

**CONSTRUCTING WOMAN: A STUDY OF THE WORKS OF  
BESSIE HEAD WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO  
*THE COLLECTOR OF TREASURES***

*Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the  
award of the Degree of*

**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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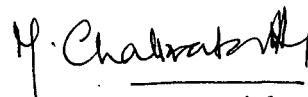
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*For Baba and Maa.....*

*Dated: 19<sup>th</sup> July, 2001*

## **DECLARATION**

This dissertation entitled **Constructing Woman: A Study of the Works of Bessie Head with special reference to 'The Collector of Treasures'** submitted by me, for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** is an original work and has not been submitted so far, in part or full, for any other degree or diploma of any University.



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**CERTIFICATE**

This dissertation entitled **Constructing Woman: A Study of the works of Bessie Head with special reference to The Collector of Treasures**, submitted by **Madhumita Chakrabarti**, Centre of Linguistics and English, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of the **Master of Philosophy**, is an original work and has not been submitted so far, in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any other university.

This may be placed before the examiners for the award for the degree of Master of Philosophy.

  
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# ***CHAPTER ONE***

## INTRODUCTION: THE SPACE OF WOMEN IN AFRICA AND AFRICAN LITERATURE

### INTRODUCTION

The circumstances of her birth and upbringing, culminating in her ultimate status as an exiled refugee in Botswana have all combined together to allow **Bessie Head (1937-1986)** a unique position in the genre of African fiction. She was born in Pietermaritzburg in South Africa of mixed parentage – a white mother and a black father – although the more usual combinations were a white father and a black mother – and was thus a ‘coloured’. From her childhood, she was aware of the fact that her very existence “was an affront to racial laws”<sup>1</sup> and that there was no place for Head anywhere in apartheid-ridden South Africa, either with the numerically superior blacks or socially superior whites. Throughout her life therefore, she remained the “archetypal outsider.”<sup>2</sup> Her childhood was spent partially at foster homes and after that at the Anglican mission orphanage, i.e. in a perennial state of rootlessness. Even her marriage to journalist Harold Head ended in a divorce, thus ending her hopes of stability on that front too. After a brief spell as a journalist with *Drum* magazine in Johannesburg, Bessie Head decided to leave South Africa for neighbouring Botswana on an ‘exit permit’ – meaning that she could never return to South Africa. She made her home in Botswana in the midst of 40,000 villagers in a rural co-operative village, Serowe “as a stateless person”<sup>3</sup> required to register regularly with the local police and lived here till her death in 1986.

Bessie Head’s writings are thematically linked to each other. In varying contexts, they are reflective of the prevailing sense of homelessness that the exile continually has to face, of the state of alienation and rootlessness and are



are autobiographical to a large extent. The theme of political ‘protest’, a hallmark of most black African writings of the apartheid era is relatively subdued in her works, although the brutality of the whites and consequent dehumanisation of the blacks is stressed on. Her uniqueness also lies in the fact that unlike other black South African authors who had been exiled due to apartheid – like Alex La Guma, Dennis Brutus, Bloke Modisane – Head alone chose her adopted locale – Botswana – as the setting for all her works. At the same time her work, as Lloyd.W.Brown says:

draws significantly upon the experience of being a non-white in South Africa, for the denial of civil rights to the South African non-white encourages Head’s sense of homelessness in much the same way that the system of apartheid fragments the individual’s sense of personal integrity.<sup>4</sup>

In most of her works therefore, there is the recurring image of the ‘outsider’– who comes to a new place, meets new people and attempts to carve out a place for herself in such a community. Like her, most of these characters are women, for instance Margaret, in *Maru* or Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* or even the many powerfully depicted women characters in *The Collector of Treasures* or even *Tales of Tenderness and Power*.

Her women characters are sketched out from her own life and are all therefore autobiographical to a large extent. Each however differs from the other in some respect and this serves to further humanise them and give them individuality. Unlike many of her contemporary writers in the African continent, like Efua Sutherland, Ama Ata Aidoo and Flora Nwapa, who in spite of their strong portrayal of women characters still communicate “a fairly comfortable sense of belonging”<sup>5</sup>, Head’s writings deal essentially with the discrimination in society, sexual and racial, and her characters portray various

aspects of social injustice and inequality, while remaining individuals in their own right. She therefore aims to create 'new worlds' of men and women, far removed from the existing status quo of society, a world free from the power-centred brutishness and manipulative violence that she experienced in South African society.

Since no study of Bessie Head's works, and especially of her women characters can be made without taking into account the scenario of African literature in general and of women and women writers in particular, the following sections of this chapter will attempt to provide a brief overview of the role of women in traditional African society as compared to their situation in the colonial and post-colonial period. In addition, I will attempt to give a picture of the traditional space ascribed to women in all the genres of African literature. The study will be undertaken essentially within the framework of these two areas.

## **WOMEN IN AFRICA**

The concept of African womanhood has been one of the fashionable topics for discussion in social and academic circles, especially since feminism has come into vogue. The typical western construct of the African woman and of women in 'traditional' societies is that these women were suppressed, uneducated, illiterate unemancipated creatures, and that it was only the onset of colonialism that brought about the emancipation of women in these societies by introducing them to the western concept of the 'enlightened' woman. In this context, we can quote from E.E.Evans Pritchard, who maintains that the adult primitive woman is one who "has never heard of social equality", does not consider herself as under-privileged and is actually self-satisfied in her small domain of home and family – at being wife and mother. Moreover, she emerges a victim of African male and of traditional

customs and practices.<sup>6</sup> She displays a stoic resignation for a situation, not aware that there could be a life outside the confines of the four walls. Western thought would have us believe that it was only in the post-colonial period, when they come into contact with western ideas, that these women, as well as men, realise the backwardness and oppressive nature of their own society, and thereby embark on the road to 'improvement'.

Recent studies conducted in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on women's activities in Africa are clearly inspired by the trends of Western feminist thought, and provide us with a more correct, balanced account of the lives and livelihood of women in different parts of Africa. They perhaps also lead us to conclude that colonial impact, far from leading to the liberation and emancipation of women, actually "diminished the prerogatives and rights that they formerly enjoyed."<sup>7</sup> How is this so? Various accounts tell us that in the pre-colonial period, African women were actually at par with men in many respects. They interacted with their societies, worked alongside men in the fields and were economically independent. There was reciprocal division of labour, women were given the independence and liberty to put forth their own point of view and make their own decisions. They especially excelled in the field of agriculture, particularly in the gathering of vegetable products, and this has led Ester Boserup to refer to Africa as "the region of female farming par excellence."<sup>8</sup> This opinion is further strengthened by Goody and Buckley's study of 1973, where they have observed that women play a major role in cultivation in 53% of the societies in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, they participated in political life – for example – community decision-making. Igbo women for instance, have traditionally been one of the most hard-working and independent women in all of Africa; and politics has been one sphere in which these women have been almost as active as men. Women have also traditionally been involved in the exercise of religious practices, especially those related to spirit possession and spirit-medicine cults as avenues of protest against male domination, as situations of temporary authority or even

as steps towards attaining of positions of political prominence. Even Islam, a religion popularly associated with ideas of female repression serves as a backdrop for “the liberalising activities of coastal Kenya women’s associations”<sup>10</sup>, especially in the context of Muslim Mombassa society. Such women’s associations have also contributed to the growth and development of women in society, for example, by encouraging support of education and schooling for the Muslim girl-child.

What is common in all these examples is the case for women’s space and identity. Even while living in the midst of highly hierarchical and patriarchal societies, women in traditional Africa enjoyed a position at par with men in many respects. However, during the period of colonisation, women gradually started to lose their importance and status in society. The European colonisers decided for themselves that colonialism was a ‘positive event’ for the African woman, and that ‘the light’ of Western Christianity would lift them from the toil of agricultural labour, the burden of polygamy and forced marriages, and the pain of clitoridectomy to a richer and more fulfilling life.<sup>11</sup> The reality however could not be more different. Colonialism actually took away the independence and self-sufficiency, which the women had hitherto enjoyed. For instance, the coastal Ga women were reduced to undertaking petty trading, which earned them just enough to maintain their subsistence level. The British colonisers also failed to see that African women had political roles in their society – their myopia and desire to construct their own superiority caused them to undermine the contribution of women and set up a situation whereby men appropriated all the power. As Ester Boserup points out:

Virtually all Europeans shared the opinion that men are superior to women... [and they] did all they could to achieve this.<sup>12</sup>

What we see therefore is that colonial women in Africa are essentially a construction of Western theory, whereby the whims and desires of a select section of society has worked its propaganda and publicity machinery so thoroughly and in such a manner that this image has today become the stereotyped, archetypal image of the African woman. She has forcibly been trampled upon to such an extent that her identity has almost disappeared, and it is only the various recent social and anthropological studies that have somewhat restored her rightful place in society and record books. As a number of feminist scholars have argued, colonialism is not neutral as to gender. It is rather, “a patriarchal order, sexist as well as racist in its ideology”<sup>13</sup> which brought these women under “interlocking forms of oppression”<sup>14</sup> – with the racial practices of colonialism on the one hand and the structures of internal male domination in their societies on the other. As Zulu Sofola, a Zimbabwean writer notes:

With European exposure the African educated person has been led to believe that the female is an after-thought, a wallflower...<sup>15</sup>

The independence and freedom enjoyed by African women in the pre-colonial period did not therefore translate to total equality between the sexes. Men were still the dominant forces in society. This was aggravated by many of the cultural restrictions imposed on women by society, with a desire to keep them subordinate to men. For example, in many parts of West Africa, women had to kneel down in front of their husbands; in other societies, a long puberty rite for women kept them out of society and in seclusion till their marriage.<sup>16</sup>

In spite of these restrictions, women in Africa have always sought to control their own lives by participating actively in socio-economic and political processes that control their lives and livelihood. They have an

inherent strength of character, which refuses to lie down, a fact, which the women authors realise better than anybody else. It is probably not very surprising then, that most of them are renowned for their strong, determined yet human characters who scream out PROTEST from every fibre of their being – against society, against their male counterparts and against their coloniser powers– all of whom have tried to dominate over them in various spheres of life.

The following section examines the position of women vis-à-vis African literature and then aims to contextualise Bessie Head and her works within such a framework.

#### **THE SPACE AND IDENTITY OF WOMEN IN AFRICAN LITERATURE**

Even though output of African literature has increased manifold, especially in the post-colonial period, the one glaring omission that has till very recently remained in this field is all the literature written of, by and for women. This again can be attributed to a large degree to the colonial impact on the continent, which as seen above reduced women to virtual non-entities. By woman's literature, I mean a literature that deals with (a) women characters and (b) is written by women. The main feature that comes across in these works, especially those by women authors, is the space and identity that they manage to carve out for the women in a predominantly male, patriarchal and deeply colonised society, where the freedom and independence that they enjoyed in the pre-colonial period has all but been nullified. Their voices are the voices of protest, a crying out in the dark, while continually screaming their very existence.

It is a matter of fact that African literature, like that of most world literature, is still largely a male world, whether in terms of writers or

characters. In most texts, women occupy the traditional roles of wives, mothers or sisters, or conversely are the stereotypical shallow city girl or prostitutes, with no sense of traditional values. Education is seen as a barrier to fulfilling these traditional roles assigned to women by society. The colonial administrators with their views of the world where women were clearly of secondary importance further aggravated this stance. As discussed above, African women have simply remained objects of speculation and enquiry in Western thought, without any kind of reference to their widely ranging positions and heterogenities. To a large extent, African male writers have continued to carry on this bias, and women characters continue to remain exotic and misrepresented images. The reason for such ignorance and marginalisation of women writers and women characters in African literature and African 'theories' is therefore, according to Lloyd.W.Brown a continuation of this colonial tradition:

...the ignoring of women writers on the continent has become a tradition, implicit rather than formally stated, but a tradition nonetheless...<sup>17</sup>

The clear implication here is that such suppression and ignorance of women characters has been deliberately propagated, however unconsciously, in the male dominated literary circles.

It is undoubtedly true that the number of female authors is 'considerable less than their male counterparts; yet, at the same time, more and more women are turning to writing as a means of expressing their thoughts and feelings and the nature of women's predicament. Writers like Efua Sutherland, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Nadine Gordimer and Bessie Head are some of the established and well-recognised writers in the African literary scene, with younger writers like Mariama Ba, Miriam Tlali, Ifeoma Okaye and

Asenath Adage also beginning to carve out a name for themselves in recent times. However, for every such successful author there are a number of others who are unable to get such advantages and are thus unable to attain their full worth. Here, we are reminded of Virginia Woolf's comment on middle-class English women in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century:

Genius of a sort must have existed among them...but certainly it never got itself onto paper. When, however, one reads of a woman possessed by the devils, of wise woman selling herbs... then I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet...<sup>18</sup>

The general image of women in African literature therefore lies on two extreme planes, both extremely stereotypical. The first is that of “the ‘sweet mother’, the all-accepting creature of fecundity and self-sacrifice.”<sup>19</sup> This figure is often seen as an analogy of the Mother Figure. At the other extreme, is the stereotype of the sophisticated city girl versus the simple, homely, rural woman, content with looking after home and hearth. The contrast that is aimed at being projected here is naturally one between the values of modernism and traditionalism. The city-bred girl is often a prostitute like Cyprian Ekwensi's Jagua Nana in his novel of the same name, Wanja in *Petals of Blood* or Clementina, co-wife of Okot p'Bitek's Lawino in *Song of Lawino*. She is generally projected as a worthless human being shallow, selfish and completely divorced from the people and society around her. The rural woman on the other hand is a mythified ideal – a picture of exaggeration at its other extreme – passive, pious, compliant, and happy with the way things are progressing. She is the “naïve-sounding woman who does not want change and is happy with no innovation.”<sup>20</sup> Both these portrayals of women – as being either, metaphorically speaking, black or white, obviously leaves out the true picture of the African woman. African women are neither the mythified



Goddesses, ignorant of the changing times around them, nor are they city-bred to such a level that they are totally ignorant of their traditional ways of living, customs and rituals. Rather, in many African societies, women have changed along with the times and have achieved their own economic independence. The image of the unchanging, static rural women, claim many, is a projection of men and male authors, whose position and sense of superiority in society are threatened by the very concept of women's emancipation. Women characters have their space and position only in relation to men. As Christine Obbo concludes:

it seems that women's own attempts to cope with the new situations they find themselves in are regarded as a 'problem' by men, and a betrayal of traditions which are often confused with women's roles.... The forces of urbanisation and international influences have imposed rapid changes upon East African societies, yet men expect women to be politically conservative and non-innovative. Socially, women are accused of 'going too far' when they adopt new practices...<sup>21</sup>

The space given to women varies from region to region naturally; in literature, it also varies from author to author. Not all the male authors perpetrate such false images of women in Africa. Many of them, in fact, have etched out a number of complex, powerful women characters. Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana*, in his novel of the same name, is one such character, as is Amos Tutuola's wife of the Palm-Wine Drinkard in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, said to be one of the most correct images of the Yoruba woman – “a courageous, resourceful woman who dare situations with her husband, who works at anything and willingly changes roles with him, where the need arises.”<sup>22</sup> For Wole Soyinka, the woman is less of a domestic woman, and more of a “catalyst”<sup>23</sup> effecting socio-economic and political revolutions in their community. An example of such women can be seen in the case of Segi

in *Kongi's Harvest* and Iriyise in *Season of Anomy*, both of whom are courtesan political activists. As Soyinka himself has stated, the primary function of women in his work is mainly symbolic and one of essence. According to Sylvia Bryan, these characters reflect Soyinka's 'growing sympathy for a socialist ideology'. Furthermore, she observes:

...by the time Soyinka wrote *Season of Anomy* he had expressed strong socialist views ...and Ousmene is an avowed socialist writer whose novel and commitment to socialism preceded Soyinka's... present a perspective from which to examine the woman as political rebel in Soyinka's work.<sup>24</sup>

These women are in many ways crucial harbingers of change and revolution. As the dentist comments in *Season of Anomy*:

We must acknowledge the fact- pimps, whores.... are the familiar vanguards of the army of change...a standard-bearer, super-mistress of universal insurgence. To abandon such a potential weapon...is to admit a lack of foresight. Or imagination.<sup>25</sup>

Iriyise, Penda, Segi and Wanja in these novels are all thinking, intelligent human beings with their own commitments. Wanja, for instance, with the help of Munira, Abdullah and Karega manages to organise the women of Ilmorege into a co-operative group to produce crops more profitably, an idea that is later seen in Bessie Head's novel *When Rain Clouds Gather*. Yet, for all this, Soyinka's portrayal of women cannot escape from the typical male centered boundaries. That is why, in spite of all their freedom, and rebelling against societal norms, Segi and Iriyise remain "stereotypes of the siren"<sup>26</sup> – an extension of the image of the 'city girl', and male characters like Ofeyi in *Season of Anomy* can therefore easily exploit their women. Women's roles in

birth and death, the value associated with this, especially for women are also explicit in Soyinka's writings. Just as the expectant mother can cry out:

This is the last-born; give me  
A joyful womb to bind  
*(Her Joy is Wild)*

Similarly, the anguish and intensity of grief felt by a recently bereaved mother can be seen in the following lines:

No states caress her keening and  
The sky recedes from pain  
*(A Cry in the Night)*

This variety of images of women in Soyinka's works marks him out as a crucial author in the field of African writings. He portrays them as sirens, prostitutes or as the typical mother figure, but at the same time, perhaps inspired by his impression of Yoruba women, he also grants them a certain degree of economic independence and liberation. Soyinka's women therefore stand, in many ways at the crossroads of African society.

