

Subjugation And Exploitation of The Marginalised African Women in The Select Works of Bessie Head

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Abstract:

Bessie Emery Head is a twentieth century African writer who has written about the reality of the African society, pre- and post-colonisation. Her focus does not stop with racial subjugation but concentrates more on the double-oppression of racism and gender suffered by the coloured women. This paper studies the oppression, subjugation and exploitation of women not only by the colonisers but by their own men in the name of culture and tradition with reference to some of Head's works of fiction. Her personal sufferings have enabled her to lend the aura of authenticity to her portrayal of such victimised women.

Keywords: colonisation, African women, migration, racism, sexism, patriarchy, oppression, marginalisation, subjugation, exploitation, isolation, alienation

Introduction:

Bessie Head, a prolific South African writer, who lived in Botswana, had her main focus on the lives of the blacks of southern Africa, who were victims of apartheid under colonial rule. Having migrated from South Africa to Botswana, hoping to find solace and a sense of belonging that had eluded her all her young life, it was a shocking revelation that the ethnic division in Botswana was quite parallel to the racial segregation that prevailed in South Africa. This article, however, attempts to focus on the portrayal of women characters in Head's oeuvre through whom she sheds light on the double colonization they were subjected to. Despite her interest in the status of women in a phallogocentric society, she does not favour herself being categorized as a feminist.

Black Women Writers:

Various black women writers from Africa and the Caribbean have broken the walls of enforced silence and emerged forth like butterflies from their cocoons. According to Toni Cade Bambara, writing has helped to "free the colonized mind, to unravel centuries of lies and discover the essential black collective self" (Bambara 42). They have successfully portrayed confident, bold and "alternative images of black womanhood" (52) as opposed to the patriarchy enforced roles on women as "mother, whore or maid-of-all work" (52) as observed by Olga Kenyon. Male writers were more focused on racial discrimination, whereas the women writers have endeavoured to expose women as not only victims of racism, but also victims of gender and sexist bias. The personal experiences of the women have enriched their writings, enabling them to "fictionalize their autobiographical material to affirm the value of their identity, which had been denied to them until recently because of sexism and racism" (54). Some of the recurrent themes in all the works of Black women novelists are themes like, "community, sexuality; the relationship between change and pain; the ill-treatment of their bodies by the men they love; the thwarted female artist figure; the description of clothing, as iconography" (54).

Elements of Pain and Agony:

Bessie Head's personal experiences of pain and agony, both as a victim of racism and sexism have given her a unique perspective of life as an individual of

mixed origin and a woman. She never felt a sense of belonging as expressed in *A Woman Alone*:

I have not a single known relative on earth, no long and ancient family tree to refer to, no links with heredity or sense of having inherited a temperament, a certain emotional instability or the shape of a fingernail from a grandmother or great grandmother. (28)

Her hopes of a better future in Botswana were not fulfilled as she was not accepted there because of her bi-racial origin. According to her own comment, "I have never had a country: not in South Africa or in Botswana where I now live as a stateless person" (28). She was offered citizenship only after fifteen years of continuous appeal because of government hostility towards South African refugees. Her writing career spans from 1962 to 1985. As a South African refugee who had expected to be accepted and embraced in a place that had escaped the harsh colonial rule, this hostility left her "perplexed, bewildered and desperate" (230).

Bessie Head's oeuvre consists of six full length works and around twenty-five short stories. Her writings contain an interesting amalgamation of racism, classism, and sexism. Her observation of the world in which she had grown up helped her to realize that "... it is only people who make people suffer and not some hidden unknown God or devil ..." (63). She explains the themes of racism and its brutality when she says: "I was born in South Africa and that is synonymous with saying that one is born into a very brutal world – if one is black" (66). Despite the immense suffering and painful alienation that she went through, Bessie Head has written about sexual and racial bigotry in a very unemotional manner. As Eilerson comments, "Bessie Head always retained her individualism. Though feeling strongly about racism and sexual discrimination – and having gained by the bitterest experience, a considerable knowledge of both problems – she would never allow herself to be totally identified with other African nationalism or feminism" (14).

Isolation and Alienation:

Bessie Head's experience of isolation and alienation inspired her to demonstrate through her writings that a world filled with love and respect for fellow human beings was a possibility. She intends to expose the destruction inflicted by apartheid, sexism and racialism upon humanity. She has explored through her writings how the apartheid laws, certain Christian practices and traditional customs of Botswana contributed largely to the sufferings of the natives and particularly the black women of South Africa and Botswana.

