

Resisting Marginalisation in the Select Short Stories of Bessie Head

Noor Hussain¹ and Nazia Zaman²

¹Associate Professor of English, B. N. College, Dhubri, Assam, INDIA.

²Assistant professor of English, B. N. College, Dhubri, Assam, INDIA.

Corresponding Author: hussainn702@gmail.com



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ABSTRACT

The African black woman is said to suffer from double marginalisation –marginalized by colonialism and by patriarchy. Bessie Head, one of the most influential authors of South Africa, voices the marginalization faced by the women of her country. In her works, she narrates the tales of underprivileged village women and their predicament to exist as mere humans in their own society and among their own people. Though she does not consider herself a feminist, her protagonists are always females and they become the mouthpiece of the entire subjugated section of the society. Head's short stories depict the breakdown of traditional structures of the society and also the erosion of security that the institution of marriage offered to the women. This paper is an attempt to study two of her short stories to highlight the suffering of her protagonists and also how they overcome them and present a new image of themselves.

Keywords- Marginalisation, resistance, underprivileged, female, subjugation.

I. INTRODUCTION

The African women are often said to be the principal victims of colonisation and patriarchy as well. They are at the “centre of chaos in the so-called Dark Continent” (Sati 2015: xix). Even the African woman writer was not exception to this process of marginalization. Therefore, it becomes necessary for her to raise her voice against the western colonial and native patriarchal discourses. In this context, Bessie Head is a significant author, voicing the painful struggle of the African women. Born and brought up in a highly racially divided South Africa, Head was disliked by both the races as she was the child of an upper class white (English) woman and a black man (a Nguni-Sotho). In the apartheid South Africa of 1930s, such a child was regarded as illegitimate. It is because of this social status, she never felt any sense of belonging towards her own country. She found herself rejected by both the white and the coloured communities. She was “doubly humiliated” (Heywood 2004: 215). She joined the anti-apartheid struggle, the Pan-African movement and also the Black Consciousness movement. But she soon

realised that these movements were abetting the enmity between black, white and coloured communities instead of bringing reconciliation between them. Her first published novel *When the Rain Clouds Gather* (1968) reverses the tradition of ‘Jim comes to Johannesburg’ by tracing the journey of the protagonist from the urban ghetto to rural retreat. The novel also proposes a paradigm of inter-racial harmony (Mackenzie 2001: 123). Similarly, her second novel *Maru* (1971) suggests the breaking down of class and racial prejudices by a marriage between an upper class man and a lower class woman. In her third novel *A Question of Power* (1973), she deviates from the convention of subordinating individualism to national interest and chooses to locate “her moral and creative centre in individual people, in “how stange and beautiful people can be –just living” as she put it in her social history, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*” (quoted in Mackenzie 2001: 123). She was also aware of the fact that the political discourses were highly coloured by the patriarchal concept of the society and world. She found that the Black Consciousness movement was not spacious enough to accommodate the issues faced by the female section. Therefore, she

initiated an alternative narrative, which accommodated an attitude which was definitely anti-apartheid and, at the same time, the narrator is not male but a female who is neither black, nor white but a human. This was perhaps her attempt to oppose racism as well as male hegemony.

Being a mixed-race, single woman, deprived of any place to be called as her home, she accepted Botswana as her newly adopted home. But even her experiences in Botswana were not very welcoming as she was regarded as an outsider for “not being black enough” (Nixon 1993: 112). Being deprived of family, race and nationality, she vented out her humane feelings through many oppressed characters such as the protagonists in her short stories like “The Collector of Treasures” and “Heaven is not Closed”. In her short stories Head explores differences of class, race, education and gender. “Her writing always opens a window onto the complexities of power and prejudice relations, showing Zora Neale Hurston’s “triple burden” to be as true a description of South African woman’s life as it was of the African American woman’s” (Wisker 2001: 159). This paper attempts to demonstrate how Head’s women emerge independent, struggling against the traditional patriarchal African society.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Bessie head published her first collection of short stories *The Collector of Treasures* in 1977. Before this she had published three novels and got international attention as a novelist by the time she died in 1986. Since then several studies have been carried out to assess her life and work. The most impressive among these is Eilersen’s *Thunder Behind Her Ears: Bessie Head: Her Life and Writings* (1995). Craig MacKenzie in his book *Bessie Head: An Introduction* (1989) describes Head’s novels as “intensely private, remarkable works” and all her works of fiction “are fashioned in some way from the author’s experiences” (Mackenzie 1989:19). Whereas the first three works are attempts to come to terms with her position as an alien in Botswana society, the collection of short stories is a definite attempt to focus on the community at large, a period described by Mackenzie as her “socially-oriented period”. In the book *Female Novelists of Africa* (1984) Taiwo argues that *The collector of Treasures* highlights the leading role played by a woman in each of the stories, and the condition of women in a modern African society. In her discussion of *The Collector of Treasures* in “Bessie Head: Production under drought conditions” (1989), Susan Gardner alludes that this collection “has a discernible feminist content” because it focuses on “the insistence that women have suffered systematic social injustice because of their sex” (1989:231). The title story of the collection demonstrates the deep psychological trauma that the contemporary women had to live with. In an article titled “Dikeledi’s revenge: A reading of Bessie Head’s “The collector of