For the women, there is a two-fold discrimination of women and of African women. And therefore, for women writers in particular, the entire politics of writing is different from that of men. They do not write on a different platform from their male counterparts as far as ideology is concerned – after all, as Ama Ata Aidoo comments:

Did we not all suffer the varied wickedness of colonialism, apartheid, neo-colonialism and global imperialists and fascism together?<sup>27</sup>

What the feminine writers are upset about is the fact that while the male authors are regarded as creative writers and creators, the women generally are ignored in this respect and are perhaps seen more as 'social documenters' – delineating and depicting their situation from their own point of view. They

believe that this is the primary reason why critics and academicians may be interested in them. Women share with other disadvantaged nations an intimate expression of oppression and repression and the publishing of their works is a manner of combating the orthodoxies of colonial and anti-colonial writing as well as delineating the experience of women. In fact, as Florence Stratton states:

...by merely writing when they did, Ogot and Nwapa challenged a number of orthodoxies: 'the voicelessness of the black woman' for instance, and her lack of subjectivity and historical reference, as well as the definition of female creativity as residing solely in the womb and its corollary: the notion of writing as an exclusively a male activity.<sup>28</sup>

Another major reason why these women are upset is the inherent restrictions imposed on them by society. Male-dominated society and literary circles deny them their just rewards, especially in terms of recognition – their writings are regarded as frivolous, and are seen as non-important. The situation has become so bad in many cases that many women writers have actually stated of a regret of having entered into this field, which they regretfully and painfully describe as a 'mistake'.<sup>29</sup>

For female authors, their writings are essentially a matter of commitment. It is their duty not only to talk about what it is to be a woman in such a situation, and the reality of the situation, but also in a larger sense, the situation in the whole of the Third World. Their 'biological womanhood' is an embedded fact in each such level of commitment.<sup>30</sup> One question that has often been asked in this regard is whether any writer, male or female, can address everything of concern to his or her society, giving a balanced

viewpoint. Sex is an important concept undoubtedly, but it is not everything in life - the be all and end all - as in the West. As Buchi Emecheta states:

Sex is part of life....It is not **the** life....African feminism is free from the shackles of Western romantic illusions and tends to be much more pragmatic. We believe that we are here for many, many things, not just to cultivate ourselves and make ourselves pretty for men.<sup>31</sup>

The approach towards sex and the woman's cause is also much more pragmatically handled, and that is perhaps why, the 'feminist' novel in Africa is in many ways 'better' than its Western counterpart – proposing as it does a more 'radical' and militant viewpoint, unlike the idealistic and Utopian outlook of many Western texts. For these authors, the world is not an enlightened, equal society, without hierarchies and prejudices. Rather, these women face up to the harsh and true reality around them, and realise that in order to actually survive in this highly patriarchal, male-dominated society, where the focus is on suppression and domination, they need to carve out their own safe, supportive world. We may argue here that such actions may actually lead to the perpetuation of some kind of reverse hierarchy and ideology and lead to what has been termed as “feminist separatism”,<sup>32</sup> although it is more or less clear that women only desire some kind of equal representation and are not looking to initiate a hegemonic regime themselves. The essential conflict in the works of most African women writers is twofold - between the old and new-tradition and modernity and secondly, the significance of sexual roles. This latter aspect is dealt with almost exclusively from the point of view of women, and more specifically, their perception of and space within the limited boundaries of that society. As has already been discussed above, for male authors like Achebe or Ekwensi, women essentially remain a picture of the

ideal, supreme motherhood, with its sacrosanct mystique or conversely, a city-bred prostitute. For women writers, their biological identity is of course important; and the biological roles they need to fulfill in society are implied and acknowledged by them. Where they essentially differ from their male counterparts is in the fact that they do not attach the idealism and mystique with motherhood, which is so characteristic in the works of the former. For male writers as also for African society, a woman is not considered 'whole' if (i) she is not a mother several times over and (ii) if she is 'thata' or barren - unable to bear children and therefore confronted with the stigma attached to her by society. This is a confirmation of the fact stated by many people in traditional African society, who attach status and respect to women only in terms of their capacity to be wives or mothers. It is only a woman who can actually feel the pain and hurt of such a tragic situation. Therefore it is perhaps natural that it is the women writers who are able to create such poignant women characters and display their inner strength and fortitude in facing up to such a situation. For instance, Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* which deals with the issue of male-female relationships in her novel, focuses primarily on the woman's changing perception of herself vis-à-vis her family and society and shows how a woman is able to gradually concile herself to her status in society. This is true of all the major writers- a sign of their protest against the male-dominated patriarchal society, although most of them go a step beyond Nwapa and stress on the woman's need to develop and assert their own point of view. Protest is just one method of doing this - but to really make some constructive difference to their own lives as well as the lives of other women, it is necessary for them to actually take the initiative and make the attempt to take control of their own lives and destiny. For writers like Buchi Emecheta, Efua Sutherland, Ama Ata Aidoo, Flora Nwapa and Bessie Head, the women characters are strong, independent women - rural as well as urban - whose

protests against societal mores and decisions to stand up for themselves as economically independent and self-dependent women reflect the true 'liberation' required of the African woman – not the so-vaunted pseudo-liberation as proclaimed by the colonial powers.

#### SCOPE OF THIS WORK

The main focus of this study is the construction of women characters in the works of one such woman author - Bessie Head. Her works will be discussed in a three-fold concept-at the microcosmic level in relation to her own volatile life and upbringing, and at a wider macrocosmic level in the context of the political and literary situation in apartheid South Africa and Africa in general. Her characters are complex, and each is beset by his/her own moral and psychological crisis. Gender conflicts cannot naturally be divorced from the hierarchical power relations and politics based on the man/woman dichotomy- the power, and the consequent abuse, of male power. According to Bessie Head, all male - female relationships are based on such power-centered brutishness. How, if at all, do her women protagonists rise above these abuses of power in the various domains in their lives and of the stereotypical notions of women discussed above? Do they succeed in challenging, not only male autocracy but many of the conventional silences of South African literature? Although the majority of Bessie Head's works will be discussed, special attention will be paid to her <sup>collection of Short Stories</sup> short story collection *The Collector of Treasures*, where the linking theme and connecting thread between all the stories is the changing status and position of women in Africa, as reflected through the villagers of a small Botswanian village. It will be attempted to establish a relationship between questions of identity, place and space and the ability and success of these women to "create new worlds out of nothing." In other words, how do these women succeed in ascribing meaning

to mere geographical territory and carving out an identity for themselves within the confines and limits of community and society? Her protagonists articulate their critique of society through a number of crucial overlapping, yet exiled positions. In what manner does their status as an 'outsider' help or hinder this search process for assimilation in to society? The following chapters will, in this context first focus on the development of the writing tradition in South Africa from the nineteenth century to the present, focussing on the apartheid era and the place of women in this progression. Chapter Three looks at Bessie Head's three novels- *When Rain Clouds Gather*, *Maru* and *A Question of Power* in terms of the various associations they offer between land, gender, power and identity. Chapter Four is a detailed analysis of *The Collector of Treasures*, where in addition to the above, an attempt is made to trace the stories as a continuum or journey undertaken by the protagonists as they search for the new world or moral utopia. The final chapter will consist of a summing up of the major arguments. In addition to all these, another major thread that will be discussed is the relationship between gender, race and national identity in all the works and the bearings that each of these may have on the others.



## End notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Pushpa Naidu Parekh et al eds. *Post-Colonial African Writers*. p.207
- <sup>2</sup> Lloyd. W. Brown. *Women Writers in Black Africa*. p.159
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.158
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.159
- <sup>6</sup> E. E. Evans-Pritchard. *The Position of Women in Primitive Societies* cited in Hafkin and Bay eds. *Women in Africa*. p.3
- <sup>7</sup> Hafkin and Bay eds. *Women in Africa*. Introduction. p.4
- <sup>8</sup> Ester Boserup. *Womens Role in Economic Development* cited in Hafkin and Bay eds. *op cit.* p.15
- <sup>9</sup> Hafkin and Bay eds. *op cit.*
- <sup>10</sup> Roopali Sircar. *The Twice Colonised: Women in African Literature*. p.19
- <sup>11</sup> Hafkin and Bay eds. *op cit.* p.15
- <sup>12</sup> Ester Boserup. *op cit.* p.17
- <sup>13</sup> Florence Stratton. *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*. Introduction. p.7
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> Adeola James. *In Their Own Voices*. p.117
- <sup>16</sup> Hafkin and Bay eds. *op cit.* p.8
- <sup>17</sup> Lloyd. W. Brown. *op cit.* p.3
- <sup>18</sup> Virginia Woolf. *A Room of One's Own*. pp.239-240
- <sup>19</sup> Eldred Jones et al eds. *Women in African Literature Today*. p.6
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7
- <sup>21</sup> Christine Obbo. *African Women: Their struggle for Economic Independence*. p.143
- <sup>22</sup> Eldred Jones. *op cit.* p.10
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.119
- <sup>24</sup> Sylvia Brian. 'Images of Woman in Wole Soyinka's works' in Eldred Jones *op cit.* p.120
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.121
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.123
- <sup>27</sup> Ama Ata Aidoo. 'To be an African Woman Writer' in Kirsten Jolst Petersen ed. *Criticism and Ideology*. p.158
- <sup>28</sup> Florence Stratton. *op cit.* p.173
- <sup>29</sup> Ama Ata Aidoo. *op cit.* p.162
- <sup>30</sup> Ogun-dipe-Leslie. 'The Female writer and her Commitment' in Eldred Jones et al eds. *op cit.* p.6
- <sup>31</sup> Buchi Emecheta. 'Feminism with a small f' in Kirsten Holst Peteresen ed. *op cit.* p.150
- <sup>32</sup> Eldred Jones et al eds. *op cit.* p.15

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# *CHAPTER TWO*

## **GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF SOUTH AFRICAN LITERATURE: AN OVERVIEW**

While discussing the growth and development of South African literature, I would divide it into three clear stages in which, by and large, one does not merge into the other. The first stage is that of the oral tradition— like that of many African literatures – of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, primarily communicated through the medium of indigenous African literatures. The second stage begins with the publication of Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) – the first South African novel in English – and continues till 1948 - the year when the policy of ‘apartheid’ was first presented to the all-white South African electorate by Dr.D.F.Malan of the National Party. Apartheid has become a watershed both in the context of South African politics and society as well as its literature. Literature in the apartheid period, especially those by black writers, is informed and dominated by this factor, with a very strong tone of ‘protest’ and it is this protest literature that forms the third stage of the growth and development of South African literature. There is also a fourth stage – still in its infancy – of literature in the post-apartheid period, when the authors talk of the disillusionment of present day life following non-realisation of their dreams. Works like J.M. Coetzee’s *Despair*, winner of the 2000 Booker Prize, and the most recent works of Nadine Gordimer have generated multiple debates on this issue.

‘Literature’ as a genre/concept in South Africa has its origins in oral performances – praise poems, riddles, folk tales, proverbs etc. as in other parts of Africa. This time-honoured tradition has enabled literature to be handed down traditionally from generation to generation by word of mouth. Most stories are told in a conversational style, with repetitions as a form of recollection. They are allowed to unfold by themselves, through the storyteller's voice,

who might, however, give his/her own suggestions and interpretations of the story. Oral story telling, with its capacity of ending at the most climactic movements also had the ability to sustain audience interest and retain their emotional involvement, although “not necessarily lead to a lulling of the ... critical consciousness.”<sup>1</sup> The dawn of literacy amongst the Southern Africans and the gradual transformation from the oral tradition to written word should be attributed to missionary activity. In order to effectively communicate and “preach the word” to the locals, it was not only imperative for them to learn the language, but “also reduce these languages to writing.”<sup>2</sup> The first man ever to write a book in Xhosa was John Bennie, a Glasgow missionary and one of the three founders of Lovedale. However, even before the arrival of the Glasgow Mission, Ntsikana, previously a pagan, composer, singer as well as polygamist and adulterer had been influenced by Christianity and had founded his own Church. Ntsikana’s story, later written down by his disciples signalled the arrival of the written ‘story form’ in Xhosa. This is mainly a theological doctrine, showing the response of Xhosa religion to Christianity – and it is this theme that dominated Xhosa literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

These earliest Xhosa writers, who were also converts to Christianity, are therefore responsible for the blooming to the written form in Xhosa. However, it is also a sad, ironic fact that since no other African, apart from those associated with the missionaries were actually educated, literacy became the exclusive privilege of the Christian converts and their progeny. The printing press in Lovedale enabled the Bible to be completely translated into Xhosa by 1864, as well the publication of various magazines like *Ikwezi* (Morning Star) in 1841, later replaced by *Indaba* (The News) in 1862. Tiyo Soya, one of the most educated of the Xhosa, was one of the leading

contributors to *Indaba*, but his greatest contribution lies in his translation of the first part of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* into the language, which "has had almost as great an influence on the Xhosa language as the Authorised Version of the Bible upon English."<sup>3</sup> These two books became the sources as well as the inspiration for most succeeding works in the language. Furthermore, by the end of the nineteenth century, important literary work, although mainly of a religious, didactic nature, had already been done in Xhosa and this laid the foundations of the beginning of substantial creative writing in the language.

Ntsikana therefore occupies a central position within any historiographical attempt to locate South African literature. His position however, makes a definition of South African literature more complex and problematic. It is clear that as a genre during this period it incorporates indigenous literature in African languages as well as literature written in English, thus divesting it of a homogeneous structure. Ntsikana uses traditional Xhosa elements in his works as a point of departure and makes literature out of them – traditional images, symbols, forms and myths. Music of Xhosa tradition is used to interpret Christianity, by investing it with new meanings, thus leading to the indigenisation of Christianity in South Africa. He composed four hymns, of which the most well known, 'Great Hymn' was first written down by a missionary the year after Ntsikana's death. The other three hymns were written down by John Knox in the early 1900's. These hymns all show a clear incorporation of elements of the praise-poem "with its use of repetition, laudatory phrases and imagery"<sup>4</sup> into written literature. Over the years, various written versions of this hymn arrived, but the fact that the different written versions, emerging at different points of time in the oral transmission

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show little modification in significant content, testifies to the integrity of the transmission process.”<sup>5</sup>

Ntsikana’s influence on Xhosa literature is manifold. Not only did his poetry act as a transitional bridge between the old and new forms of Xhosa poetry by using traditional oral literary forms and images to interpret the present and integrating the new values and symbols with the old, his disciples also became the first literate Xhosa people, in a previously non-literate society, thus occupying a central historical position, as “the first Southern Africans ever to express their thoughts in writing.”<sup>6</sup>In this, they were certainly inspired by their leader to a great extent – at least in terms of form and technique. Furthermore, his major work, the ‘Great Hymn’ is also often associated with the development of Xhosa nationalism – a kind of ‘national anthem’ for special occasions.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, as the first literary composition given to individual formulation, it constitutes a bridge between the traditional and the new and is thus of great historical importance. All in all, Ntsikana remains the first important literary figure of any repute in South Africa. He not only influenced the development of written indigenous literature, but also paved the way for a development of literacy amongst the natives of South Africa and for a full flowering of literary activity by blacks and whites, males and females. What makes his achievement all the more creditable is that he had no writing tradition to guide him in his endeavours, or to provide him with a model which could be used as a point of departure for further improvement and development.

By the turn of the century, writing in South Africa had reached new heights. This was primarily due to an increase in literary levels, which as already discussed, owed its development to missionary activity. Like in most other colonised regions, the missionaries in South Africa came with the aim of ‘enlightenment’ and ‘education’

for the natives, paying no heed to and ignoring the traditions of the area. How successful they were in their ultimate missions is not within our scope of discussion at this point of time. The significant fact is the definition that was given to literature during this period. Being a relatively new genre, virtually any kind of writing activity – fictional or factual, came in the garb of ‘literature’. So, Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of An African Farm* is as much a part of literature as are the many formal letters, essays, or even travel journals and biographies. As a matter of fact, Sidney Mendelssohn’s *South African Bibliography* (1910), a veritable anthology of Southern African writing, is dominated by travel records and memoirs, which serve as tremendous sources of information. There is very little mention of creative writing in this account. Therefore, as Ian. D.Colvin comments:

In South African bibliography, literature of the imagination... holds a minor place.<sup>8</sup>

Travel literature was born out of a desire to learn, to explore, to conquer new arenas. Tim Couzens has undertaken a detailed discussion of these literatures in his article ‘Widening Horizons of African literature’, where he divides this ‘sub-genre’ into two types – local travel and overseas travel.<sup>9</sup> The writings are of great variety – ranging from those of an educated black African on his travels, who is surrounded by “anomalies” such as the white man less educated than himself, or visits by a black to the South African International Exhibition to even descriptive accounts of the Kimberley diamond mines, which have become invaluable today. These travel doctrines were also influenced to a great deal by the theological thrust in the education that people, especially blacks were receiving. One of the most important books prescribed to them was the Christian allegory,

*Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan as well as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Bible. Bunyan had a pervasive influence on these newly educated people, with the title of his work providing an inspiration for the modern black (marching along the path of progress towards an ultimate release from his burden). For example, Thomas Majolo's *Moetioa Bochabela* (The East-bound Traveller) is a well-crafted literary expression of travel literature and Christian allegory, where the hero Fekisi sets out on a solitary journey towards Ntsoanatsatsi hill, being fed up with the immorality of his fellow travelers. It covers a wide range of places and incidents, until Fekisi finally reaches his destination on Christmas Day, (a significant fact in itself), a place where everyone is united in heart and mind.