Bessie Head shows a persistent commitment to explore and expose the inherent goodness of mankind and her vision of an ideal world despite the cruelties she had faced since her birth. In the process, she exposes the oppression faced by the black women and their efforts to emerge successfully without succumbing to the overpowering burden of both racism and patriarchy. Her writings reveal that all kinds of repression are inextricably linked one with the other. This paper deals with Bessie Head's portrayal of African women, their oppression and their relevance.

Bessie Head in her first novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, not only focuses on racialism, but also on sexism. Makhaya Maseko, the protagonist of the novel has

escaped to Botswana from South Africa, after being released from prison where he had been incarcerated on the charge of sabotage. An old village elder, Dinorego, helps him cross the border and takes him to the village of Golema Mmidi (meaning “to grow crops”). Here, Makhaya befriends a British expatriate, Gilbert Belfour, an agriculturalist. He finds an ally in Makhaya in his endeavours to help and teach the villagers to improve their skills and develop their community. Dinorego, his daughter Maria, Mma-Millipede and young widow, Paulina Sebeso are all willing to co-operate and work towards a better future. They readily accept Makhaya in their midst. However, Matenge, a local chief opposes the introduction of modern techniques as he wants to hold on to old traditions. He is a harsh dictator who shows no sympathy when Paulina’s son dies of tuberculosis and holds her responsible for her son’s death. This induces the villagers to join together to fight for justice for Paulina. Realizing that he cannot face the challenging crowd, Matenge ultimately takes his own life by hanging himself.

Discrimination and Subjugation:

Bessie Head has explored the racial, class, tribal and gender tensions existing within the African society. Through the characters of Paulina, Makhaya, Gilbert and Maria, she reveals the sufferings that the women faced in their everyday life, both in the name of racism as well as gender. If the black man’s sufferings started with the imperial rule, women’s sufferings can be traced a long while back, even before the white man landed on African soil under the patriarchal system. Colonialism only meant “double colonization” resulting in racial as well as gender discrimination for women. The oppressed native man became the native woman’s oppressor.

The marital relationship between Gilbert and Maria and Paulina’s relationship with Makhaya, give an insight into the spontaneous high-handedness of men when it came to women. Behind the obvious relatively loving respectful and tender affection between the couples, are some undercurrents of conventional sexual roles imposed on women: “The women were the traditional tillers of the earth, not the men. The women were the backbone of agriculture while the men on the whole were cattle drovers. But when it came to programmes for improved techniques in agriculture ... the lecture rooms were open to men only” (34). The women were treated with scorn and contempt and their indispensable contributions to society and family were not acknowledged. Gilbert is portrayed as a broad-minded Englishman who finds the self-reliant Maria who has “a life of her own” (32) attractive. He proudly claims to Makhaya that, “She makes all these little rules and you can’t budge her from them” (33). He marries Maria, a native African woman after proposing to her three years earlier, when she refused to do so as she was not educated and felt that she might not be suitable for him. She educates herself under his guidance and later marries him. But marriage seems to change the dynamics between them and brings out the latent conventional attitudes in the subconscious of both. This is evident when Maria expresses her unwillingness to live in England when Gilbert makes a reference to such a move in the future. He becomes aggressive and reminds her:

‘You’re not Dinorego’s daughter anymore’, he said to Maria in a quiet threatening voice. ‘You’re my wife now and you have to do as I say. If I go back to England, you go there too.’ (114)

Double Colonization of Black Women:

Bessie Head is one of the few African writers who points out the double colonization of the black women and also provides a solution to the issue of gender discrimination. In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Bessie Head observes how men consider women as something one can “buy at some stage, the way you bought a table you were going to keep in some back room and not care very much about” (140). She has exposed the intersectionality that caused the subjugation and the exploitation of the marginalised women of the African society. Makhaya’s relationship with Paulina and the married life of Maria with Gilbert serve to expose the unscrupulous patriarchal set-up in the African society. The readers are drawn a picture of the phallogocentric, male chauvinistic attitudes that have suppressed the voices that have attempted to protest against the African social environment. Makhaya and Gilbert are men who have deep respect for women and their individuality. This does not prevent them from inadvertently falling into the traditional attitude of feeling superior to women: “Still, from some unknown quarter, Gilbert had acquired a number of conventional ideas about married life – like it was the man who was the boss and who laid down rules” (114). The same applies to the women too as witnessed from Maria’s reaction to Gilbert’s ‘threatening voice’: “The woman of common sense retreated rapidly before the threat, and the other woman softly contradicted her, ‘I did not say I won’t obey you, Gilbert. I only wanted to find out what was on your mind’” (115). The idea of male superiority is deeply embedded in the psyche of both Gilbert and Maria, despite Gilbert being a member of the white and ‘refined’ society and the latter being a woman of common sense and poise: “There were two women in her – one was soft and meditative and the other was full of ruthless common sense” (112).