treasures”, Marius Crous observes that the female protagonist’s cutting off of her husband’s genitals can be seen as a deconstruction of phallogocentric society. Crous further argues that the subsequent imprisonment of Dikeledi is an attempt by patriarchy to reaffirm its control over the fair sex. Against the previous studies, the present study undertakes to show the struggle of the women in fiction of Head, or for that matter, women in Africa, for asserting their individual identity and their effort to move from the margin to the centre.

III. METHODOLOGY

The critical method of the present study is influenced by the concepts and ideas of feminism though Bessie Head herself refuted the claim that she was a feminist. There is no denying the fact that the male-female relationship is primary in the text *The Collector’s Treasures*. Head takes the sides with women and told their stories because the community cherishes life and the continuity of the race. MacKenzie describes “the hardship of women of the village experience” as the main focus of the stories (1989:16). However, a common theme of feminism is the concept of gender –how women are social construct and how they are subject to control and oppression on the basis of their gender. The common experience of oppression on the basis of gender unites women across divisions of race and colour. Experiences of oppression and injustice pervade through the short stories “The Collector of Treasures” and “Heaven is not Closed”. Analyzing the European and the Third World feminisms, Mohanty observes that it is difficult to express the diverse histories and struggles of feminisms in a single way or concept (Mohanty 1991:4). A central idea of the feminist literary criticism is the ‘phallus’. In the opinion of Toril Moi, phallogocentrism is a system which privileges the phallus as the symbol of power or source of power (Toril Moi 1985: 179). By extension one can, following Lacan, argue that phallus does not merely refer to male organ. It is a symbolic construct signifying male dominance in society. Dikeledi’s cutting off the penis of Garesgo may be seen as a symbolic act of resisting the male dominance in the society.

IV. DISCUSSION

The short story, “The Collector of Treasures” was published in the year 1977 in Head’s short story collection *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales*. As the story opens, we see the protagonist, Dikeledi Mokopi is being moved to the prison, sentenced with life imprisonment on the charge of murdering her husband. In the beginning, when Dikeledi was brought in front of the prison wardress, the conversation was quite suggestive of the prevailing conditions in the households. “So you have killed your husband, have you?”.... ‘You’ll be in a good company.

We have four other women here for same crime. It's becoming the fashion these days' ” (Head 2015: 38). When Dikeledi told Kebonye, another prisoner, that she killed her husband, Kebonye was not at all perturbed, rather she showed no emotion and smiled cynically. When Dikeledi told her that she killed her husband by cutting off his private parts by a knife, Kebonye told that she also committed the same crime by a razor. This type of act committed by these women suggests their acute anger and frustration which leads them to take such ultimate steps.

In this story Head elaborately describes the attitude of man towards woman during the three phases of African life. In the old days before the colonial invasion of Africa, he was a man who lived by the traditions and taboos outlined for all the people by the forefathers of his tribe. He had no individual choice or freedom to assess whether these traditions were compassionate. His “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 were regarded, in a congenial sense, as being an inferior form of human life.”(Head 2015: 43). These lines clearly depict the traditional way of life of Africa, where the status of women was not better before colonization. During the colonial era, the situation deteriorated further. Peterson and Rutherford argue that women are represented in colonial discourses in ways which collude with patriarchal values. Hence the phrase ‘double colonisation’. That is, women are twice colonised –by patriarchal values and by colonialist representations (quoted in McLeod2010: 175). During the colonial regime, the ancestral values lost control over the society and it was dominated by the imported life style of the colonisers. In the following lines of the story, Head depicts the harsh reality:

The colonial era and the period of migratory mining labour to South Africa was a further affliction visited on this man. It broke the old, traditional form of family life. For a long period a man was separated from his wife and children while he worked for a pittance in another land in order to raise the money to pay his British Colonial poll tax. British colonialism scarcely enriched his life. He then became the boy of White man and a machine tool of the South African mines (2015:43).

