schreiner's condemnation of imperial double standards, corroborated by missionaries.

Further studies can examine:

1. indigenous voices not included in colonial accounts.
2. missionary roles across African contexts; or
3. postcolonial memory, resistance, and Zimbabwean literature and history.

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