Paulina Sebeso is another character who is portrayed as strong, determined, independent and assertive. She is a “passionate and impetuous woman with a warm heart” (84) and “had a decisive way of walking as though she always knew where she was going and what she wanted” (83). She had been married at the age of eighteen and lived a comfortable life with her husband and two children in northern Botswana. Her husband had worked for sixteen years “as a bookkeeper for a certain large company for which he received a wage of thirty pounds a month” (82). He was accused of embezzling two thousand pounds and being “a foreign man from Rhodesia whose tribal tradition it was to commit suicide when his honour was at stake” (82), he hanged himself. The company claimed that his suicide was an “admission of guilt” (83) and seized his property depriving Paulina of her home and possessions. This tragedy leads Paulina to Golema Mmidi. Her ten year old son, Isaac, is sent to a cattle post twenty-five miles away from the village, to graze their cattle. Paulina and her eight-year-old daughter Lorato, stay in Golema Mmidi and grow crops. Tradition and convention assign priority to a man’s honour than to his wife or children. Head exposes the capitalist society’s emphasis on maintenance of petty office records rather than show concern for the life of an individual. “Her story replays the classic scenario of the seduction and betrayal of the bourgeoisie and the avariciousness that sustains the system itself” (Garrett 122-35). Head uses this tragedy in Paulina’s life to reveal the existence of the power struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed, the colonizer and the colonized and the ruler and the ruled.

Paulina is not weakened by the tragedy of losing her husband, but “soon recovered from the tragedy in her life and set out to build up a new life in Golema Mmidi” (84). She is a vivacious and confident woman but is a victim of the patriarchal demands placed on women. Her self-assurance is undermined because she is “flat-chested”

(83). Such a requirement is not expected of a man, "It never really mattered what kind of man he was or the magnitude of his faults and failings" (84). Paulina finds herself attracted to Makhaya and sends her daughter to greet him in her name. but Makhaya turns her down sending "back a cruel message" (85) replying "Go and tell her mother I don't know her" as if it is a male prerogative to initiate a relationship. He seeks her company later when he requires it. The fact that he is a "whole foot taller than Paulina" (123) seems to satisfy his male ego for dominance. Paulina exhibits the conventional conditioning in women to believe that some "jobs aside for women and certain jobs for men. Men and women are unlike mentally" (158). She is shocked when Makhaya offers to light the fire and prepare some tea for himself. She is alarmed and exclaims in horror, "Don't touch the fire. It's a woman's work" (157). The woman is entrapped in a bondage that is steeped in her mentality since her birth, instilled in her by her own mother.

Cultural and Traditional Bondages:

Makhaya is willing to break the traditions when he says, "All these rotten customs are killing us" (184). He also knows that Paulina, despite being an independent woman "would meekly follow him" (184) and submit to his desires and orders. He is also repulsed by the attitude of the old woman in whose hut he stays the night, as he escapes from South Africa. Years of poverty and oppression have made her what she is, so much so that she involves her ten-year old granddaughter in prostitution. She is unable to believe that Makhaya is sane on the grounds that he paid the little girl ten shillings and did not avail her services. He feels that it is "the mentality of the old hag that ruined a whole continent" (11). He can also be considered as a progressive character from how after his father's death, he barred his younger sisters from calling him 'Buti' or 'Elder brother' and treating him with "exaggerated respect" (11). His own mother protested when he instructed his sisters to call him by his first name and consider themselves as his "equals and friends" (11). He questions the tradition asking, "Why should men be brought up with a false sense of superiority over women?" (11). He is also a man of many contradictions when he prevents Paulina from seeing her son's dead body saying "... can't you see I'm here to bear all your burdens?" (184). The primordial image of a woman as someone who needs to be nurtured and protected is a phallogocentric attitude as pointed out by Bessie Head here. The native African woman appears to expect and accept oppression as a way of life:

The small group of women, including Paulina, at first felt a little inhibited. They were unaccustomed to a man speaking to them as an equal. They stood back a while, with uneasy expressions, but once it struck them that he paid no attention to them as women, they also forgot he was a man and became absorbed in following his explanations. (119)

Women have always played a major role in the African society as Bessie Head observes in *When Rain Clouds Gather*:

No men ever worked harder than Botswana women, for the whole burden of providing food for big families rested with them. It was their sticks that thrashed the corn at harvesting time and their winnowing baskets

that filled the air for miles and miles around with the dust of husks, and they often ... took over the tasks of men and also ploughed the land with oxen. (104-05)

Golema Mmidi is a typical African village where “The men attended to the cattle business and helped with the ploughing, while the women were the agriculturalists or tillers of the earth” (19). The women who are involved are prevented from taking part in the training programmes and Head expresses the irony of the situation and her annoyance through Gilbert who says “Why give training to a section of the population who may never use it but continue to leave it to their wives to erode the soil by unsound agricultural practices? Why start talking about development and food production without taking into account who is really producing the food?” (33).