Head unveils the evils of colonialism in this story. However, she portrays the more miserable status of women even after the independence of Africa. The subjugation of women in the African society was an omnipresent aspect whether it was during the pre-colonial, colonial or postcolonial periods.

It was generally expected that their status might improve in the society after the independence, but nothing happened like this. Rather they remained the same as they were since the time immemorial. After

independence, their predicament worsened because there was no dominance of the traditional values among the male dominated society. Now they became the lord of themselves and could do whatever they liked.

“Independence suddenly and dramatically changed the pattern of colonial subservience. More jobs became available under the new government’s localization programme and salaries sky-rocketed at the same time. It provided the first occasion for family life of a new order, above the childlike discipline of custom, the degradation of colonialism. Men and women, in order to survive, had to turn inwards to their own resources. It was the man who arrived at this turning point, a broken wreck with no inner resources at all. It was as though he was hideous to himself and in an effort to flee his own inner emptiness, he spun away from himself in a dizzy kind of death dance of wild destruction and dissipation” (Head 2015: 43).

The man who got a new way of life just after the independence is presented through the character of Garesgo Mokopi, the husband of Dikeledi. Prior to independence, he worked at a salary of R50.00 a month, but soon after the independence, it shot up to R200.00, which gave him wings on his womanizing spree. He was never found at home. With plenty of money, he slept with the women of the village. Dikeledi was left with her three children, with no resources. He did so perhaps, because she was boring, illiterate, traditional sort of woman, whom he no longer found exciting and moreover there were many other women, exciting and smart.

Garesgo was a man who had no responsibility towards his wife and children and therefore, Dikeledi had to support herself and her children for long eight years. She earned her living by doing various jobs like knitting, thatching the huts and erecting mud walls for the village household. She could feed her three children without any help from Garesgo but the crisis occurred when Banabotho, her eldest son had to seat for the primary school leaving examination. He was very interested in studies and wanted to pass the examination with a grade A to please his mother. When he passes the examination with flying colours, Dikeledi decided to remind Garesgo that he was the father of three children and he had responsibilities towards them. Hence, she went to meet him in his office. She begged him to pay Banabotho’s fees for the secondary school. Instead of helping her, he accuses her of being the concubine of Paul, a neighbour. After some days, Garesgo thought that he should walk in and establish his rights over Dikeledi and hence, sent a note through his son. Dikeledi took the note, it infuriated her as it was quite suggestive that he would come home to help her with the expenses of his son’s school fees only in exchange of some sex.

She answers his letter: “Sir, I shall prepare everything as you have said. Dikeledi”. From her letter it seems as if Dikeledi accepts his demand without questioning it. She is, however, aware of the real intention behind the words. “(P)repare” is an ironic choice of words in this case, because she also plans her final act. The patriarchal association of women with the preparers of food in the kitchen is thus undermined. Dikeledi took the ultimate decision to kill him by cutting of his private parts. For a woman like Dikeledi, life became unbearable that compelled her to take the fateful decision of her life, which resulted in her lifetime imprisonment. Once she married Garesgo to escape from the oppression of her selfish uncle with whom she lived after her mother’s death. But, perhaps, sorrows would never let her alone. Hence her name Dikeledi, meaning ‘tears.’ Women suffer both in the pre-colonial and post colonial Africa. And the sense of liberation was false.

But Bessie Head has created some “spirited female characters” with strong personality who could challenge the male hegemony or their hostile environment (Sharma 24). Dikeledi is one such woman. In the first section of the tale, Head delineates her as a woman who is gifted with a number of skills –knitting, sewing, and weaving baskets. In the prison she, like other women, was busy knitting woollen garments. With her almost boneless hands of strange power, she had completed the front part of a jersey by mid-morning. Her co-inmates “stopped to admire the pattern she had invented in her own head” (Head 41). Bessie Head further delineates Dikeledi as a “woman whose thatch does not leak” (41). She could feed and rear her children with her amazing skills. This made Dikeledi a unique, resourceful woman.

Bessie Head seems to resist male domination through sisterly solidarity. The celebration of sisterhood is seen again in the first section of the tale. As Dikeledi reaches the state central prison with pain and despair, she finds some solace and hope when Kebonye and other cellmates talk to her with kindness and sympathy. With their common experience of violence and injustices in a patriarchal society, the women in the prison can easily develop a sense of sisterhood or fellow feeling. Their oppression and their common crime –the murder of their husband –help them get united in a hostile environment. A similar but deeper “female bonding” is seen in Head’s depiction of the friendship between Dikeledi and Kenalepe (Sharma 24). These two women, says Head, share “one of those affectionate, sharing –everything kind of friendships that only women know how to have” (45). In the Botswana society, polygamy was common till the early twentieth century. So was the extra-marital affair in the villages. Kenalepe’s deep affection for Dikeledi makes her propose to the latter to share her life-partner with her. She can “loan Paul”, her caring and gentle husband to Dikeledi. She justifies her proposal by saying that she never had a friend like Dikeledi and that Paul had other girls before he married her (*The*

Collector, 48). Head depiction of this heart-warming image of women is in sharp contrast to stereotypical image of jealous women.