These works have initiated the formation of a literary tradition in South Africa, which has since continued to grow and develop in the twentieth century, with writings in English becoming the major focus of attention.

#### **OLIVE SCHREINER, STEPHEN BLACK, SOLT.PLAATJE**

In the genre of English writings from South Africa, Olive Schreiner, Stephen Black and Sol. T. Plaatje occupy central positions. Each of these writers, in their own way, has been the harbinger of new literary traditions. Schreiner's *The Story of An African Farm* is not only credited as being the first creative literary work in English by a South African; it also stands at a critical position in the context of women's writings and feminist criticism. Stephen Black is the first dramatist of any note in South Africa, whose play *Love and the Hyphen* has the record of being the longest – running play in the country. And Sol.T. Plaatje's *Mhudi* and his social tract *Native Life in South Africa*, draws upon the oral tradition as well as Christian allegory, and is unique for its presentation of the coloniser –



colonised encounters and its scathing attack on racial segregation and the Natives Land Act of 1913.

Olive Schreiner's name has today become synonymous with an embattled, visionary feminism. Considering the period and the milieu within which she was writing, this is no mean compliment. Born in 1855 of a German father and English mother, both missionaries, Schreiner spent her childhood in the Cape Colony of South Africa, searching all the while for her identity. She reacted against her parents' intense religious practices, all the more provoked by the intellectual debates within which she had begun to get involved from her mid-teenage years. She was a rebel; this was the first manifestation of her rebellion. She constantly sought an escape from the philosophical and the social prisons around her, and this is reflected in her heroines like Undine (*Undine*, published posthumously in 1929) and Lyndall and Waldo (*The Story of An African Farm*). Schreiner aimed to work out a just and rational basis for human existence, education as well as various complexities involved in the relationship between the sexes. She was strongly critical of the conventional Victorian forms of arranged marriage, which she saw simply as "the exchange of sexual services for economic support."<sup>10</sup> Writing provided her with this outlet, by means of which she could put across her thoughts and feelings, through the mouthpieces of her characters.

All of Schreiner's novels have a strong focus on childhood experiences – its sufferings and pleasures as well as children's curiosity to make some sense of the world around them. She seems to be a strong believer in Wordsworth's doctrine that "the child is the father of the man"<sup>11</sup> as seen in her epigraph to *The Story of An African Farm*. The last sentence of this epigraph, taken from French writer Alexis de Tocqueville reads:

The entire man is, so to speak, to be found in the cradle of the child.<sup>12</sup>


The children, growing up during the course of the novel find adults constantly opposing their actions in their desires to live out their dreams through their children and then confronted with a world filled with loss, conflict and disillusionment. Women especially, have little formal education, and are sent to “finishing schools”, where as in the words of Lyndall, the heroine of *The Story of An African Farm*, they “finish everything but imbecility and weakness, and that they cultivate.”<sup>13</sup>

The novel is a complex, symbolic work, where the major characters all possess striking, unusual imaginations and intellects. There is a paradigm in the characterisations, where at one level we see the surreal, philosophical imaginings of Lyndall and Waldo, while at another, we have the comic foibles and intrigues of the likes of Tant’ Sannie and Bonaparte Blenkins. Schreiner’s ability to delve into the psychological depths of her characters, their inner musings and her eloquent descriptions of the landscape may be said to stem from Thomas Hardy’s concept of the Immanent Will (such as Egdon Heath in *Return of the Native*) and acts as a pre-cursor to many twentieth century novelists who have taken this theme to greater heights. Africa is here presented in a new light, especially to European readers, who had hitherto only conceptualised it as an exotic cultural rhetoric; yet who expected to see reduplications of their homelands in such ‘new’, colonised societies.

The character of Lyndall is perhaps the most emblematic of Schreiner’s conceptions of womanhood. Here is a woman who is totally independent, unwilling to conform to societal stereotypes; who possesses indomitable courage and energy, and who has the courage to conceive a child with her lover outside marriage.

Unfortunately though, this effort ends in tragedy, with Lyndall's death at childbirth. Waldo is Lyndall's alter ego, almost totally dependent on, and consequently shattered, by her early death. After her death there is no option for him but to gradually waste away and die. Gregory, the father of Lyndall's child is presented as an effeminate English colonial. His androgyny is notable, both in attitude and dress (he attends to Lyndall in her last moments dressed as a woman). This character is significant, as through him Schreiner argues for a liberation of individual temperaments and desires from the constraints of societal mores.

*The Story of an African Farm* is therefore unique in many ways. It not only initiated a white South African (for that matter, any South African) literature in English, it also allowed South Africans to believe that there was something to cherish in their physical environment. However, there is an underlying irony implicit in the novel. Schreiner continually speaks of liberalism and liberal ideals, yet there is not a major black character in the novel. All the blacks are shown as peripheral characters, part of the local fauna, and nothing more. This depicts the condescending attitudes ingrained in the 'white' mind. True liberalism cannot be possible unless there is a clear movement towards a common, equal society for all, especially in South Africa. The other major questions which strike us are a) the circumstances of Lyndall's death in the novel and b) the circumstances of the novel's publication. Lyndall has continually been presented as the fiercely independent rebel, yet she dies in childbirth. Perhaps Schreiner was not totally comfortable with the idea of illegitimate children and the stigma associated with it, a fallback from her childhood days, when her mind was conditioned by her parents' beliefs. Similarly perhaps, she was also unsure as to her limits on ideas of feminism. What fortifies this standpoint is that *The*



*Story of an African Farm* was first published under a male pseudonym – Ralph Iron, in England, at the height of the Victorian period, when the novel peaked as a genre, and a number of prolific women writers had already emerged. Olive Schreiner was not breaking any new ground in this respect, so what was it that led her to take such a step? This is a matter that requires further research, but whatever the outcome, Schreiner's importance in South African literature, both from the historical point of view as well as a starting point for feminist literary criticism cannot be denied.

Drama as a literary genre in South Africa is still relatively undeveloped, as is the research into theatre history in the country, resulting in the field virtually sinking into the “abyss of forgetfulness.”<sup>14</sup> Any basic research into drama in South Africa will undoubtedly however throw up one name – Stephen Black. Between 1908 and 1929, Black produced and directed more than a dozen scripts for South African theatre, in between writing three novels, editing ‘alternative scandal – sheets’ and freelancing as an article-writer. For over two decades, the immensely popular Black was South Africa's only actor - manager. No wonder then that he is widely acclaimed as the first South African dramatist. His two most well known scripts are *Love and the Hyphen* and *Helena's Hope, Ltd.*, both of which had more than 600 performances and had performed to an excess of 30,000 patrons by their twentieth performance. Both the scripts are topical satirical comedies, influenced by dramatists such as Sheridan and Oscar Wilde, and are continually spiced up with doings of the very moment. It is therefore almost impossible to assign a single script to them, nor is it possible to recreate the aura that was created during the performances each night through use of such miniscule details.

*Love and the Hyphen* (1908) came about as a celebration of an important event - South Africa's joining of the Union, which was formalised in 1910. *Helena's Hope, Ltd.* was launched two years later, in 1910, to "discuss further and measure the implications and promises of that same Union."<sup>15</sup> By the late 1920s however, theatre was beginning to lose out to the popularity of the movies, and with no successor to take over from him, Black's death in 1931 signalled the start of the dormancy of this genre, a hibernation from which it is yet to awake fully.

The style of Black's plays is not one of high - class drama, and do not follow the Aristotelian concepts of unity of time, place and action. Rather, a number of individual sketches are linked together in a variety of styles. The actors too were more accustomed to 'light' theatre - pantomimes, song and dance, light opera etc. Contemporary reviews of the plays of Stephen Black have shown all of them to include elements of parody, romance, spectacle, music (including interludes), physical skills, melodrama as well as topicality. The essence of the success of these plays lies in the fact that Black managed to exploit local language resources to their ultimate level, which "made his plays 'South African' in sound and texture."<sup>16</sup> In addition, like the British and European dramas, stock characters abound in Black's plays. These include the colonial, fiercely independent women, the Boer pipe-smoking patriarch and the crusading journalist - Black's own alter ego, waging a battle for freedom of the press. Unfortunately for us, there are no complete extant versions of Black's plays, drama being a relatively neglected genre and all that remains of his works today are the manuscripts and typescripts or 'prompt' copies of his various plays, most of which are incomplete.

What makes Stephen Black's play's, especially *Helena's Hope Ltd.* relevant even in present day South Africa are the racial intonations. Black's antidote to racial allegations was to make it sound funny, but that has not found many takers in the South African literary market. Overall, Stephen Black has been a highly neglected figure in South African literary history, mainly due to the step-sisterly treatment that is given to theatre, but also due to the English hegemonic set up with which he was associated. It is high time that literary history is 're-written', keeping in view the recent political and social changes in the country as also the fact that drama has once more begun to gain in popularity in South Africa. This is especially true of the younger generation of writers, the 'angry young men', who find the immediate expressive nature of drama a much more effective medium to express their feelings than the time consuming and painstaking medium of researching and writing a novel.

The third figure who has made a tremendous impact for succeeding generations of African writers is Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje, better known as Sol. T. Plaatje. Although best known to students of literature as the author of *Mhudi*, Plaatje has been of one of South Africa's most significant political figures and a crusader for his local Tswana as well as other native languages. In theme and content as well as the notion of protest evident in his works, he therefore precedes many of the succeeding generations of African writers in the 1950s and 1960s.

The full title of Plaatje's novel is *Mhudi: An Epic of South African Native Life a Hundred Years Ago*. It is clear from the title itself that Plaatje is recounting events of a past century; of the war between the Matabele and Barolong in the times of Mzilikazi. A constant criticism against Plaatje however has been that "he is unable to span the gap and live in the period about which he is writing."<sup>17</sup>

The novel deals with the story of two Bechuana natives, Ra-Thaga and his wife Mhudi who survive through a number of raids – by warring Zulu tribes and mistreatment by the Boers whom they had once aided. The message is once again of the white man attacking the peaceful black citizen, and this is perhaps the first real pre-cursor to the ‘protest’ literature in South Africa that was to gain popularity in the 1950’s and 1960’s. The language of *Mhudi* is quite significant in this respect. Although writing in English, Plaatje does not just use cliched English terms, he also uses a lot of typically South African imagery and proverbs, which are not isolated, but are rather an “aspect of artistic expression within a social and literary context.”<sup>18</sup> We particularly notice an increase in the number of proverbs being used during the crucial debate amongst the Barolong as to whether they should help the Boers. This takes an added significance as it demonstrates that however much English may have been Plaatje’s chosen medium of communication, while discussing matters of national importance he still relapses into local language. One interesting proverb is as follows:

...a man has two legs so as to enable him to walk properly...For the same reason he has two eyes in order to see better. A man has two ears so as to hear both sides of a dispute. A man who joins in a discussion with the acts of one side only, will often find himself in the wrong. In every grade of life there are two sides to every matter.<sup>19</sup>

This true and excellently expressed proverb demonstrates Plaatje’s ability at its highest level. He attempts to practice this too; the technique used in the novel is one of shifting perspective, where the viewpoints of both sides are given equal importance.

*Mhudi* is also historically important, in that South African history had largely thus far been a one-sided account, written by the whites and from their perspective, thus displaying a historical bias in

terms of interpretation. They had also clearly been ethnocentric. Plaatje became one of the first writers to project the 'other' point of view of the disadvantaged lot. Indeed, the blacks dominate the novel, the whites appear only one third of the way through the book and are presented in a somewhat negative light – as the harbingers of tension and conflict into the midst of a relatively peace loving tribe. It is because of this that such a clear contrast is presented between the war - like Matabele (whites) and the peaceful Barolongs (blacks). The Boers are described as 'foolish' and 'incompetent'; in effect, there is only one of them dealt with sympathetically, the illiterate simpleton Phil Jay, whom Mhudi, the heroine considers as the only humane person amongst a tribe of wild men. Furthermore, through this novel, Plaatje also aims at a successful defence of traditional African customs – religion, socialism, marriage – which is posited as a contrast to the Christianity of the Boers. It is also significant that the setting of the novel is in a transitory period – when these respected well - knit values are coming under continual threat from Christianity, and are about to disappear or change for ever.

Plaatje, like Schreiner before him, also demonstrates an awareness of women emancipation. Mhudi, the heroine is able to carve out an independent lifestyle for herself from the wilderness into which she is thrown – she therefore becomes symbolic of the pride and spirit of her race – the Barolong tribe. The other women in the novel – Umnandi, wife of Mzlikazi (a child-slayer, yet childless) and Annetje, the Boer girl, also have their own identities. The friendship of these three strong female characters and their roles in the novel demonstrates Plaatje's keen awareness of freedom for the black woman, and conveys an early message that black South African women would not meekly subscribe to the hegemonic demands of the white colonisers. Despite the various criticisms levelled against it,



*Mhudi* therefore remains an important landmark in South African literature. Not only does it provide us with a balanced viewpoint of history, far removed from the one-sided, biased accounts that had so far been in circulation, it also carries on the tradition set by Schreiner and provides us with strong independent, determined female characters. In one respect, Plaatje goes beyond Schreiner, and that is in his portrayal of strong, memorable black characters, an aspect ignored in Schreiner, for whom the blacks had not been much more than a part of the local landscape. *Mhudi* is also significant in another aspect. It is a valuable social document of its time, the period immediately following the Native Lands Act, and acts as a critique of the consequences of this Act. The Act is attacked more directly in Plaatje's sociological treatise and best known work *Native Life in South Africa*. The concerns of both books – the problems of land and labour are common, and one also finds a recurring theme of the loss of one's loved land to the hands of the whites.

*Native Life in South Africa*, a response to the Native Lands Act of 1913, is a moving account and one of the "most eloquent African political statements ever to be written."<sup>20</sup> This Act was probably the most important piece of legislation that affected the lives of black people in South Africa, creating overnight a "floating landless proletariat"<sup>21</sup> who could be oppressed and manipulated at will. This therefore, ensured that the whites would ultimately control land ownership, and set the foundations for the later day policies of apartheid.

Plaatje's book however is not just useful for the critique it provides of this Act. Well researched, it also provides us with a full portrait of the times as well as a period of history from nearly five hundred years ago to the change and transition of the present. It also explores the political and historical contexts leading up to the Act

and documents the gradual steps taken by the White South African government to exclude blacks from the political and social sphere of the country. In other words, the policy of segregation of people on the basis of their colour began to take shape with this Act.

The Natives Land Act was so devastating that it evoked for the first time “organised black protests of an intellectual kind”<sup>22</sup> and gave impetus to the South African Native National Congress (later the African National Congress) of which Plaatje himself was the secretary. When all the appeals to the South African Government to suspend the Act failed, Plaatje took himself to the higher board, England. And as Bessie Head points out in her Foreword to this book, Plaatje is “passionately pro-British.”<sup>23</sup>

.... In 1910, much against our will, the British Government surrendered its immediate sovereignty over our land to colonials and cosmopolitan aliens who know little about Home, because their dictionaries contain no such loving term...<sup>24</sup>

There is a clear distinction between the whites in South Africa and the Britishers. At the same time, Plaatje prophesies the second kind of oppression that the blacks will have to suffer at the hands of the African Boer. What remains significant in his book is his presentation of blacks, not as inhuman, but as people deserving justice, humanity and dignity like anybody else. To achieve this, however, they have to be given representation in Parliament and the right to vote. This is an insistent theme of this book – it is understandably difficult for black people to accept legislation of a parliament which has no representation and bears no responsibility to the black man.

*Native Life in South Africa* remains an epoch-making social tract, written by a man who assumed the responsibility of

representing the silent, oppressed black natives of his country. Unfortunately however, the Natives Land Act was followed by even more segregationist policies, all of which ultimately contributed to the despicable policy that was apartheid. It is effectively the first real protest against this regime, which later took on much larger proportions. It therefore remains a classic statement and account of the early stages of this titanic struggle.

The works of Olive Schreiner, Stephen Black and Sol. T. Plaatje all point towards a new direction in South African literature – from strong female portrayals to the gradual importance given to black protagonists, especially women. Their pioneering work was carried forward in the succeeding decades by the later generation of black authors, for whom ‘black consciousness’ took on an added dimension, and ‘protest’ literature reached its peak, especially in the backdrop of apartheid, which became an official, legal and inescapable part of South African society.