Mma-Millepede is one of the hapless women caught up in the clutches of the highhandedness of patriarchy and authority. Her family was “one of the poorest in the village” (73), and they were “terrorized into submission” and “the family of Mma-Millepede had no choice but to allow their daughter who had eluded his sexual advances to marry Ramagodi” (74). Ramagodi was one of the chiefs, “a drunkard and dissipated boaster” (73). He married her and then cast her aside to pursue his sexual dalliances till ultimately, he divorced her, as he got bored with her religious ways.

Mma-Millepede is denied the chance of marrying Dinorego because of the tribal royalty in the form of the black tribal chief oppressing the common man. Most women are forced to go through life in perpetual loneliness, disgrace and heartache as men treat them as commodities to be used and cast aside according to their fancies. They unashamedly shirk their responsibilities to the children they fathered, and the women are left literally left holding the baby. *When Rain Clouds Gather* exposes, the marginalization suffered by women within the African set-up, reflecting Bessie Head’s experiences as a victim of racial bigotry in South Africa. She also highlights the fact that tribalism plays a huge role in allocating an inferior status to women, a practice that prevailed despite being educated, and “Every protection for women was breaking down and being replaced by nothing” (133).

Maru is Bessie Head’s second novel in which she traces the origin and causes of gender discrimination in southern Africa.. Horace I. Goddard comments that Head writes about a “liberation not only from a colonial past but also from the African male’s racialistic, sexist and power-seeking tendencies” (108). The women are marginalised and treated like outcasts in the conventional African set-up. Bessie Head has presented a racial discrimination between people of the same race and points out that this complicated relationship between tribes reveals that racism can be internalized too, and “The nature of discrimination in *Maru* is unique in the sense that it is practised among the individuals of the same race” (Odhiambo et al 90). She discusses the dual sense of powerlessness suffered by the black women based on their gender and colour. One comes across different forms of segregation presented in *Maru*, with more focus on gender and racial prejudices.

The heroine of the novel *Maru* is a Masarwa, considered as the lowest of the low in the society of Botswana. This is a deliberate choice by Head for the sole purpose of exposing the degrading, irrational and harsh prejudices of the people towards one of their own countrymen. Margaret’s biological mother dies at childbirth and her death serves to provide an insight into how the Masarwa are treated with very little regard, whether dead or alive. The “expression of disgust” on the faces of the nurses in the hospital when they are

forced to wash the body of the dead woman are captured and portrayed in the sketch pad of Margaret Cadmore, the missionary's wife. One gains an understanding of the deep hatred from her observation and wonders, "if they so hated even a dead body how much more did they hate those of this woman's tribe who were still alive" (230).

Her hard work and diligence enable Margaret, the Masarwa, to become a primary schoolteacher in the village of Dilepe. The villagers are baffled when they learn that she is Masarwa with English manners. She boldly acknowledges her lineage and as a consequence faces the usual discrimination and dehumanizing insults. Her education does not protect her from the prejudices of the people around her. Pete, the principal, is shocked to have her on his staff, and believes that Margaret "can be shoved out ... it's easy. She is a woman" (253). Seth, the education supervisor comments that "She couldn't possibly have got there on her own brains. Someone was pushing her" (253). Both Pete and Seth refuse to acknowledge her intellectuality or see beyond her gender. They are contemptuous of Margaret because she is Masarwa, a tribe whom they felt are a 'millstone', who "can't think for themselves but always need others to feed them" (256). Contempt, scorn and prejudice impel Pete to instigate the school children against Margaret. A young boy mocks her saying, "Since when is a Bushy a teacher?" (257). The social set-up of Dilepe seems to have "objectified and subsumed" Margaret (Galloway 3). Her pathetic life of isolation in the midst of a community is summed up in one sentence when she meets Moleka and feels a tug of attraction towards him. His attitude of friendliness made her feel warm and she "was really no longer lonely" (244) and the "loneliness had disappeared like the mist before the warmth of a rising sun" (243).