“Heaven is not Closed” is another short story by Bessie Head, published in the same collection of short stories, *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales*. The story has universal implications that are related to human nature. It deals with two persons from different religious backgrounds falling in love. Galethebege, the protagonist of the story, is the symbol of faith, a devout Christian and a firm believer in the norms laid down by the church. On the other hand, Raloke, lover of Galethebege, was a pagan, following the native tribal custom of Setswana. There was a difference of opinion between these two lovers. Galethebege wanted to marry in the Church but Raloke wanted to follow the traditional customs. Head contrasts the two lovers in the lines, “Galethebege was all at the same time startled, pleased, and hesitant. She was hesitant because it was well known that Raloke was an unbeliever; he had not once set foot in church. So, she looked at him, begging an apology, and mentioned the matter which was foremost in her mind” (Head 2013: 57).

In this story, Galethebege is presented as a woman who is always afraid of being the object of God’s wrath and at the same time she did not want to displease her lover, who said, “I took my first wife according to the old customs. I am going to take my second wife according to the old customs too” (Head 2013: 57). Here, Head presents an account of Africa’s transition to a modern world order and the complicated nature of the transition. Christianity, the chief tool of the European colonization, is shown to have been embraced by many natives simply because it was a fashion of that time as well as a mark of civilization. Though Christianity propounded by the church put forwarded a very progressive image of itself, but the reality was quite opposite to it. So, Choudhury comments, “In true sense, then it is Galethebege, who is the most modern, ready to accommodate and adapt to the demands of the changing circumstances, keeping intact her own personality even as she responded to the world around her. The Church on the other hand, functions dogmatically, closes itself to those who do not submit to its strictures, and restrains its members from developing themselves in accordance with the social circumstances in which they live” (2013: 65). Indeed, Galethebege appears to be strong woman by holding on to her own beliefs despite pressure of society and the church.

Though Galethebege, subjugated by Raloke’s age old customs, marries him according to Setswana customs, but she could not disbelieve the existence of the newly found God. When she was excommunicated by the church and was told that heaven is closed for Raloke as he was an unbeliever. Here, Christianity has been presented as having no space and mercy for those who does not follow its commands. Head represents the

white missionary as an orthodox, who tries to impose the restrictions of the church on the local people. This often leads to the conflict between religion and traditions. When the missionary imposes his view that heaven is closed for Raloke and Galethebege, the authoritative dictate shows the arrogance of the whites and not humility, which is the hallmark of every religion. Being subjugated by both her husband and the white missionary, Galethebege found a new way of salvation. Though heaven was closed for her, she was determined to open it by her sheer devotion to God. Throughout her life, in one corner of her house, she prayed to God, perhaps, to open its doors to herself and her husband.

V. CONCLUSION

Dikeledi and Galethebege, though afflicted with various pains, emerge as new women who can resist the patriarchy. Head seems to suggest the emergence of some kind of new woman who can fight against the male hegemony and the apartheid regime in South Africa. Actually, Dikeledi is the collector of treasures, who treasures the happy things in her heart and they give her the strength to survive even in the most adverse situation in her life. She remained calm when she killed her husband and never felt any remorse for her action because she believed that whatever she had done, was right. While staying in the prison, she was always hard working and able to earn as she was before her imprisonment. She supported her children, was able to save money for their education. When she left for the prison, Paul promises to look after her children and pay for their education and this generosity of Paul was also hard earned by Dikeledi herself for her services done to Paul's household. As Galethebege was told by the missionary that heaven is closed for her, she never questioned the mercy of God. She understood the real spirit of God and may be that is why she was able to get the doors of heaven not closed for her. With her devotion, vast knowledge of Christianity and perseverance, she had the supreme authority while talking about God among the villagers. Head writes, "Perhaps her simple and good heart had been terrified that the doors of heaven were indeed closed on Raloke and she had been trying to open them" (Head 2013: 63). To conclude, it can be said that Bessie Head, in her works presents the patriarchal and colonial discourses and presents the women of Africa as agents of their own destinies. Dikeledi and Galethebege are the new African women who resist the male hegemony as well as the colonial misrule.

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