#### **APARTHEID AND BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS: PROTEST AND COMMITMENT**

Looking at the growth and development of South African literature since World War II in the pan-African context, we cannot but help notice that there is one thread that binds these works together, and that is a documentation of the struggle between the colonisers and the colonised, between modernism and tradition. As we have seen, most previous writings were travel accounts, and theological doctrines. Writers like Schreiner, Plaatje and Black proved to be the trendsetters of a new kind of writing, when writing becomes a medium of educating African readers and imploring them to perceive their own experiences and react to them. It is also a mirror of South African society that is held up in front of the rest of the world depicting the real situation, not the highly over-glossed one-sided accounts which the colonisers propagated. As Per

Wastberg has stated, taking the line of the seminal Nigerian author, Chinua Achebe:

It is the artists' responsibility to reshape a distorted history and portray a misjudged society honestly, without idealising it.<sup>25</sup>

Achebe himself has been successful in this mission. He does not only tackle themes of Western economic suppression, but also posits the conflicts that become apparent within African society itself – the traditionalism of the past against the greedy, self-centred individualism of the present. The writer in Africa, furthermore, has tried to be part of the nation-building effort, especially in the post-independence period. To do this, they have been brutally honest and have not hesitated to criticise what they feel to be wrong in their societies, even if they personally have suffered as a result. For instance, Ayi Kweh Armah's novel *The Beautiful Ones are not Yet Born* presents Ghanaian society as distinctly 'unbeautiful' – where fifth, stench and corruption are the hallmarks of the day. Armah is just one of many African writers, like Ngugi wa thiong'o, Nuruddin Farah and Ama Ata Aidoo, who have been forced to go into exile as a 'punishment' for the kind of 'negative' influence they were said to be having upon society.

The situation in contemporary South Africa is in many ways similar as well as different from the rest of Africa - similar, as on a broad scale, the problems that the South African writers deal with (and the 'punishment' they receive) are not much different from the rest of the continent. If anything, the black writer in South Africa feels an added responsibility towards his/her society. This is due to the one major fact that has set South Africa apart, not only from the rest of Africa, but also the rest of the world – the policy of *apartheid*. For years, South Africans have lived in one of the most oppressive

and racist regimes of the world, one that can only perhaps be compared with Hitler's Nazi regime. Apartheid, although officially in force since 1948, had already been present in various forms since South Africa became a Union in 1910. It stemmed the flow of creative output and put the country into 'unparalleled turmoil'. People living within the system were faced with massive psychological and emotional pressures. There was a clear division between oppressor and oppressed, whites and blacks, haves and have-nots and the framework of society was such that for years, one could not even conceive of multi-racial life in the country.

The term 'apartheid' is of Dutch or Afrikaans origin and means "apartness, segregation or separate development as the law of the land."<sup>26</sup> Its formal entry into South African social and political life was in 1948, when D.F. Malan's openly racist Nationalist Party came to power. The entire concept of apartheid is thus a construction of the whites – another method by which the false theory of their superiority is propagated, through hatred or intolerance of the non-white races. As Hari Sharan Chhabra writes in his book:

Apartheid in practice is the long term objective of the territorial separation of the white minority and the non-white majority, but its basic tenet has been **the complete domination of the state and society by the privileged white population.**<sup>27</sup>(my emphasis)

So, just how did the Nationalist government practice this twin policy of segregation and discrimination? A set of laws were codified which perpetuated the existing racial segregation and white domination, and also extended the system of regulating and controlling migrant labour, in force since the Natives Land Act. Furthermore, it was argued that not only should whites and blacks be separated, the various ethnic and tribal groups within the black

community should be kept apart from each other, thus leading to the creation of ten homelands for the various tribal groups.

The policy of apartheid therefore aimed at minimising contact between whites and non-whites. One of the first legislations to be passed in this regard was The Mixed Marriage Act of 1949, which forbade any kind of emotional and sexual ties to take place between whites and non-whites. Similarly, the Immorality Act of 1957 went one step further and not only made inter-racial sex a crime, but even made it illegal to entice others to engage in such activities. The main purpose behind these legislations was the Government's belief that if the sex barrier collapsed, apartheid would not survive. Legislation was also passed which secured separate living areas in cities for whites, Africans and coloureds; this last community was again further sub-divided into Indian, Malay, Chinese etc. People belonging to one group were forbidden from even entering areas demarcated for another, and this contributed to increasing levels of unemployment. Moreover, restrictions were put on the employability of blacks, and in cases where they did find employment, there was severe discrimination in wages. Certificates of competence required for mining jobs were distributed only to whites and coloureds, the Bantu Building Works Act, 1951 prohibited Africans from doing skilled building work in white areas. Naturally therefore, more than anything else, apartheid was an economic viability for the whites, an option that allowed the bulk of resources and wealth to be concentrated in the hands of the few and increased discrimination between haves and have-nots. As Martin Legassick has remarked:

Apartheid or its segregationist precursors...is not merely a theory or practice concerned with racial and cultural identity and division, but **the means of sustaining profits, domination and survival of the capitalist class and its system** [my emphasis]<sup>28</sup>

For the blacks and other people who were living within the system, apartheid aggravated the already present and oppressive policies of segregation and put the country into 'unparalleled turmoil'. However, it was not as though these people kept quiet against such discrimination, the only aim of which was to propagate 'baaskap'(keep the white man boss). The South African Native National Congress had, as discussed previously organised protest even from the time of the Native Lands Act. In 1950, by which time it had changed its name to the African National Congress (ANC), a historic beginning to the resistance movement was made under the leadership of Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo and Walter Sisulu, through a general strike. By 1952, black activists began to breach some of the minor regulations of apartheid. For instance, they deliberately sat on park benches marked for Europeans and meekly accepted the punishment given to them in return. Gradually, this movement organised itself into a larger, more militant struggle. Following the Sharpsville massacre of 1960, these militants of both the ANC and Sobukwe's Pan-African party went on the rampage and carried out a number of sabotage attacks. The Government retaliated by beginning a police crackdown on the militants, by passing the Sabotage Act, 1962 – in which anybody suspected of subversive activities was placed under house arrest and by banning black political activists. Mandela, by then one of ANC's best-known leaders went underground and was arrested in 1963. His crusaders against this oppressive regime led to his trial and ultimate sentencing to life imprisonment. Mandela languished in jail for twenty-seven years, even there he remained totally committed to his cause. This is highlighted by the major role he has played since his release in 1990 in getting South Africa back on the road to democracy. He says:

I was made by the law a criminal not because of what I had done but of what I thought, because of my conscience....<sup>29</sup>

Mandela's words aptly sum up the situation in apartheid – ridden South Africa, where 'criminals' are created out of idealism, where the minority whites resort to any levels of degradation of humanity simply to keep alive their own interests of hegemony and power.

In literature and creative writing too, the notion of protest against such oppression has been clearly evident. Writers in South Africa have literally wielded their pens as soldiers wield swords. In many cases, they have held a pen in one hand and a sword in the other. Their writings scream out their dissatisfaction at the situation in the country. Many writers have succeeded in stoking the fires of protest in the hearts of people, and have inspired them to join in the freedom movement. Perhaps more than any other country in the world therefore, we see in South Africa a direct link between politics and literature and between literature and society. Ngugi wa thiongo's words could not have been truer in the South African context:

Every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics.<sup>30</sup>

South African writers have always considered it their task and a mark of their commitment to society to protest against the various differences causing conflict. The protest comes from the voices and pens of black writers, naturally – both male and female, but also, somewhat surprisingly, from white female writers, whose ambiguous position in the societal hierarchy allows them to take a somewhat more sympathetic standpoint to the cause of the oppressed in society. Why ambiguous? Because the white woman has probably the least defined identity in the context of South African society. As a white,



she is expectedly 'superior' to the blacks, yet at the same time, being a woman, her position is naturally taken as 'inferior' to the white male. This idea will be dealt with in more detail later on in this chapter.

What have been the dominant tones and themes of South African writings? Our focus is mainly on the black writings that came out the height of the apartheid regime – in the period between late 1950s - 1970's .Not surprisingly, most of these works are 'protests' against the various social absurdities and the brazenly open oppression. 'Protest' writing generated from the disillusionment that followed in South Africa after the banning of various major political organisations. Literature gradually moved away from simple, entertaining everyday stories towards a revelation of "the spectacular ugliness of the South African situation in all its forms: the brutality of the Boer... the phenomenal hypocrisy of the English speaking liberal, the disillusionment of educated Africans, the poverty of African life, crime...."<sup>31</sup> The works of writers like Dennis Brutus, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Alex la Guma, Can Themba, Bessie Head and Nadine Gordimer all deal with aspects of these themes, and fortify the links between politics and literature in South Africa. As Dennis Brutus puts it:

... to write at all once you are banned from writing- and it doesn't matter whether you write well or badly- constitutes a form of protest against apartheid in South Africa.<sup>32</sup>

And who is the audience for this literature? The answer to this question is problematic and two-fold. At one level, we can quote Ndebele who says:

...the literature was premised on its supposed appeal to the conscience of the white oppression: if the oppressor sees himself as evil, he will be revolted... and will try to change.<sup>33</sup>

Objectively, the audience targetted quite naturally therefore does seem to be the white, English-speaking individual, yet at the same time, this audience was naturally not very keen to accept this literature. Schooled under the Euro-centric literary tradition, which had always taught them to be aware of their own 'superior' status'; it was an insult for them to even think that they were being taught by the blacks! At another level however, it can be said that the effective audience for this 'protest' literature is the educated black South African, and this literature acts as a clarion-call for him/her to come and participate in the ongoing struggle, and at this level it has been successful.

Naturally, literature by itself is not enough as a mode of protest. Right from the 1950s, writers like Chinua Achebe have advocated that in order to truly fight and be victorious against the white man, one needs to use the very weapons of the colonisers themselves – the powers of articulation, of sophisticated language usage and its manipulation to control and subjugate. An excellent documentation of this is provided through the tortoise allegory in *Things Fall Apart*, where the tortoise is the missionary/coloniser, the other birds the natives/colonised, and the parrot the epitome of how the colonisers can be taught a lesson.<sup>34</sup> All throughout, the tortoise has used language to subjugate the birds, yet by the end the parrot alters a message to be given to the tortoise from his wife. As a result of which, he falls into a bed of machetes, spears and guns, his shell is broken, and needs to be glued back on. The tortoise has effectively been taught a lesson, and the oppressed birds have gained a victory by practicing the same kind of trickery that had so far been practiced on them. Therefore, as Barbara Harlow has stated:

.... the language skills of rhetoric together with armed struggle are essential to an oppressed people's resistance to domination and oppression and to an organised liberation movement.<sup>35</sup>

South African authors have in recent times adopted this very method. Along with the power wielded through their writings, they have also taken to the streets, organizing and participating in marches and agitations and even going to prison. As responsible, committed writers and citizens, and inspired by people like Mandela, they adopted these policies thereby becoming idols and inspiration for the ordinary people of the country. The writer has therefore merged with the common man, he no longer remains a simple spectator to happenings, objectively recording his viewpoints.

Unfortunately however, for one writer who has succeeded in defying the odds of society, there are many more, who have either given up writing altogether, or who have gone into self-exile and moved to other countries, from where they can make their voices heard more freely, especially to international audiences. The number of famous names who have gone into exile in South Africa are staggering – Dennis Brutus, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Alex La Guma, Lewis Nkosi, Bessie Head etc. For many, like Brutus and Head, their reasons for going into self-exile came from a desire to carve out their own identity. Being 'coloureds', they are a minority within themselves, alienated and marginalised even within South African society. Most of them however, continued to keep South Africa as the setting/locale of their novels; at the same time, being exiled gave them the legal liberty to be as radically critical of the white apartheid regime as they wished to be. Within South Africa, the situation of the black writer has been further handicapped by the legal procedures. The white government, correctly perceiving a threat from the native population for its apartheid policy actually framed rules such as

Suppression of Communism Law of 1955 and the Publications Act of 1963, which crippled the writer before he/she even got started. Creative writing cannot reach high levels in such farcical situations, a fact succinctly and eloquently stated by Ezekiel Mphahlele:

... as long as the white man's politics continue to impose on us a ghetto existence, so long shall the culture and therefore literature of South Africa continue to shrivel up, to link lower and lower, and for so long shall we in our writing continue to reflect only a minute fraction of life.<sup>36</sup>

Censorship has been one of the most vicious crippling factors limiting the flow of creative writing in apartheid-ridden South Africa. The country was ridden with 'security police' – a diabolical, manipulative, tyrannical group of men, whose only job seemed to be the discouragement of the young writer. Any young potential writer was discouraged and threatened, until he faded away into oblivion and another young voice was throttled. Books of exiled authors were banned for no justifiable reasons - this was proved by the fact that the books were automatically unbanned if the author decided to come back to the country or once he passed away!! The entire situation is so farcical that it is funny, or it would be, if it were not so sad. Black authors naturally faced the brunt of these attacks, but white authors were not spared either. Nadine Gordimer, the award-winning white South African author has been a case in point in this respect. Her novels *Burger's Daughter* and *The Late Bourgeois World* were banned along with Andre Brink's *A Dry White Season*, for making anti-white statements. This banning however, did generate a positive effect on censorship laws- faced with one of their own breed being targetted, the censorship directorate appealed against its own committees, and this led to the dispensation of new censorship laws. "Undesirability" now had to be more clearly defined, it was not possible to ban books any more, simply on the basis on certain

isolated passages or on the whims of certain people. Post-apartheid South Africa has seen a revision of censorship laws, but one can argue that things are perhaps going overboard once again, especially in the light of the recent controversy over the removal of Gordimer's *July's People* from the school syllabi on the grounds that it was 'racist'.

South African creative writers have however defied all odds and pressures around them to continue to write and express themselves- whether from jail, slums, rich white suburbs or even when exiled from the country. From Peter Abraham's *Mine Boy*, dealing with the experiences of black men confronted with the dual experiences of industrialisation and racial discrimination and *A Wreath for Udomo*, about the rise of a young Negro student to power to Ezekiel Mphahlele's moving autobiographical account of his upbringing in the Pretoria slums in *Down Second Avenue* and Alex La Guma's writings dealing with the various experiences of black labourers, the repression of the racist mechanism – all point towards these links between politics and literature and the commitment towards the protest against apartheid.

South African literature therefore, has in a real sense been a hostage to apartheid, which has provided writers with "a subject of great power and moral urgency."<sup>37</sup> In many ways, this subject has been uni-dimensional, ignoring other sociological aspects of South African life and culture. From the 1980s however, directions in South African literature began to move beyond 'protest' at the apartheid system towards a more equal cultural milieu, where both blacks and whites would be equal, and this set the tone for the eventual abolishing of apartheid in the 1990s.<sup>38</sup> Post-apartheid South Africa is gradually building up its own literature; it is however perhaps too

early to comment and undertake research on the direction which it is taking.

#### WOMEN WRITERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

The history of women writers in South African literature can be traced back to Olive Schreiner and *The Story of an African Farm*. Between Schreiner and the emergence of Nadine Gordimer in the 1950s, the only literature of any note from the pen of women writers emerged in the form of travel journals and letters from people like Lady Anne Barnard, wife of the colonial secretary of the country, and creative literature from the likes of Pauline Smith and Sarah Gertrude Millan. Since Gordimer, a number of South African women have made their mark on the literary circuit – like Sheila Roberts, Ellen Kuzwayo and Miriam Tlali, the first black South African woman novelist. It has also produced diaspora writers like Farida Karodia, who, although now settled in Canada, continues to deal with the South African situation, in particular, the position of Indians and ‘coloureds’.

Like in other parts of Africa, women writers in South Africa have to write against the backdrop of the two most crucial and unchangeable aspects of their lives – being born an African and a woman. In addition, they also write amidst the political situation in South Africa, and like the male authors, their works too are intensely politically committed. Unfortunately though, these women writers with the exception of the likes of Nadine Gordimer have not received their due share of recognition, clearly suggesting that racial and class imbalances are also reflected in gender and that “the definition of gender overlapped with the conceptualising of other social hierarchies.”<sup>39</sup> For instance, black women constitute crucial subject matter for the white feminists, an example through which they can dole out their hegemonic wisdom, narrate the black woman’s

passivity in social situations and the role of the enlightened white European feminist in granting her 'salvation' from her troubles. Black women today continue to be presented in terms of conventional hierarchical oppositions, which traditionally applied to women. One is reminded here of Helene Cixous's idea of "patriarchal binary thought"<sup>40</sup> where oppositions such as Activity/Passivity, Sun/Moon, Culture/Nature, Head/Emotions, Intelligible/Sensitive, Logos/Pathos are all said to correspond to the most primary opposition of all-Man/Woman, and are heavily integrated into the patriarchal value system. The 'feminine' side is always seen as a negative, powerless entity in this hierarchy of oppositions. In South Africa, the opposition takes on an added dimension. In such a highly polarised society, women are not only seen as inferior to men, a two-level distinction is apparent here as well. The white woman occupies the middle rung of the hierarchical ladder-inferior to the white man, but superior to the blacks – male or female on the virtue of her skin colour. To exert their authority therefore, the white women indulge in crass exploitation, especially of the black women. What one needs to remember are two things i) that 'woman' by itself is a highly ambiguous term. Desiree Lewis has attempted to define women thus:

... 'woman in white woman becomes normative and 'woman' in 'black woman' deviant;...in 'middle class' becomes standard...white 'working class has to qualify 'woman'.' White middle class woman provides the basis for defining gender identity, establishing feminist goals...<sup>41</sup>

This kind of reasoning is not only blatantly ironic, it highlights the ridiculous nature of compartmentalisation of identity that takes place in woman. For the woman in South Africa, this kind of a distinction creates further opportunities for exploitation in a society and reveal the biases of 'double oppression' (black women) and 'triple oppression (black working class women). The second thing

that we should always keep in mind is that struggles and concerns of white and black women, while same at the macrocosmic level, differ to a large extent at the microcosmic level, i.e. what may already be taken for granted by a white woman (e.g. liberation from domesticity and entering a so-called male domain) is not so simply achieved by a black woman, and can actually lead to a further entrenchment, rather than a challenge to patriarchy. Therefore, there cannot be one ubiquitous feminist theory that will be applicable to all women uniformly worldwide – the socio-political and economic milieu has to be taken into consideration.