Maru and Moleka are similar in their casual affairs with women, though they differ from each other in their approach: "The clue to Moleka and Maru lay in their relationships with women" (247) Yet "Moleka has never missed sleeping with a woman since the age of twelve" (265) and is described as "savage, arrogant Moleka" (267). He is condescending with Dikeledi when he says, "I know you like to praise me, Dikeledi" (241), robbing her of dignity and self-respect. The years of conditioning in the African patriarchal system bind her to the conventional clutches even though she holds some tribal practices in contempt. This factor also plays a part in her agreement to go along with Maru's devious plan to steal Margaret from Moleka for himself. An era of colonialism and age-old patriarchy have moulded her mind to subservient acceptance of male dominance and oppression.

Chauvinism and Exploitation:

Maru and Moleka are typical male chauvinists who are manipulative of women for their own pleasure. Maru secures Margaret for himself with no regards for her personal desires and feelings. He makes an executive decision that he should marry her as she is not suitable for Moleka. He represents the repulsive attitude to a woman and a Masarwa when he says, "What did he want with a woman who meant nothing to the public? ... She had lived like the mad dog of the village, with tin cans tied to her tail. Moleka would never have lived down the ridicule and malice and would in the end have destroyed her from embarrassment" (225). The relationship between Margaret and Maru seems to epitomize the concept of double colonization. Maru is introduced to the readers as a born leader, a progressive man and a visionary who symbolizes an "emerging male humanness", according to Brown in *Women Writers in Black Africa* (172). But he finds himself in the conventional gender role as seen in his marriage to Margaret. He claims to believe in mutual respect and equality in a relationship but to gain what he wants he resorts to underhand means like chicanery, spying and intimidation as is seen in his efforts to make Margaret his own and not Moleka's. Maru, "for all his idealism, his denunciation of antiquated social forms

and the exploitative relations between the sexes in his society is himself manipulative, unscrupulous and overbearing" (Kibera 323-24). He does not think twice about using his own sister as bait to distract Moleka from Margaret.

The traditional gender roles of female subservience and male dominance survive in Maru and Margaret despite their modernity and education. Margaret is terrified of her husband Maru who "sometimes had vicious, malicious moods" (223), and "his wife looked up fearfully from her work of preparing for the evening meal" (223). Being married to Maru has destroyed her confidence and self-respect. He ignores her desires and makes decisions for her with no concern or regard for her consent. Maru's "every word was a sharp knife intended to grind and re-grind the same raw wound" (224). She is more like a Masarwa slave than a wife to Maru. Her long-time suffering as a woman and a Masarwa has completely eroded her fragile confidence and she becomes an easy victim of Maru's malice and dominance. In one of his vicious moods, he viciously declares, "... you are not at all important to me, as I sometimes say you are" (225). Margaret lives in constant dread of his malice, but the least bit of kindness towards her on his part made her feel "quite drunk and mad with happiness and it was not unusual for her to walk around for the whole day with an ecstatic smile on her face, because the days of malice and unhappiness were few and far over-balanced by the days of torrential expressions of love" (224). He marries her as he had decided that one day, he would marry "the kind of wife everybody would loathe from the bottom of their hearts" (222). Her marriage only adds to Margaret's humiliation and pain as a result of "patriarchal boundaries" (Katrak 62-81).

Margaret's individuality is "brutally negated" (Mackenzie 54) by Maru's oppression and malice. The marriage does nothing to change the prejudices of the villagers or herald a new era for Margaret. She is forced to give up her job, her identity, her school and her independence to fall back into the traditional female role of Maru's home. Her education and career have not changed her basic sense of inferiority, but the phallogocentric set-up ensures that she continues to live a life of subjugation and isolation. As Huma Ibrahim observes about the plight of Margaret, "What does it matter if a peacock dances in the forest, no one can see its beautiful plumage "... her story is like a fairy tale that never ends. There is no awakening. Is she still waiting? One can only imagine that this time she wants to be rescued by Moleka" (106). It is her passive submission to oppression that heralds the "wind of freedom" and she "remains defined but never defines herself. She continues as the stunted identity she has always been" (Ibrahim 102). But Maru is aware that she is a woman of worth when he remarks philosophically to Ranko about his intention to marry Margaret: "This time I'm stealing the gold because I've grown tired of the straw" (296). He "walks around like a saint but touch him on his soft spot and he's just like everyone else, only worse (296), and "He'd terrorize you into the grave" (299). Margaret does not stand a chance against Maru whose character is aptly described from the words of Morafi. Her married life fails to be one of idyllic bliss.

A Question of Power (1974), the last of her trilogy, also brings to light the status of women and women's issues of African society and form an integral part of her writings. While her female characters are not only charismatic, dynamic, intellectual, and revolutionary, but are also mentally fragile as a result of the traditional and customary upbringing. Bessie Head wrote a *Question of Power* when she was recovering from a mental breakdown. The novel is autobiographical in the sense that the protagonist Elizabeth is portrayed as surviving a similar such psychotic breakdown and operation of a society that

frowns upon her individualistic outlook. as a woman. She attempts to convey the reality of how women were treated as “dead things” in the African society.

Elizabeth, a coloured émigré from South Africa is caught and torn between two men, Sello and Dan, Molomo. Sello, a Motabeng farmer and cattle breeder is a constant presence in Elizabeth's life in Botswana. He has a seemingly benignant veneer, who at the same time acknowledges that he cannot be taken at face value and warns her against a complacent acceptance of his goodness: “You have an analytical mind. You must analyze everything you see” (29). As a woman who has faced disappointments and abuse, she fumbles and finds herself at a loss. He seems to callously prey on an innocent and vulnerable woman. Bessie Head's birth was the cause of much of her agony. According to Ngcobo, “mentally and socially [Head] suffered several traumas because of the circumstances of her birth” which was aggravated by the fact that the “social code of behaviour [at the time] condemned the mother's action as lustful and depraved – and therefore shameful” (343). The resultant abuse and rejection led her to focus on the gender relations in the African society with the desire to provide a platform to address the oppression of women. *A Question of Power* provides an insight into the South Africa of the 1960s and 1970s, a period in which the nationalistic movements seemed to victimize the women. The women of Africa are represented as “either a helpless victim of white rapists”, or as a “prostitute who has betrayed the black struggle by copulating with white men, and a fickle mother who throws away her starving children” (105). The intense and persistent alienation and discrimination lead to Elizabeth's psychotic breakdown in *A Question of Power*, an occurrence that brutally exposes the intense agony of the marginalised women.

Eilerson opines that Elizabeth's oppression is because of the fact that she is a woman of mixed origin. She feels alienated and is made to feel sexually and racially inferior by Dan who sadistically and constantly mocks her lack of sexual finesse. When “compared to the eccentric Sello and the glamorous Dan, Elizabeth is self-effacing, subdued, a victim. Socially, she is oppressed because she is a woman, and politically, because she is coloured” (145).

Sello and Dan represent the male who in his struggle for power and his sexual perversion, becomes the destroyer of everything in his path, likewise destroying Elizabeth. The constant physical, mental and sexual exploitation she has experienced at the hands of Dan and Sello leaves her “highly collapsible material. Anything toppled her over, a thunderbolt, a command, any suggestion of powerful assertiveness (115), and “She seemed to have no distinct face of her own, her face always turned towards Sello, whom she had adored” (63). Dan is described as having “pretty eyes, large, luminous, black with a cluster of lashes. His eyes gave his face a wonderful expression of innocence and friendliness”, is a “power-maniac,” one who “never saw people, humanity, compassion, tenderness” (19). He is a “warrior” (103) with “a terrible will” who makes use of “magic rituals and all kinds of tricks” (199), and in actuality he is a manipulative, perverted, power seeker in her nightmares. The evil intentions of Sello are revealed to Elizabeth in her nightmares by a group of people who warn her: “There is an evil in your relationship with Sello. He knows. He is controlling your life in the wrong way, and he does not want to give it up” (311).

Elizabeth's sense of inferiority is evident from the words, “He pressed several buttons at the same time. You are supposed to feel jealous, you are inferior as a colored. You haven't got what that girl got. The record went around in her heart the whole day” (127). Her gender as a woman exacerbates her oppression and to alleviate the pain of

sexism and dehumanization, she turns to Indian philosophy. Buddhism provides her with an answer to men being considered superior to women and for women's subjection to the oppression. Bazon appreciates that "Bessie Head chose to focus on sexism rather than racism in "A Question of Power". This forces her African readers more familiar with racism to see the similarities between the two and their common roots in the philosophy of domination. Men degrade, manipulate and abuse women in Elizabeth's nightmare, basically because they fail to perceive sacredness in them" (Abrahams 56).

Head characterizes Elizabeth as bouncing back from oppression and acquiring mental stability by working alongside the uneducated and hardworking Kenosi as well as with the help of Tom and Eugene. Caught between the double jeopardy of mixed origin and gender discrimination, her life was simply the existence of a woman destined to be marginalized" (Abrahams 20), but ultimately she discovers peace within herself, fights back for her son Shorty, understands what is love, earns respect with her success in the vegetable garden, finds her balance in life, comes to terms with the "false social systems of class and caste" in the African society and feels a sense of belonging in her adopted country. Craig MacKenzie comments in *Bessie Head: An Introduction* that, "The central characters in the three novels, Makhaya, Margaret and Elizabeth, all share some aspects of the author herself and move sequentially closer to her own experience. This progression has a direct bearing on the shape each novel takes" (19).