It is perhaps not surprising therefore that in such a situation, very few black women writers of any note have appeared in South Africa. Bessie Head, Miriam Tlali and Ellen Kuzwayo are probably the only worthwhile names in this regard, and Bessie Head, again is different, as her novels were not published in South Africa but in Botswana. The credit for becoming the first black woman to publish a novel in South Africa goes to Miriam Tlali and her novel *Muriel at Metropolitan*. This novel is autobiographical to a large extent, like the heroine Muriel, Miriam has herself worked as a book keeper at a furniture store in Johannesburg, and it is her experiences there that provide the basis for the story. Characters like Mr. Bloch, who appear in the novel do have a real life parallel. Unfortunately even though *Muriel at Metropolitan*, was first published in 1969, it was only made available to South African readers in 1975, by Longman. This version though is faulty in two aspects – not only is it heavily censored, with entire sections being expurgated, there are also a number of jarring mistakes in the novel, which perhaps diminish the impact it has created to some extent. Tlali's second work *Amandlo* has also faced the same kind of problem with the Censorship Board.



The main feature of Tlalis' works is its focus on black South African women in various situations. She realises that the position of the black woman is very different vis-a-vis the Western middle class white woman – “the real problem is not so much a question of sexism as it is the issue of power.”<sup>42</sup> It is power, or rather, the assuming of power that causes the sexist, patriarchal attitudes of men towards women. Another thing that becomes very evident in her work is anger. Like most other South African writers of the period, protest and revolt form the cornerstones of her works, and this comes not only from the men but also the women, who are equally a part of the general struggle. This anger comes through in various ways - the protest of Muriel, the resistance capability of Amandla or Mihoti, and it is directed not only at men but also towards women and the system in general.

On the other hand, Ellen Kuzwayo, unlike many other black South African writers, has translated her theory into action. Over the years, she has done her bit to educate the women of Soweto, one of the least developed areas of Johannesburg and in resisting racial discrimination and fighting against the second class status of African women living under the apartheid regime. No wonder, she is fondly known as the “mother of Soweto.” Kuzwayo has worn a number of different hats during her life – a school teacher, social worker, political activist, writer as well as a wife and mother. As a writer, her reputation rests on her autobiography *Call me Woman* (1985) and her collection of short stories, *Sit Down and Listen* (1990). Thematically, both these works attempt to educate the audience, primarily a Western audience about contemporary Africa – the urban and rural experiences that inform the politics of black South African identities, and about women's identities in particular. The oral tradition is also very apparent in both these works. Kuzwayo addresses her audience from

the first, implicating them as participants in and witnesses to her exploration of the personal and political lives of people enduring the vicissitudes of South African apartheid.<sup>43</sup> She writes both as a woman and a ‘womanist’, showing women continually negotiating between self and community and striving for autonomy within the community while subverting age-old African traditions. *Call Me Woman* has been categorised as autoethnography<sup>44</sup> more than autobiography, as it provides a presentation of African women’s contributions – individual and communal, towards the advancement of their society, especially in the South African context. These women are the unsung heroines of South Africa, they are the “true” feminists, not the stereotypical ones so vividly glorified in Western literary theory.

The title of her school story collection *Sit Down and Listen* clearly implies the oral story telling tradition mentioned above. The stories are a mixture of fiction and non-fiction, which derive their source from the immediate community and the experiences of the members. She wants her audience – both grown ups and children to take the time to ‘sit down’ – to pay attention to what she has to tell them – and ‘listen’. Special attention is paid to children, the generation she perceives to be most cut off from their roots and their past history, the collection is therefore deliberately pedagogical and didactic, and reveals the encounter between past and present, tradition and change, official history and alternative histories. The characters are presented as typically human – failing and falling continuously as they aim to chalk out a decent livelihood for themselves, and as they wrangle with the various oppositions and conflicts both within society and themselves.

All in all, Ellen Kuzwayo’s works define the personal in relational to the communal, and are only a small part in her larger person as a political and social activist. Her time in prison heightened

her resolve to tell the story of African woman. Writing is an act of protest and resistance, and Kuzwayo is not a leader in this movement, but simply “a palimpsest of the innumerable selves of South African Black Women.”<sup>45</sup>

The last major woman writer to be discussed here is a lady whose works, perhaps more than any other writer, have given imaginative and moral shape to the recent history of South Africa; a lady who has done her fair share in resisting apartheid and in attempting to change responses to apartheid. What makes this position interesting is that this lady is a white South African, born and brought up in the midst of white rule and apartheid in its hey day. She is none other than Nadine Gordimer.

From the time that she started writing, Gordimer felt certain limitations due to the vigorous social divisions that were maintained due to apartheid. Her artistic creativity, she felt could go only up to a certain level in such a milieu, thus imposing some kind of limitation on creativity. She has expressed these limitations thus:

...living in a society that has been as deeply and calculatedly compartmentalized as South Africa's has been under the colour bar, **the writer's potential has unscalable limitations.** (My emphasis)..

Gordimer occupies the ambiguous position of the white woman in South Africa. She is a ‘minority within a minority’<sup>46</sup> – a white South African woman who has openly opposed the prevailing ethos of the politically and economically powerful white South African minority.<sup>47</sup> This is clearly evident in all her writings, which are intensely personal as well as political. This of course is not unnatural; as we have repeatedly seen, the politics - literature relationship is a recurring trope in South African literature, and any novelist who aspires to reflect the quality of life in South Africa cannot escape the political. Her political commitment has undoubtedly been the biggest

strength of Gordimer's work: its major reflections come through the idea of interracial relationships. Choice of partner, like all other aspects of social life are conditioned and controlled by law. It is therefore significant that three novels of Gordimer *Occasion for Loving* (1963), *A Sport of Nature* (1987) and *My Son's Story* (1990) deal with this theme, and the sexual liaisons most often take place between white women and black men, one of the rarer types of interracial relations. The lovers undertake a courageous defiance against the oppressive codes of society, challenging it at every step. At the same time, one also notices a growing awareness of black women on the part of Gordimer. In *Occasion for Loving* and *A Sport of Nature*, the black wife/mistress is a silent on looker at the doings of her husband/lover. Yet by the time Gordimer wrote *My Son's Story*, there is a clear change in the conception of her female characters. The interracial love affair still has touches of utopia, given the socio-political context of the country, but the black wife is no longer silent. Her voice is beginning to come through from the debris of racism and sexism beneath which she has been buried for so long. Like any human being who has been crushed beneath mortar and cement, but has come out alive, the black women's voice is initially a whisper, yet it slowly gains strength, whereby by the end of the novel, she has slowly but surely developed a life of her own as a revolutionary, and to the astonishment of her totally unsuspecting son and husband, she is imprisoned for her revolutionary activities. There is also a perceptible change to the white woman's attitudes towards the black women. It is ironic that the white woman's love for the black man doesn't extend to the white women, who, likewise are victims of sexism and racism in society. Ann and Hillella, the white women of the first two novels, are relative "lightweights" "not the types to be effective in a revolutionary situation"<sup>48</sup> – as their bonding

with the black men is more due to physical lust rather than a true sympathy or political commitment to their cause. Yet, Hannah is clearly different – by the end of *My Son's Story* she has started questioning this lack of female bonding, her “lack of sisterhood.”<sup>49</sup> And Gordimer has thereby has opened up a new dimension in black and white female relations in her works.

The relationships seen above form one aspect of the debate on liberalism in South African literature, of which Gordimer has been an important proponent. Liberalism implies an attempt towards a more racially and politically tolerant and egalitarian society. In South Africa, at least as far as the whites are concerned, ideas of liberalism come from an act of espousing the cause of the blacks. In the above novels, this espousing is done, not through political activities, but at a more primate level through the human body - which thus becomes an important metaphor. Gordimer has continually questioned the various dictates of apartheid and her works have reflected the push for a multiracial society. In a well - known essay “Where Do Whites Fit in?” she discusses the place of whites in a changing South Africa. It is indeed a problematic idea, but Gordimer is clear that to fit into South African society, whites will have to “forget the old impulses and the temptation to give advice.”<sup>50</sup> If they feel white first and South African second, “it would be better not to stay in Africa.”<sup>51</sup> This idea is more fully etched out in *The Late Bourgeois World* – in the story of Max and Liz Van Den Standt. Gordimer probes this liberal bourgeois dilemma – and comes to the conclusion that “weak-willed narcissistic liberalism contribute nothing to the destabilization of a apartheid.”<sup>52</sup> Liberalism must therefore be undertaken with the view of a serious commitment and personal sacrifice and not simply as a “feel good” showing off exercise. Thematically, Gordimer’s other novels of this period, *A Guest of Honour*, *The Conservationist*, *Burger's Daughter*

and *July's People* continue to debate this liberal dilemma and position of the whites – through characters like Evelyn Bray, Mehring (the epitome of the type of person Gordimer believes should not be staying on in multi-racial South Africa), Rosa Burger and Bam and Maureen Smales – all of whom claim to be liberals, yet in their subconscious the black man is hardly ever of much more value than his identity as the native ‘Other’.

Gordimer has continued to be a prolific writer in a South Africa that has today to a large extent become that she had ideally envisaged. Apartheid is officially a thing of the past, and although polarisation still does exist to some extent, the question of where whites fit in this new society still continues to torment Gordimer. Her most recent novel, *None to Accompany Me* is set in new South Africa, before the first non racial election, and presents characters who have lived through and been used to the old order trying to carve out and develop a new world for themselves, and in the process redefining family, community and society. Her protagonist in this novel is Vera Stark, a white liberal lawyer representing black South Africans who accepts the challenge of staying on in a changed society on African terms with courage and hope and in spite of an unpredictable and uncertain future. The novel provides us with a picture of contemporary South Africa, going through a period of transition and conflict, where both blacks and whites are unsure and unaware of the future.

Gordimer's works show her to be acutely aware of the social and political situation in her country. Like most of the black writers, protest is still a dominant feature in her works, but while the black writers limit their protest to the raw deal that society has given them, Gordimer goes one step further. Taking the stand of a detached observer, she is equally critical of the policies of both sides and calls into question traditionally defined relationships between “self” and

“other”. In continually depicting interracial relationships, she questions assumptions of Euro-centric superiority. Being a white woman writer, this has not given her popularity in her society; yet she has become an internationally renowned author who has gained popularity and respect worldwide for her uncompromising and determined standpoint.

This chapter has thus attempted to trace a brief history of South African literature from the time of Ntsikana to the present day. What is clearly evident is that whatever the period of writing and whoever the writer, racial conflicts and the political scenario of the country find repeated reconstructions in the literature – whether prose, poetry or drama. More than any other country in the world, South African literature has clear affinities with the political. Literary rejuvenation in the country in the 1950s and 1960s especially from black writers can therefore be attributed to the increasing tones of protest following apartheid and demonstrates the political commitment of the authors. I would like to end this chapter with a quote from Ngugi wa 'thiongo, which lucidly and clearly brings out the complexities in the relationship between literature and politics, especially in Africa’.

... Literature cannot escape from the class power structures that shape our everyday life.. [he] has no choice...his works reject one or more aspects of the intense economic, political cultural and ideological struggles in a society. What he can choose is one or the other side in the battle- field. What he or she cannot do is to remain neutral...<sup>53</sup>

## End notes

- <sup>1</sup> Janet Hodgson. 'The Image of Ntsikana' in White and Couzens eds. *South African Literature and Culture*. p.21.
- <sup>2</sup> A.C.Jordan. *Towards an African Literature: The Emergence of Literary forms in Xhosa*. p.37
- <sup>3</sup> A.C. Jordan. *op cit.* p.39
- <sup>4</sup> Janet Hodgson. *op cit.* p.28
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.27
- <sup>6</sup> A.C.Jordan *op cit.* p.43
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.37
- <sup>8</sup> Ian Duncan Colvin. *Introduction to Africana*, cited in *History and Hiistoriography of South African Literature*.p.70
- <sup>9</sup> Tim Couzens. 'Widening Horizons of African Literature' in White and Couzens eds. *op cit.* p.69
- <sup>10</sup> C.Brian Cox ed. *African Writers*. p.746
- <sup>11</sup> William Wordsworth. *To The Skylark*.
- <sup>12</sup> Olive Schreiner. *The Story of an African Farm*.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> Stephen Gray. 'The Theatre of Stephen Black' in White and Couzens eds. *op cit.* p.101
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.102
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.104
- <sup>17</sup> Tim Couzens. 'Sol Plaatje's **Mhudi**' in Kenneth Parker ed. *The South African Novel in English*.p.57
- <sup>18</sup> Ruth Finnegan. *Oral Literature in Africa*..cited in *Ibid.*.p.59
- <sup>19</sup> Sol. T; Plaatje. *Mhudi*.p.46
- <sup>20</sup> Brian Willard. Introduction to Sol.T.Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa*. p.4
- <sup>21</sup> Bessie Head. *A Woman Alone*. p.79
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.81
- <sup>24</sup> Sol.T.Plaatje cited in Bessie Head. *Ibid.*
- <sup>25</sup> Per Wastberg. 'The Writer in Modern Africa' in Kirsten Holst Petersen ed. *Criticism and Ideology*. p.17
- <sup>26</sup> Uma Shankar Jha. 'Origin and Objective of Apartheid' in Uma Shankar Jha ed. *South Africa: Retrospect and Prospect*. p.17
- <sup>27</sup> Hari Sharan Chhabra. *New South Africa: Problems of Democratic Transition*.. p.1
- <sup>28</sup> Martin Legassick. 'South Africa in Crisis: What Route to Democracy?' cited in Miriam Tlali. 'The Dominant tone of black South African Writing' in Kirsten Holst Petersen ed. *op cit.* p.199
- <sup>29</sup> Mary Benson. *Nelson Mandela*. cited in Gurleena Mehta. *Apartheid in Fiction*.p.17
- <sup>30</sup> Ngugi wa thiong'o. *Writers in Politics*. Preface.
- <sup>31</sup> Njabulo Ndebele. *South African Literature and Culture*. p.44
- <sup>32</sup> Dennis Brutus. 'Protest against Apartheid' in Pieterse and Munro eds. *Protest and Conflict in African Literature*. p.94
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p.48
- <sup>34</sup> Chinua Achebe. *Things Fall Apart*.
- <sup>35</sup> Barbara Harlow. *Resistance Literature*. Preface. p.xv
- <sup>36</sup> Ezekiel Mphahlele. *The African Image*. p.109
- <sup>37</sup> Pauline Fletcher ed. *Black/White Writing: Essays on South African Literature*. Introduction. p.13
- <sup>38</sup> Douglas Killam et al eds. *The Companion to African Literature*. p.13
- <sup>39</sup> *Staffrider*. Vol.10, No.3. p.16
- <sup>40</sup> Helene Cixous. *Le Jeune Nee*. p.115
- <sup>41</sup> *Staffrider*. *op cit.* p.18
- <sup>42</sup> Douglas Killam et al eds. *op cit.*
- <sup>43</sup> Pushpa Naidu Parekh et al eds. *Post Colonial African Writes*. p.264
- <sup>44</sup> "Autoethnography" was a term devised by Mary Louise Pratt in **Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation** to denote life writing that seeks to revise, ironise, context and confront colonial representations of colonised people.
- <sup>45</sup> Pushpa Naidu Parekh et al eds. *op cit.*



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- <sup>46</sup> Nadine Gordimer. 'The Novel and the Nation in South Africa.' p.52 in G.D. Kellam ed. *African Writers on African Writing*.
- <sup>47</sup> Pushpa Naidu Parekh et al eds. *Post Colonial African Writers*, p.188
- <sup>48</sup> Nancy Topping Bazin. 'Sex, Politics and the Silent Black Women' in Pauline Fletcher ed. *op cit*, p.31
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>50</sup> Nadine Gordimer. *Essential Gestures*. p.36
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., p.37
- <sup>52</sup> Pushpa Naidu Parekh et al eds. *Post Colonial African Writers*. p.191
- <sup>53</sup> Ngugi wa'ithiongo. *Writers in Politics*. Preface.