The Collector of Treasures was published in 1977 and is concerned with the rural life of Botswana and the issues connected to it. Despite various issues like religious conflicts, witchcraft and tribal history being dealt within each story, the central vein that runs through all the stories is the hardship faced by the women of the village. The short story "Life" is set in pre-independent Botswana and the protagonist of the story is Life Morapedi, the story's namesake. She returns from Johannesburg where she had worked in different capacities including that of a prostitute. Unattached single women are looked at with suspicion as being of doubtful character especially when they want to rent rooms. They are regarded as prostitutes and discriminated against. Independent women are frowned upon. Bessie Head points out the double standards of the men who use this attitude as a means of controlling the women in their lives and families to prevent the women from being independent or moving away to urban areas.

Life had left the village "as a little girl of ten years old with her parents" (CT 37), to Johannesburg. Seventeen years later, having worked as a "singer, beauty queen, advertising model, and prostitute" and also associating herself with gangsters, she decides to return to her quiet and traditional village. Life's arrival in her village causes a stir among the villagers who "immediately and obligingly took her to the Morapedi yard in the central part of the village." They expect from her "new ideas that would freshen up the ordinariness and everydayness of village life." They are willing to help her settle down in the village. The first seed of doubt is sowed in their minds when they observe the ease with which she spends money on "anything the workers expresses a preference for". They guess that "their child could not have lived a very good life in Johannesburg." Their doubts are confirmed, and they are shocked when she starts the prostitution business earns money by selling her body for sexual services as there is no other job that appeals to her.

Despite free sex available among the women of the village, the men willingly pay her for her services intrigued by the novelty of it. "Life was the first and the only woman in the village to make a business out of selling herself. The men were paying for her services" (CT 39). "They could get all the sex they needed for free in the village, but it

seemed to fascinate them that they should pay for it for the first time" (CT 40). Though her married life seems to induce an interest in her to settle down to a life of domesticity, she cannot adapt herself to her new life as a married woman and the routine and monotony of marriage: "All my old ways are over," she says. "I have now become a woman", but then she reverts to her former life of alcohol and prostitution, which is unacceptable to her husband who kills her. Bessie Head highlights how "the murder of Life had this complicated undertone of rejection" (CT 37) that she faced from her husband and the society. Her rejection of traditional ties leads to her own rejection by her village people.

Life takes a stance to show that her feelings and desires count but is killed for being independent and strong-willed. He punishes her free lifestyle with death while all men who have sinned with her are not accountable for their sexual depravity. The patriarchal double standard is that the man is sentenced for only five years whereas Dikeledi, in the short story "The Collector of Treasures" is sentenced for life for killing her husband. The fact is that he was an abusive man, who was neither faithful to his wife nor was a good father to his children. Bessie head portrays women who fight back for their rights in "... a world where women (are) of no account" (CT 3) and are considered to be "... just dogs" (CT 81).

The extreme burden placed on women can be traced back to traditional systems and lifestyle formulated by a phallogocentric society: "The ancestors made so many errors and one of the most bitter-making things was that they relegated to men a superior position in the tribe, while women regarded in a congenial sense, as being an inferior form of human life (CT 92). Bessie Head also acknowledges the reality that the women are so conditioned to this subservient and oppressive lifestyle that they consider themselves as inferior human beings and are shocked to find women who resist such restrictions.

"The Special One" is a short story that deals with the identical concept of gender relations between men and women. She portrays a society that judges a woman based on her rather than her circumstances. She juxtaposes the lives of two female characters, Maleboge and Gaenametse to reveal the hypocrisy in the society. Maleboge observes that she lost her inheritance because as a woman, she did not have the right to own property: "I lost it because women are just dogs in the society" (CT 81). Gaenametse's husband divorces her accusing her of expecting sexual intimacy during menstrual cycle which shocked the society as it was believed that such an act would bring bad luck for the husband and would lead to his death. The villagers are quite aware that he is a womanizer and adulterer, yet they mock and ostracize Gaenametse. Head makes a subtle observation that the husband "anticipated this social reaction to his wife and deliberately invoked the old tribal taboo to boost his image" (CT 85). The same society practises polygamy and women are considered as objects for sexual gratification.