# *CHAPTER THREE*

## THE NOVELS OF BESSIE HEAD: GENDER, POWER AND IDENTITY

The aim of this chapter is to examine Bessie Head's three major novels – *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), *Maru* (1970) and *A Question of Power* (1972) in the context of their portrayals of gender, power and identity. For Bessie Head, the question of identity was paramount in all her writings, and in most of her works, identity is associated with land. In this respect, we can quote Frantz Fanon, who, in his well-known work, *The Wretched of the Earth* said:

For a colonised people, the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land, the land which will bring them bread, and, above all, dignity.<sup>1</sup>

Carving out an identity for oneself naturally implies a creation of space for the individual, which in turn translates to voice and power. All these concepts are therefore clearly linked to one another. Recent studies of post-colonial histories see space as having multi socio-cultural dimensions. In patriarchal societies, and in their reflection in African writings in particular, these links are very obvious, with power having clear connotations with “male” and “masculine”. This fact is corroborated by our study of the space of women in African literature, where, whether as writers, characters or even as audience, women have clearly had second-class priority. It is only in more recent times that the slow but steady proliferation of women authors has enabled their voice to be heard. In South Africa, apartheid has naturally made the situation much worse; let alone black women, even black male authors have found it difficult to make their voice of protest heard –crippled as they have been by the intolerant political situation, tough censorship laws and the fear of having to go into exile.

For a writer like Bessie Head, these concepts of space and voice have clear affinities with identity. Her protagonists, like her, are generally ‘outsiders’, alienated from mainstream society. With few exceptions like Makhaya in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, they are all women, thus placing on them a double burden and making things more difficult. Both Margaret in *Maru* and Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* have elements of their creator in them. All of Head’s women characters are placed within traditional societal frames, their challenge lies in first establishing and then consolidating their identity in such a society. Space is naturally also linked to landscape, which “circulates as a medium of exchange ... a site of visual appropriation, a focus for the formation of identity”.<sup>2</sup> Colonial spaces have meant that areas that were simply “geographical territory” are imbued with new inputs and gradually transformed into a culturally defined landscape. As Erica Carter puts it:

It is not spaces which ground identifications but places. How then does space become place? By being named ... and by embodying the symbolic and imaginary investment of a population. **Place is space to which meaning has been ascribed**<sup>3</sup>(My emphasis).

Meaning of a space does not therefore simply mean investing it with a name, but also deals with issues of possession and representation of the landscape. All these naturally lead to various domains of ‘cultural contestation’ or an inevitable clash between two cultures; especially in the colonial context. Another notable fact is that such constructs of space and place are generally of western academicians, who inscribe the colonised territories/spaces with the distinction of the ‘Other’ and interpret them in terms of familiar Euro-centric perceptions. As suggested by Edward Said in *Orientalism*, the East is constructed by western academic circles as the ‘Other’

in a style that allows them to establish and dominate over the 'Orient'.<sup>4</sup> This applies as much to the African continent and to South Africa in particular, where interactions between race, gender and power are perhaps more clearly defined than anywhere else. "The extremities of the policies of apartheid (have) resulted in unique spatial configurations within South African society"<sup>5</sup>, which, though numerically is a 'black man's country', has been administered and controlled by the white man, who determined and allocated spaces to communities based on racial terms.

Of all the South African writers, Head is probably the one in whose works these complex interweavings of land, race, gender and their relationship with power become directly manifest. She is the only writer amongst all those exiled by apartheid to situate the bulk of her writings in her adopted locale, Botswana, which, in her own words was "one door away from South Africa."<sup>6</sup> Most of the other South African literary exiles had preferred to go to the Northern hemisphere and to "bohemian diasporas", but for Bessie Head, exile meant a state of affairs, by means of which

... cross cultural differences were offset by the significant spatial and cultural continuities which were contingent to her remaining in the South.<sup>7</sup>

In order to gain a proper understanding of Bessie Head's writings, it is necessary to have a clear picture of the background and circumstances of her life. As already stated, she was an illegitimate child born of mixed parentage – and therefore a 'coloured' who fitted in nowhere in the political mosaic of South Africa. Moreover, even within the 'coloured' community she was a rarity. Having been born of a white mother and a black father, Bessie Head was an exception to the 'normal' scenario of a black mother and a white father, which was yet another symbol of the hegemony and power exercised on the blacks by the whites. In her case in particular, this meant that she was

‘doubly ostracised’ in society. This fact became amply clear to her from a very young age, and her childhood experiences played a crucial part in the fashioning of her adult personality. From her very birth therefore, she remained the ‘archetypal outsider’ in every conceivable sense; and this alienation from mainstream society continued throughout her life. As a “first-generation child of bi-racial origin”, Bessie Head therefore had to bear the “full brunt of South Africa’s discriminatory legislation.”<sup>8</sup> At the age of thirteen, she was sent to a mission school, where she was coldly and cunningly given the true details of her life, and her insane mother by the school principal, which she poignantly describes in *A Woman Alone*:

Your mother was insane. If you’re not careful, you’ll get insane just like your mother. Your mother was a white woman. They had to lock her up as she was having a child by the stable boy who was a native<sup>9</sup>

This kind of attitude pre-empted a lifelong hatred of missionaries and Christianity as organised religions, a fact that becomes startlingly clear in the course of her writings. It also put into place the first questions of place and identity, which continued to haunt her throughout her life. She realised that “her very existence was an affront to racial laws”<sup>10</sup> and all bonds of feeling and affection within her were destroyed by apartheid. After an unsuccessful career, first as a teacher and then a journalist, Bessie Head married in 1961. Unfortunately, the marriage was not successful and in 1964, she left South Africa on an ‘exit permit’ – meaning that she could never return – and moved to Botswana where she lived for the rest of her life, but only from 1979 to her death in 1986 was she a legal citizen of Botswana.

Head’s life has contributed immensely to her fiction; through her texts she looks back at the circumstances of her own life, which makes her work unique in African literature. The ‘outsider’ motif is predominant in her works,

as are issues of religion and Christianity. Her primary focus however, is on gender issues, in particular, the roles and identities of women. She deals with “the moral and political ideals of women’s equality and female individuality”<sup>11</sup> and explores the power conflicts that function in all domains and aspects of man-woman relationships. In all her writings, we notice a continual grappling with identity, in particular by the women protagonists, who aim to carve out an independent, self-sufficient life and voice of their own, in spite of being faced with insurmountable odds.

Head’s first novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather* published in 1968 is, in her own words her “most amateur effort”<sup>12</sup> and is written against the backdrop of two crucial events – a terrible drought and an impending general election. She says of the period:

I think only a South African born black person could fully understand the situation. It meant that black people ... could form little co-operatives to resolve their distress; a co-operative of any kind in South Africa would cause a riot of hysteria among the white people-their wealth and privilege are dependent on the poverty and distress of black people.<sup>13</sup>

The escape of the young, black, Zulu political activist Makhaya into Botswana is therefore politically significant and sends out a message of “what we really ought to have”<sup>14</sup> to the people of South Africa. The novel goes on to deal with his gradual resettlement in the village of Golema Mmidi, through involvement in the agricultural co-operative headed by the idealist English missionary Gilbert Balfour and run by the locals. The main plot of the novel centres on the development of the co-operative, which ultimately succeeds, in spite of a number of obstacles in its path. These obstacles are primarily in the form of Chief Matenge, the evil brother of paramount Chief Sekoto, who sees the increasing respect earned by Balfour as a direct challenge to his power and hierarchy. Dinorego, the elder statesman of the village is a firm supporter of


this movement, which is seen as a harbinger of development to enable a creation of Bessie Head's "new worlds" - where social and racial harmony co-exist-through ex-refugee native residents, an exiled Zulu and an English missionary. All three are shown as congenially occupying the same space, while at the same time, each section is able to develop or retain its own unique identity.

In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, we also see the first inklings of many of the themes that were later to become inseparable with Bessie Head. The most crucial of these is her treatment of the usual experiences of exile; Makhaya, in this respect is a pre-cursor to Margaret and Elizabeth. He escapes from South Africa and its apartheid - ridden society, and initially himself scorns at his Zulu identity. He says:

... "I'm a Zulu". And he laughed sarcastically at the thought of calling himself a Zulu.<sup>15</sup>

and then,

"But look here, old man; I'm no tribalist. My parents are-that why they saddled me with this foolish name. Why not call me Samuel or Johnson, because I am no tribalist."<sup>16</sup>



This last sentence spoken by Makhaya is extremely significant. He comes across as a person who desperately wants to escape from the rigours of his old life – to the extent of even changing his name. The primary identities that an individual acquires are that of name and nationality, and here Makhaya rejects both in one cold sweep. The underlying emotion here is of self-destruction and disillusionment. Makhaya is at heart an idealist, a simple man; and it is in Golema Mmidi that he finds his utopia and attains 'moksha'.

The village of Golema Mmidi, representing land, is central to the whole narrative of the novel. It is made up of a motley of refugees, in all numbering



about 400. The landscape of the village is initially bare and harsh, and as Lloyd.W.Brown suggests, this nothingness is a parallel to the “destructiveness of the refugees past.”<sup>17</sup> Unlike many other villages in Botswana where “families would migrate in November to their lands on the outskirts of their villages to help with the ploughing and planting”<sup>18</sup>, to return to their homes only in January, Golema Mmidi is unique, as not only are the inhabitants all refugees rather than members of a particular tribe, they all earn their daily living from the land and through crop growing, making it the pivot of their existence and the village “one of the very few areas in the country where people were permanently settled on the land.”<sup>19</sup> Initially, these lands are drought-stricken, due to the failure of the rain clouds, and in this situation death, destruction and desolation reign supreme, making it a haven for vultures. The rain clouds, as stated by Paulina are symbolic of hope and all things good, and the title of the novel for Head, therefore also symbolises a vision of hope for the future in South Africa.

Makhaya’s world-view at the start of *When Rain Clouds Gather* is as bleak as the Botswanian landscape. As his involvement in the co-operative increases, he develops a sense of community growth, which contributes to his own individual growth. The co-operative is in direct contrast to the previously dry and bleak landscape, and betrays Bessie Head’s continual quest for a free, harmonious world. Golema Mmidi is a utopia – a place where refugees, an exile and an Englishman work in tandem, in a village whose name literally translates into “agricultural growth”. This is perhaps too much to hope for, even in a country so little affected by colonialism as Botswana, but it does show that with education, people can be receptive and adaptive to change. Gilbert Balfour’s scientific rationalism merges with the emotionalism of the locals; this union has a solid parallel in the marriage of Gilbert and Maria, a native of the village and daughter of Dinorego, the elder statesman of the

village. Their marriage is a union of not only different races but also different cultures. The co-operative thus represents a healing moral ground, a symbolic ideal utopia that reflects both the creativity and purposefulness of its members as well as setting an example of unusual racial and sexual harmony. Like the land, Makhaya too, is transformed by the end of the novel – from an alienated escapist to a man concerned for others and who participates to his utmost in community affairs. His growing involvement with Paulina, culminating in their marriage, signifies his coming a full circle. His initial contempt for his Zulu name, which means ‘one who stays home’ is modified, and takes on real meaning with his initial statelessness replaced by a full-fledged commitment to Paulina and to Golema Mmidi. He however also realises that this is the exception rather than the norm, a utopia that is far removed from other places even as near as across the border in South Africa.

However, within this utopia too, there are conflicts of power, and here they are displayed through paramount Chief Sekoto and his younger brother, Chief Matenge – the village administrator. The image of the ‘Chief’ as portrayed here and as seen in African societies per se is slightly different. In most African village societies during the colonial period, the Chief was *appointed* by the Government in power, and as a result, he naturally, in most cases acted as the Government’s spokesperson on crucial issues. The well-being of the members of his tribe often seemed to be of minimum priority, and at the same time, they used the power and authority given to them by the colonisers to further cause discrimination and propagate hierarchies in their societies. Matenge, in *When Rain Clouds Gather* is to a large degree, a prototype of this kind of power-hungry Chief, while Sekoto, on the other hand, is actually one step ahead – a self-proclaimed Chief, who has claimed the land of Golema Mmidi as his own. Matenge is an unpopular man, both in his household as well as the village, due to his “overwhelming avariciousness

and unpleasant personality.”<sup>20</sup> He aims to exert his power by directly controlling the villagers, while Sekoto wields it in a much subtler way:

not clear

He attended all the funerals of the poor in the village, even accepted responsibility to bury those who were too poor to bury themselves, and had built a school here, a reservoir there. But because he was a Chief he lived off the slave labour of the poor. His lands were ploughed free of charge.... he was washed, bathed and clothed by the poor, in return for which he handed out old clothes and maize rations.<sup>21</sup>

The poor villagers have no choice but to engage in such menial tasks, as after all, Golema Mmidi is the territory of Sekoto, who at least overtly seems to show genuine concern for their needs. Matenge on the other hand, is power-hungry and concerned only with an exercising of his authority. He prefers tradition to change – wants tribal customs and the feudal set up to continue, as that gives him greater power. He is the “African oppressor” – different in race, but perhaps no less vicious than his colonial counterpart. The only interest the colonisers had in the countries they colonised was to widen the gulf between people, while claiming to work for their benefit and emancipation. There is therefore a continual underlying strain of competitiveness between the two brothers, with one always trying to outdo the other.

Gilbert Balfour comes as a powerful third force in this hitherto two-tier political system. His utopian ideas immediately constitute a threat for both Sekoto and Matenge, who are quick to realise that Gilbert’s schemes have the potential to get the entire village on his side, thereby leading to a loss in their political clout and power. His arrival at Golema Mmidi has other implications as well. Gilbert is a white missionary and comes to the village “to assist in agricultural development and improved techniques of food production.”<sup>22</sup> This can perhaps be constructed as an attempt of the white man to establish this hegemony. Given Head’s inherent hatred of missionaries, whom she regarded

as doing more harm than good, her characterisation of Gilbert is certainly unique. He does exert authority, but unlike Sekoto or Matenge, he has earned the right to do so, by truly working for the village. That is why, it is Gilbert who emerges the winner in this three-way power race. Matenge collapses and commits suicide, and Sekoto remains in his ambivalent position.

In the two sexual relationships portrayed by Bessie Head in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, between Gilbert and Maria, and Makhaya and Paulina, only Maria is originally from Golema Mmidi. All the other three are outsiders. The characters of Paulina and Maria are posited as a contrast to each other, in that Paulina is far more vibrantly outspoken than Maria. Moreover, her leadership qualities and assertiveness - so apparent in the co-operative movement - mark her out as a sharp contrast to the “effeminate shadows of men who fear women.”<sup>23</sup> Maria, on the other hand is a more difficult character to comprehend:

There were two women in her-one was soft and meditative and the other was full of ruthless common sense, and these two uncongenial personalities clashed and contradicted with each other all the time.<sup>24</sup>

Though not afraid to speak her own mind, in the final analysis, she is not much different from the traditional, conventional women who bow down to male authority. For instance she tells Gilbert that “I won’t feel free in England”<sup>25</sup>, but when faced with his chauvinistic attitudes, she recoils immediately. Her statement however reveals another dimension of the space – land – identity concept. For Maria, the village of Golema Mmidi is home, where she has the liberty to be her own person. England represents a totally alien new world, where her blackness will make her conspicuous and thereby hamper her freedom of speech, of movement and perhaps even of existence. The oppression there may become an extension of that faced by the colonised Africans in their own lands, from which Golema Mmidi is a blissful

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exception. The relationship between Maria and Gilbert is more or less stereotypical, Gilbert's duality becoming very apparent during the novel. While on the one hand, he comes to Botswana escaping from the feudal structures prevalent in England, on the other, when faced with the first challenge to his male authority by his wife, he, as Lloyd.W.Brown states "automatically reverts to the standard notions of male prerogative."<sup>26</sup>

The relationship between Paulina and Makhaya, on the other hand, has a different dimension simply because of the fact that both characters are strong personalities and rebels against the prevailing status quo of society. Paulina, a widow, plays a decisive role in ensuring the full participation of women in the development of the co-operative. In fact, the success of Gilbert's co-operative lies not just in his ideas but more importantly perhaps, in the women of Golema Mmidi who are entrusted with the execution of these ideas and are thus equally responsible for its success. Paulina is far removed from the stereotypical notions of women that had more or less been the norm in African male-authored fiction, with few exceptions. She is not just a "mother figure", neither is she a typical "city girl". Of course, she does possess these qualities, as evident in the various aspects of the relations between herself and her son, as also in the manner in which she sets out to capture Makhaya's heart. But what sets her apart is her leadership qualities and assertiveness, and these qualities combine to project her as a "true feminist", far removed from western notions of the term. It is but natural that Makhaya and Paulina are drawn towards one another. Makhaya sees the customary notion of female submissiveness as another part of the divisive societal mores, which he is desperately seeking to escape. For him, the space accorded to women in society is equal to that of men; both sexes ought to operate on ideas of co-operation and interdependence, rather than masculine privilege and female subordination. He is therefore the novel's "feminist ideal of manhood."<sup>27</sup> The

union between Makhaya and Paulina is symbolic of an ideal where the woman has her own space and identity in society; her existence is not linked to that of her husband. However, like Gilbert, at times Makhaya too cannot escape from the old values of society – for instance, he is relieved to discover that he is a foot taller than Paulina, a subtle manifestation of male power. Through Gilbert and Makhaya, Bessie Head depicts the "new man" in a "new world" – who is able to progress with the times, but at the same time is not yet able to sever his ties totally with the old way of life. In her succeeding novels, we see this "man" developing and growing through characters like Maru, Sello and Dan. What sets Gilbert, Makhaya and all these other men apart is that they are honest enough to accept this paradox. The women are a part of the larger community as well as individuals in their own right. In this respect Bessie Head moves ahead of her times. As we have seen, traditional patriarchal societies have generally been repressive to the roles and needs of women. In *When Rain Clouds Gather* as well as *Maru*, *A Question of Power* or *The Collector of Treasures*, she makes a direct link between community support and survival. In this respect, we can conclude:

Instead of seeking a place for woman outside the community, instead of finding the woman's solution in opposition to community ... view(s) the community itself as a space in which women have an equal voice to men – not more, not less... oppression or deprivation is not gendered unless it occurs outside the community. It is political and socio-economic in origin and it operates on cross gender lines, affecting men and women equally.<sup>28</sup>

*When Rain Clouds Gather*, Head's "only truly South African work reflecting a black South African viewpoint"<sup>29</sup> therefore initiates some of the major concerns of her later fictional texts: class, race and gender tensions, alliances against abuse of power, questions of space (displacement) and identity. All these themes find greater expression in her succeeding novels.

In *Maru*, which appeared two years after the publication of *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Head concentrated more on the theme of “racialism.”<sup>30</sup> The novel was born out of a desire to write a novel on the hideousness of racial prejudice. Throughout her life, Bessie Head had faced the racial oppression that came out of being born a South African. It was a situation that prompted her to migrate to Botswana, but once there, she realised that the “language of racial hatred ... was (not) exclusively practised by white people”<sup>31</sup> and that “exploitation and evil is dependent on a lack of communication between the oppressor and the people he oppresses.”<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, in Botswana, Head realised that the language of evil and oppression are universal, it all depends on the perception and construction of the ‘Other’. For the white man, everyone else who looked ‘different’ than him was the ‘Other’, but the concept of asserting racial superiority is far more complex:

And if the white man thought that Asians were a low, filthy nation, Asians could still smile with relief—at least they were not Africans. And if the white man thought Africans were a low, filthy nation, Africans in Southern Africa could still smile—at least they were not Bushmen.<sup>33</sup>

In *Maru*, therefore, Head explores the concept of race as a cultural narrative, using a fictional form “strongly influenced by folk tale and moral fable.”<sup>34</sup> The outsider here is Margaret Cadmore, a ‘bushy’ member of the hated Masarwa tribe in Botswana, regarded in the same vein by the Botswanians as the blacks are in South Africa. The name Margaret Cadmore was derived from one of the few missionaries who had inspired Head during her childhood, a woman whom she loved “for her personality.”<sup>35</sup> The story of *Maru* is told mainly through Margaret, thus displaying Head’s greater concentration on the experience and longings of the woman. In Dilepe village, Margaret is not exempt from the racial prejudice against the Masarwa, which she has faced all her life, rather like Bessie Head. Her refusal to be called a

“coloured” – “I am not ashamed of being a Masarwa”<sup>36</sup> stirs up a storm of protest in the school where she has come to teach. Yet, during the course of the novel, she becomes a catalyst for change. With none less than both the paramount Chief Maru and Moleka, son of another Chief falling in love with her, the entire concept of racial superiority is challenged. Both these men, along with Maru’s sister Dikeledi offer Margaret their friendship and protection, but their liaison with her also has further far-reaching ramifications, where

in the end are themselves forced to revise their attitudes toward the Masarwa slaves they own, even to the point of abandoning the institution altogether.<sup>37</sup>

This represents a great leap forward for these village tribes. Previously, they could only have conceived of the Masarwa as slaves. Maru and Margaret’s marriage is a symbolic union in more ways than one – not only does it suggest a diminishing of racial hatred and oppression, it also provides hope for a better future – not only in Botswana, but also in South Africa. A marriage between a Masarwa woman and a man who otherwise would have been the paramount Chief also permanently changes the perceptions of the remaining Masarwa people. As Head writes:

A door silently opened on the small, dark, airless room in which their souls had been shut for a long time. The wind of freedom, which was blowing throughout the world for all people, turned and flowed into the room. As they breathed in the fresh clean air, their humanity awakened ...How had they fallen into this condition when, indeed, they were as human as everyone else?<sup>38</sup>

On the other hand, the Batswana are unable to accept their Chief’s volte face so naturally; thus betraying their lack of knowledge of the real standards of society. They accuse Maru of a fall in ‘standard’ in marrying a Masarwa,



but “how were they to know that many people shared Maru’s overall ideals that these was not the end of him, but a beginning?”<sup>39</sup>

However, the fact remains that Maru and Margaret cannot set up home in the village of Dilepe. They have to head for a new home, a new world a thousand miles away, and Maru has to abdicate his right to the chieftom. How then does one equate this with the concept of space, land and identity? Unlike Makhaya, who becomes and continues to remain an integral part of the village of Golema Mmidi, the same cannot be said of Margaret and Dilepe. Margaret had found her home in Dilepe village – “the most beautiful village in the world”<sup>40</sup> – where she finds friends and is no longer as lonely as she had been all her life. However, although, Margaret does rise above her primary identity of a Masarwa or a “bushy”, marriage to Maru means that she again has to carve out a new identity and beginning for herself in a new place. In a more general context however, as discussed above, her marriage gives the Masarwa tribe a sense of belonging and freedom, and makes them feel that they are more than ‘the wretched of the earth.’

Closely and intimately linked to the subject of racism is the love theme. In *Maru*, there are two love triangles – the first between Maru, Moleka and Margaret and the second between Moleka, Margaret and Dikeldi. The very fact that both Maru and Moleka fall in love with Margaret is testimony to the fact that in spite of being socially inferior, she is actually far superior to everyone in the village. This fact is continually emphasised throughout the novel – Margaret has had a better education than everyone else in the village, she is a talented artist with visionary powers, affectionate and patient with both people and animals. No wonder people are drawn to her in spite of their prejudices – Margaret however loves Moleka and not Maru, but the latter uses his power and prestige to remove Moleka from the way, by marrying him off to “the second best woman in the world”<sup>41</sup>, his sister Dikeledi. He then

proceeds to elope with Margaret to a new place. For Margaret, however, this marriage is akin to a “living death”<sup>42</sup>, where she is more or less bullied into submission by Maru’s exercising of his political power, with all the people closest to him – his best friend Moleka, his sister Dikeledi and his to be wife Margaret. This demonstrates an inherent trait of his personality, as integral as his powerful humanness and individuality and carves him out as an ambiguous personality, strong willed and individualistic, while also humane and considerable. The character of Maru, in the overall context of the novel is very crucial. He is a “magical, fairy-tale hero”<sup>43</sup>, unpredictable and strange – a man who exercises his power no doubt, when it suits him, but at the same time is able to reach beyond these notions to understand the life of people like Margaret who have been oppressed by his class of people.

The character of Margaret is clearly autobiographical. Not only is she largely influenced by the ‘other’ Margaret Cadmore in Bessie Head’s life, she also faces the same kinds of problems when she first comes to Dilepe village as a school teacher. This ‘other’ Margaret Cadmore, like the character in *Maru* was also an exiled Bushman, brought up by a missionary of the same name. This woman not only gave Margaret her name, but also an excellent education, thus setting her up for life. Bessie Head was deeply impressed and influenced by this missionary, who she loved “for her personality” – in particular, her ability to react against the prevailing norms of society. Furthermore, like Bessie’s own life, the two Margarets – mother and daughter – have the same name, but are from different races. Yet, unlike this Margaret, Head’s character in *Maru* is an artist, her drawings are a portrayal of her inner awareness and depict the social and psychological significance of the visionary and emotional power, which she possesses. She is also a fiercely independent and individualistic woman, and this comes out of having had to continually struggle for survival and identity, both in society, as well as within

herself. Her success lies in the fact that she is able to rise above her racial identity by means of her education and affectionate nature, and carve out a more wholesome identity for herself, where she becomes known for herself and her personality, rather than her racial identity.

In contrast to Margaret, Dikeledi is much less individualistic. On first learning that Margaret is a Masarwa, she offers her the easier option of calling herself 'coloured' but is astute enough to understand Margaret's refusal to do so. Like her brother Maru and also Moleka, she also displays a strong contempt for feudal, tribal practices and customs, and this enables her to become a close friend of Margaret. Dikeledi is also a 'new' woman, in the respect that she actually puts her teachers' training to use – having a job of her own gives her a degree of independence and does not bind her financially either to her brother Maru, or to Moleka, whom she later marries. The fact however remains that in *Maru*, Dikeledi continually finds herself in Margaret's shadow like Maria does with respect to Paulina in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. The former's personality is so strong that the other women cannot match up to it.

Unlike Maru's somewhat ambivalent character, Moleka, his friend and also a member of the ruling elite is remarkably strong-willed and forceful. In this respect, he is complementary to Margaret, and it is hardly surprising that they are attracted to and fall in love with each other. Their attraction is one of equals, both see traces of themselves in the other. Yet, both have to accede to the demands of Maru, whose greater power allows him to separate Moleka and Margaret, and marry her himself. Maru here comes across as a relentless power-broker, yet in the final analysis he is probably a shade better than Moleka, whose strong individualism is offset by self-centredness and egotism. Lloyd.W.Brown, in this regard states:

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... his personality is a manifestation of the exploitative power, which Head invariably locates in the male ego, and by extension, in the entrenched structures of feudal privilege, racism and tribalism...mutual attraction confirms their similarities...but the absence of any consummation underscores their differences - Margaret's self-awareness is intrinsic to the ideal womanhood...and...contrasts with Moleka's conventional notions of masculinity as possessive power.<sup>44</sup>

Moleka is a ruthless sex maniač, who has slept with all the women in the village. In his attitude towards Dikeledi too, Moleka betrays his nature of crude masculinity and exploits her sexually as he has done so many other women.

Head's third novel, *A Question of Power* is her most complex and autobiographical. Here, elements from her earlier two novels are combined with an insight into the mind of the protagonist. Elizabeth's mental breakdown is the central part of the narrative, and the novel becomes Head's most stirring indictment of power – its abuse and misuse – in various social and political domains. For her, this novel had an entirely different discourse. Unlike her earlier novels, it was not aimed at society, with a view towards helping it to correct itself, but was a “private philosophical journey to the sources of evil.”<sup>45</sup> The entire focus of the novel is on this journey, and it is here that the quest for identity becomes paramount.

*A Question of Power* covers a period of slightly more than a year in the life of the central character Elizabeth, a time when she experiences a mental breakdown and has to be committed to a mental asylum. The novel, which is set in Botswana, details Elizabeth's continual struggle to retain her sanity. Being an autobiographical novel, it is not therefore unnatural to see clear parallels between the lives of Head and Elizabeth. Both were born of mixed parentage, and were “coloured”, both had a tortured childhood, a broken marriage and a final break with the past, i.e. South Africa, with their departure for Botswana. Like Bessie, Elizabeth detests South Africa, yet realises that her

life there is pivotal to her growth and development as a human being and to her understanding of her own self. This is what she says about her life in South Africa:

She hated the country.... It was like living with permanent nervous tension, because you did not know why white people there had to go out of their way to hate you or loathe you. They were just born that way, hating people, and a black man or woman was just born to be hated.<sup>46</sup>

This nervous tension also becomes a part of Elizabeth's life in Motabeng, the village in Botswana to which she migrates. This is also similar to Bessie Head's initial experiences in Botswana, where despite a continual desire to make a home for herself, she was not initially made welcome:

I have liked Botswana very much, although I have got nothing out of loving a country that did not want me.<sup>47</sup>

Elizabeth is continually plagued by insecurity and self-doubts – about her racial origin as a “coloured”, about male power and about sex. Male power is symbolised in the novel through Sello and Dan and two contrasting images, Sello, the symbol of love and compassion and Dan, the epitome of destructive male egotism. Throughout the novel, Elizabeth is continually in conflict with these two images in her inner world, and as images they

...emphasise the manner in which her perception of men, and their of her have shaped her moral sense, her sexuality, and her individuality as a woman. More specifically, these male images represent the extent to which Elizabeth's self-awareness as a woman has internalised and must now deal with the various nuances of male symbols as the essence of power.<sup>48</sup>

Sello however, is more of a paternal figure, who maintains a hierarchical distance from her, and wants to capture her soul. Dan, on the

other hand aims at controlling her body. Together, Sello and Dan examine Elizabeth's inner hells in order to "end all hells forever."

Sello and Dan are reflective of Elizabeth's pre-occupation with power, in particular, male power. It is also, as Lloyd.W.Brown points out, a significant fact that their living counterparts are more or less strangers to Elizabeth and they are really images "of the male and sexual roles within Elizabeth's personality...(which) emphasise the manner in which Elizabeth's... perception of men and theirs of her, have shaped her moral sense, her sexuality, and her individuality as a woman."<sup>49</sup> Sello and Dan, although different in many ways, ultimately become embodiments of different aspects of male power. Dan's power is clearly sexual – he has a captivating erotic, male presence, which is able to penetrate Elizabeth's sexuality. For her, this represents a dilemma. All her life, she has enveloped and hidden her sexual needs, preferring to see sex as "dirty". To respond to Dan would betray her vulnerability to his exploitative power, while to reject him, would mean a denial of her own needs, thereby encouraging the very kind of longing that makes her susceptible to Dan's sexuality in the first place. What makes Dan even more revolting is his crude display of his sexuality, for instance his habitual gesture of "flaying his powerful penis in the air."<sup>50</sup> His assertion of superiority over Elizabeth is also significant. He taunts Elizabeth about her racial origins; as a black man, he is therefore "doubly" superior to the coloured woman, and this serves to further highlight the extreme state of alienation that the coloured people face in African society.

Sello, on the other hand represents a different kind of ambiguity. In contrast to Dan's exploitative power, he seems to represent the spiritual love, which Elizabeth so desires. Yet, in many ways, he is quite similar to Dan. His manipulative tactics are more subtle. He engineers the morality play struggle between himself and Dan in order to test Elizabeth, and after Dan's image has

been vanquished, it turns out that even Dan is a creation, and that he and Sello are actually one and the same personality.

Elizabeth's madness is the cumulative effort of these power - plays within her. Sello and Dan become extensions of her estranged husband, who while being married to her continually had extra-marital relations, not only with women, but also men. Sex therefore becomes a "dirty word" for her "everything was high sexual hysteria"<sup>51</sup> – sex is associated with sadism, child molestation, incest, homosexuality and even intercourse with animals. Having had almost no kind of satisfactory, loving sexual experience in her life, her natural sexuality is repressed and expresses itself through her nightmares, which are overtly sexual and indicative of her innermost desires. For her, sex is not just a union of bodies, but both of body and soul and that is why she cannot agree with what Tom says in the novel - "Men just sleep with women, and that's all there is to it."<sup>52</sup> The internal war between Sello and Dan therefore indicates that even here she is unlikely to find heaven and salvation.

Both Sello and Dan therefore are manifestations of power, which is here clearly associated with evil and with Satan. As she says:

Once you stared the important power maniac in the face you saw that he never saw people, humanity, compassion, tenderness. It was as though he had a total blank spot and only saw his own power, his influence, his self.... What did they gain, the power people, while they lived off other people's souls like vultures? Did they seem to themselves to be most supreme, most God-like, most wonderful, most cherished?<sup>53</sup>

In contrast, love is associated with good and God – it is spiritual, and salvation is to be sought through such beneficent relations. Love is therefore "two people feeding each other" and not "living on the soul of the other"<sup>54</sup>, it consists of little things like a girl walking with wonder in her eyes, or the wind



blowing through her hair. However, Elizabeth clearly believes that such spiritualism ought to be sought in man and not in God:

... let love enter the hearts of men ... removing the things of the soul to some impossibly unseen, mystical heaven<sup>55</sup>

Her own world is inhabited by beings, who become more real to her than the living men and women of Motabeng. Towards the end of the novel Sello and Dan become one, perhaps suggesting that they are manifestations of the forces of good and evil within Elizabeth herself.

Finally, Elizabeth is able to gain solace and peace of mind by helping in the village co-operative. As seen in Golema Mmidi, this kind of community work, she meets workers of various races and different communities, all of whom offer support to her and allow her to gain back her mental health. What has been the source of all Elizabeth's mental disintegration, is her lack of self-identity throughout her life. At the conclusion of the novel, she finally feels a sense of belonging with the land and with the community. As Bessie Head evocatively writes in the novel's closing lines

... as she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging.<sup>56</sup>

Furthermore, throughout *A Question of Power* Elizabeth has struggled with her racial identity. As a coloured, like Bessie Head, she is in racial no-man's land. As a half-European, and conditioned by South African politics, she too initially betrays a hatred for black Africans in her subconscious:

You don't really like Africans. You see his face? Its vacant and stupid- He's slow-moving ... you never really liked Africans, you only pretended to ... She sprang to her feet ... and shouted" 'Oh, you bloody bastard ... Batswana.'<sup>57</sup>

The voices within also torment and jeer at her for her alleged sense of superiority at being half-European, and not 'genuinely African'.