Dikeledi, the protagonist of the short story "The Collector of Treasures", lands in prison after murdering her husband in a gruesome manner, having suffered years of abuse at his hands in silence. The extremity of the crime is explained in Head's words to Susan Gardner: "I've never heard of a man being murdered by his genitals being slit off. But it showed the deep psychological trauma the woman had lived with" (14). The castration of her husband is seen as a detrimental blow to the phallogocentric society, even though the result of her act is imprisonment for life. As Davies observes, black women are cornered into committing atrocities by daring to transgress the boundaries imposed upon them by the patriarchy.

“Looking for a Rain God” is the short story about a tribal family that is trapped between an evolved modern attitude and customary traditional lives. Mokgobja, his wife Tero and their children depend on the land they farm for a living. Faced with a harsh drought, Mokgobja is reminded of an age-old custom of making human sacrifice to appease angry gods, who would send rain in exchange. Many years of Christian influence had suppressed this inhuman practice which rears its ugly head again. It is horrifying to note that Mokgobja, along with his son, sacrifices his two granddaughters, Neo and Boseyong, to bring down the rain, which not surprisingly never happens. Tero confesses to the murders of the two girls and Mokgobja and Ramadi are imprisoned and ultimately executed, their blood seeping into the land onto which they spilled the blood of the two little girls. Mokgobja finds it easier to sacrifice the daughters rather than his son, as he finds them expendable.

The African society sees it as the woman’s responsibility to gather firewood, make the fire, even make the clay pots themselves, prepare food and fetch water journeying miles to fill a few pots of water. The boys and girls of the village have work allotted to them based on their gender. The boys hunt and the girls do household chores. The life for boys is easier as they can live as they like while the girls are bound by tradition. The girls or the women are not considered fit for education. They are only expected to get married and look after their home and children as they are considered as born to serve

“The Deep River” is a story that reflects what Bessie Head learnt from the women of Botswana when she first arrived in 1964: “Botswana men are not nice. When you take up with a man he sleeps with you for two weeks, then he passes you on to his friend, who passes you on to his friend. This is how we live” (57). As she told Van Wyk Smith, “Theirs is not a tender, compassionate and romantic world” (116).

Bessie Head’s oppressive male character is the cause of the woman’s misery and grief. He is like a predator feeding on the vulnerability of women. He is part of the majority in the society. He wreaks havoc in the family, treating the woman in his life and the children as expendable. He shirks his family responsibilities and uses sex as a means of controlling women. Tracing the history of Africa, Bessie Head delineates the origin and development of the oppressive male. Prior to Africa being colonized, the African society’s life had been based on the traditions and customs dictated by the tribal ancestors and forefathers, who relegated the women to a lower status whose duties were curtailed to feeding and caring for the household. The colonization led to the dehumanisation of the native men who were forced into menial labour and mining which led to their separation from wives and children, contributing to a vast change in their attitude and behaviour. The period after liberation from colonialism witnessed a depravity and chauvinism unleashed against the women who were helpless against the onslaught of racism and patriarchy. The callousness of men is evident in the following passages:

“Our men do not think that we need tenderness and care.”

“My husband left me after four years of marriage, but I managed well enough to feed those mouths.”

“Uncle paid for my education for six years, then he said I must leave school. I longed for more because as you know, education opens up the world for us.” (CT 87-103)

Conclusion:

Bessie Head argues that though colonization did cause disruption in family and gender relationships, African men who have been accustomed to the superiority assigned to their gender by tradition, are less prone to changing (Moore 48). Colonization has thus only aggravated their male chauvinism and did not instil it in them. It is the woman who is considered as wayward while for the men it is seen as a way of life and are not censured for their casual sexual flings and immorality.

Head's personal experience of discrimination enabled her to empathize with her female characters as she comments to her biographer Eilersen: "It was in District Six that Bessie lived and was to work. She was the only woman reporter. This meant that she was always being given stories connected with women and children, while the men reporters get murders and politics to do. One day I [Bessie Head] should like to get hold of a good murder" (39). Discrimination is defined by Mhlahlo as "the unfavourable treatment of a specified person based on prejudice, especially as regard race, tribe, place of origin, sex and sexual preference" (4). In *The Collector of Treasures*, Head observes that as a consequence of tradition "to this day women suffer from all the calamities that befall an inferior form of human life" (92). Head refuses to comply with the traditional demarcations limiting the space for women in the society of Botswana. She portrays female characters who rise above all oppression and suffering, taking a stance for what they believe in. They are resilient and strong and also mentally fragile despite the onslaught on them in the name of culture and tradition.

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