We don't want you here. This is my land. These are my people ...<sup>58</sup>

However, according to Charles Ponnutharai Sarvan who bases his observation on letters written to him by Bessie Head, "Elizabeth's real desire is for acceptance by Africans as an African."<sup>59</sup> In this respect, Sarvan quotes from one of Heads letters to him:

I dearly loved Robert Sobukwe and the politics he expounded in the years 1958-60... Sobukwe's view was Pan African and included all things African, with an edge of harshness ... that forced one to make an identification with being African and a sense of belonging to Africa.<sup>60</sup>

The gesture of belonging that Elizabeth displays at the end shows that she has finally made this identification with being an African and realised the ramifications of what it means. It is in reality, an identification not only with the land, but also the whole of mankind and its power, which is not exclusionist, but one which everyone can share. The 'village of sand' - Motabeng, ironically, is the place where Elizabeth finally puts down her roots and gains her identity. The demons of evil have been exorcised, now she has love to carry her into a much happier, secure future.

The female protagonists of Bessie Head's three major novels are all highly individualistic, irrespective of their personality. Elizabeth, Margaret, Paulina and Maria all realise that in order to truly fulfil their individuality, they need the presence of the male. What Bessie Head is saying is that women and men need to work together, rather than separately, if both are to succeed. We are once again reminded here of the crucial differences that clearly become apparent between the notions of western feminism and African

feminism. As has already been discussed, western feminist tradition attempts to locate and assimilate African women's writings into their rubric of a "white feminist problematic", forgetting that the cultural and political modalities of the African continent are indeed very different from the west. Consequently, African feminism is a strategy that women in Africa have had to consciously adopt for their own survival and identity in the face of race, class and sex oppression. Their necessity to be resourceful, self-reliant and even to some extent, militant, forms the core of their feminism, rather than the usual western feminist ideas of simply attacking males and the set up of patriarchal society. As seen here in the novels discussed above as well as in works of other African women, the traditional values of family are not rejected in favour of the desire to become independent. Paulina in *When Rain Clouds Gather* is an excellent example. The women realise that the world is male-dominated; and points of view are male-centred, but believe that private growth of both men and women is an essential pre requisite to social change. For the woman, the first step lies in the realising of the masculine power domains in the universe. This kind of strong, independent women characters makes Bessie Head a courageous and even though, not a typically 'feminist' writer.

## End notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth*. p.34
  - <sup>2</sup> Kate Darian Smith et al eds. *Text, Theory, Space*. Introduction. p.3
  - <sup>3</sup> Erica Carter cited in Kate Darian Smith et al eds. *Ibid.*.p.3
  - <sup>4</sup> Edward Said. *Orientalism*. p.3
  - <sup>5</sup> Kate Darian Smith .*op cit.*.
  - <sup>6</sup> Bessie Head. *A Woman Alone*.p.27
  - <sup>7</sup> Rob Nixon. 'Rural Transnationalism and Bessie Head' in Kate Darian Smith ed. *Text, Theory, Space*.p.243
  - <sup>8</sup> Bessie Head. *op cit.* Introduction. p.x
  - <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4
  - <sup>10</sup> Pushpa Naidu Parekh et al eds. *Post-Colonial African Writers*. p.207
  - <sup>11</sup> Priya Kumar. 'Bessie Head: Gender, Race and Power Politics' in Harish Narang ed. *Mightier than Machete*.p.235
  - <sup>12</sup> Bessie Head. *op cit.*.p.64
  - <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
  - <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
  - <sup>15</sup> Bessie Head. *When Rain Clouds Gather*.p.9
  - <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
  - <sup>17</sup> Lloyd.W.Brown. *Women Writers in Black Africa*.p.161
  - <sup>18</sup> Bessie Head. *op cit.*.p.22
  - <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*
  - <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.24
  - <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23
  - <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*
  - <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.101
  - <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*
  - <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.102
  - <sup>26</sup> Lloyd.W.Brown. *op cit.*.p.167
  - <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*
  - <sup>28</sup> Anjum Katyal. 'Congruent Feminisms: Women in the works of Bessie Head and Mahasweta Devi' in *African Literatures :Remembrances and Condructions*.p.101
  - <sup>29</sup> Bessie Head. *A Woman Alone*.p.68
  - <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*
  - <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.69
  - <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*
  - <sup>33</sup> Bessie Head. *Maru.*.p.11
  - <sup>34</sup> Pushpa Naidu Parekh et al eds. *op cit.* .p.210
  - <sup>35</sup> Bessie Head. *Tales of Tenderness and Power*.p.8
  - <sup>36</sup> Bessie Head. *Maru.*.p.24
  - <sup>37</sup> Lewis Nkosi. 'Southern Africa: Protest and Commitment' in *Tasks and Masks*.p.101
  - <sup>38</sup> Bessie Head. *Maru*.pp.126-127
  - <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p.123
  - <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p.31
  - <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p.124
  - <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*
  - <sup>43</sup> Craig Mackenzie and Cherry Clayton eds. Bessie Head interview. *Between the Lines*.p.23
  - <sup>44</sup> Lloyd.W.Brwn. *op cit.* .pp.172-173
  - <sup>45</sup> Bessie Head. *A Woman Alone*.p.69
  - <sup>46</sup> Bessie Head. *A Question of Power*.p.19
  - <sup>47</sup> Jean Marquard. 'Bessie Head: Exile and Community in Southern Africa' .*London Magazine*.vol.18(9-10).pp.51-52

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<sup>48</sup> Lloyd.W.Brown. *op cit.* p.177

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176

<sup>50</sup> Bessie Head. *op cit.*.p.13

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p.160

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p.161

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p.19

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p.54

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p.206

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p.51

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p.159

<sup>59</sup> C.P.Sarvan. 'Bessie Head:A Question of Power and Identity'cited in Eldred Jones ed. *op cit.*p.84

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.84-85

# *CHAPTER FOUR*

## *THE COLLECTOR OF TREASURES: DETAILED ANALYSIS*

The association between land, gender identity and power in Bessie Head's three novels, as discussed in the previous chapter, continues in various forms in her collection of short stories *The Collector of Treasures*. This chapter aims at a detailed analysis of the stories in this collection, with special emphasis on Head's construction of women characters.

Following the publication of her three novels, Bessie Head deliberately moved away from the subjectivity, introspection and fantasy associated with them to a greater emphasis on "the people and institutions of Serowe",<sup>1</sup> in particular the Bamangwato leadership from Khama the Great to Seretse Khama. *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* presents a series of oral histories, along with select quotations from Khama the Great, Tshekedi Khama and others. Part One is called "The Era of Khama the Great" which details the life of the great leader and incorporates a "lively discussion of what it was like to live through and after his reforms."<sup>2</sup> Khama was a great and inspirational leader, who in his early twenties converted to Christianity and began a modernisation programme promoting ideas of western liberalism and individualism. He also suppressed long-practiced ideas of human sacrifice, of 'bride-price' and opposed the slavery of the Masarwa tribe. His successor, Tshekedi Khama continued his dreams and set up schemes of education and self-help for the villagers of Serowe. Both Khama and Tshekei Khama are presented as leaders of considerable genius in Head's work. Khama especially has a likeness to Head herself, as a man who "fought battles of principle on all sides against both white and black"<sup>3</sup> and who had undergone a lot of loneliness and suffering in his childhood. As C.Brian Cox says:

All these characteristics have clear connections with Head's autobiographical narratives and the self-image that they construct.<sup>4</sup>

The village of Serowe proved to be therapeutic for Head, a place where she finally managed to attain the peace of mind that she had been struggling for all her life. Serowe, however, is not seen as representative of the history of Southern Africa. It was a place relatively unconquered by the colonial powers, as being a mostly desert area without a coastline, Botswana had little enticement for the colonisers. Unlike other parts of Africa, "Botswana had experienced a relatively peaceful and unshattered twentieth century, a point not lost on Head as she sought a refuge from the psychic and bureaucratic violence that had marked her life."<sup>5</sup> *Village of the Rain Wind* marks Head out, as not merely a recorder, but also a custodian of Serowe's relatively insignificant history and people. She uses the village to construct models of change and development for the future, using the story of Khama the Great and his successors. At the same time, she also looks back at the missionaries and their records of African history. Naturally, these missionary accounts of history are biased, their main audience being the people back home "who will be titillated by the sensational material."<sup>6</sup> Accounts are manipulated, truth has no value. And it is this truth that Bessie Head strives for in her oral history of Serowe, by interviewing various villagers, and tracing written records of the history and development of the region. The white colonisers had dismissed the history of the place by referring to it as 'petty, tribal wars'; for them it was more important to undertake a classification of the blacks, as 'good' or 'bad', and thereby further cement hierarchies, not only between whites and blacks, but also within blacks themselves. In both *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* and *The Collector of Treasures*, Head therefore goes back into African history to capture the essence and spirit of a changing community, and the conflicts arising out of attempts to retain some elements of tradition in the face of progress and colonialism.

*The Collector of Treasures* owes a tremendous amount to Bessie Head's recording of Serowe history. Most of the stories in the collection are



derived out of Head's research for *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*. In particular, her sources consist of the interviews she conducted with residents of the village, especially a 104-year-old man, as well as on the basis of her own experiences of living in this small rural Botswana village for so many years. Head herself has commented that these short stories “arose from that intensity of contact with people.”<sup>7</sup> Both these books display a desire to engage with various social issues – in particular, the dialectical opposition between traditional customs and myths and modernity, the effect of the increasing impacts of Christianity, the theme of journey and exile, and perhaps most importantly, the role and position of women in society. Most of the stories in *The Collection of Treasures* had previously appeared in various journals like *Ms., Encounter, Magazine for Black Women* etc. However, their arrangement in the collection is very carefully and deliberately shaped “in such a way that one trailed into the other.”<sup>8</sup> The first two stories in the collection work around a refashioning of popular cultural myths, the next eight stories “examine the institutions and forces that shape the lives of villagers in Botswana”<sup>9</sup>; for instance, the imposition of Christianity, the power and limitations of witchcraft and other traditional rituals, day to day village life and events. The final four stories place a special emphasis on women, faced with situations when they have had to take responsibility for themselves and improve their lives. All the stories are unique in their own way, and the collection is especially memorable for the manner in which Head herself manages to combine the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ – the subtleties, delicacies and nuances of the oral culture are easily and fluently transferred into the written format of the short story.

The first tale, 'The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration' serves as the prologue to the entire collection, and is thus significant. It initiates many of the themes that go on to find greater expression in the succeeding stories. Set in a period before colonialism reared its ugly head

and life changed forever, the story presents the picture of an idyllic village, where the villagers are thrown into conflict following the open love of their Chief, Sebembele for a woman, Rankwana, previously married to his late father. The previously 'common face' of the villagers splits into two, with one group supporting the chief, "even through he had shown himself to be a man with a weakness",<sup>10</sup> and the other resisting this new face as "it was too out of the way and shocking."<sup>11</sup> These two 'faces' of the villagers, previously united under the single 'face' of their Chief points ahead to the future, when colonialism and its aftereffects will lead to similar conflicts recurring in various aspects of human life, as people aim to maintain a balance between the 'old' and the 'new'.

This story also highlights the theme of 'exile' and journey, so close to Bessie Head's heart. Sebembele's migration from the village with his wife and followers not only demonstrates his strength of character in upholding his ideals, but also perhaps can lead us to conclude that his future home will be one where love and sharing will rule over hatred, evil and the corruption which is inevitably associated with power. On the other hand, the so-called 'paradise' of the villagers may actually turn out to be 'hell':

One is left with the feeling that what Sebembele and his followers leave behind will turn into a garden of evil ruled by his two corrupt brothers. Unlike the Christian myth, here the good choose to leave this "paradise", hoping to find a real paradise that can accommodate their love and human desires.<sup>12</sup>

All that Sebembele and his followers carry with them of their old life is "Talaotae" – meaning, "all right, you can go."<sup>13</sup> Their destination is as yet unknown, but wherever it is, it promises to be a better world. Sebembele's departure is a parallel to Adam and Eve's banishment from Eden but Head reworks the Biblical myth in her own way – paradise is a world

incorporating love and goodness, not therefore just the Heavenly idyll, but any place on earth where we can construct it.

This journey motif also has clear parallels with the migration of the Bamangwato tribe leaders, which Head had recounted in *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, and of course also with her own individual flight from South Africa to Botswana. In *Serowe*, Head wrote of the Bamangwato leaders that:

...in a large clan, hostilities of an intolerable nature would develop. One of the clan leaders would pack up house and home and a whole section of the people would move off with him.<sup>14</sup>

At the centre of the entire conflict, which succeeds in causing, not only ripples, but also waves in the previously unruffled "deep river" is Rankwana. In a world, where traditionally "women were of no account",<sup>15</sup> one man's love for a woman succeeds in splitting the tribe, and reinforces the age-old myth that "women have always caused a lot of trouble in this world."<sup>16</sup> It is this attitude which Head questions. There is an inherent contradiction in these age-old notions. A woman is not supposed to know her own mind and is absolutely powerless in the realm of society, yet here she is credited with having so much evil power within her that she succeeds in breaking up an entire tribe! Sebembele's decision to ultimately follow the dictates of his heart rather than that of his community portrays him as a man who is not afraid to uphold the ideals of love, and this is what forms the foundation of the Eden which he, Rankwana and their followers will construct.

The first story therefore sets out the major themes and concerns of Bessie Head, which have already become apparent in her earlier novels. These issues are naturally linked to Heads' most recurring questions of identity and space for the individual.

The theme of 'old' versus 'new' is pre-dominant in most of the stories in the collection. While the 'old' is associated with tradition, the 'new' is symbolised by colonialism and the unparalleled changes that it brings to the lives of the villagers. One of the major areas in which this dialectics becomes apparent is through religion, and the constant tug-of-war between traditional Tsetswana custom and Christianity. The contradiction becomes manifest in the second story 'Heaven is Not Closed' through the two characters, Galathebege and Ralaoke. Galathebege has embraced Christianity, and all her actions show her love for the Bible and the Christian God. On the other hand, Ralaoke is an 'unbeliever' in the Christian sense, there is no place in his heart for their God, and he prefers to believe in the traditional indigenous religion instead.

He liked to say that we as a tribe would fall into great difficulties if we forget our own customs and laws.<sup>17</sup>

Head uses the personal relationship between Galathebege and Ralaoke, and in particular, the institution of marriage to highlight this dilemma. Having embraced Christianity, Galathebege wants to marry in Church, while Ralaoke wants to marry in the traditional manner. Furthermore, the Christian missionary refuses to marry Galathebege as she is marrying an "unbeliever" and actually excommunicates her from the Church. The narrative voice, the old man Modise, brings out the contrast between the two customs, and asks an extremely pertinent question:

... had Christian custom been so intolerant of Setswana custom that it could not hear the holiness of Setswana custom? Wasn't there a place in heaven too for Setswana custom?<sup>18</sup>

The missionary projects himself "as the representative of God" and the "mark of civilisation."<sup>19</sup> How 'civilised' he actually is demonstrated by his

opinion of the blacks in his area, who for him are nothing more than a blur on the horizon. Moreover, he terrifies people with the fate of eternal damnation in hell-fire<sup>20</sup> if they do not embrace Christianity. For the simple villagers, it is a dilemma to choose between the “intimate communication in prayer with God” that Christianity offers, and the “ancient stream of holiness”<sup>21</sup> which had always been a part of their lives from time immemorial.

Ralaoke is termed an "unbeliever" by the Christian missionary to whom "heaven is closed". However, as Head's title points out 'Heaven is Not Closed'. This serves as an effective critique by Head on Christianity and other organised religions. As discussed previously, Head's upbringing had made her deeply suspicious of Christianity. As she writes in *A Woman Alone*:

.... For years and years... I harboured a terrible and blind hatred for missionaries and Christianity which they represented, and once I left the mission I never set foot in a Christian Church again.<sup>22</sup>

Head's viewpoint here is certainly not very different from the general perception of the Church in colonial South Africa, which basically functions as an institution supporting a “basically perverse social system . As Bloke Modisane writes:

By acceptance and association, the Christian Church in South Africa is white – its authority and symbols are white... The Church has become a symbol of everything that is white in a country where white is the symbol of political domination and racial superiority.<sup>23</sup>

This attitude becomes very clearly evident in 'Heaven is Not Closed', where Head advocates her preference of indigenous religions and customs as opposed to Christianity, which in the name of civilisation, actually aims at creating divisions within society and thereby propagates hierarchies.

However, although Bessie Head here critiques the missionary Christian activists, it is not that she gives an absolutely clean slate to all aspects of traditional religious customs. This is clearly evident through the character of Lebojang in 'Jacob: the Story of a Faith-Healing Priest'. Jacob and Lebojang are both prophets in the village of Makaleng, but there is a crucial difference – Lebojang uses the name of God to make profits for himself, a true businessman, while Jacob transcends the troubles in his life by a strong belief in his faith and in the 'Voice of God'. Lebojang and Jacob are clearly opposites – and stand for oppositions such as evil versus good, power versus love and sharing. The differences between them underline the fact that Head's lack of attraction for organised religion does not extend to the greater concept of faith itself. Rather, for her, the entire concept of religion lies in the community and not in the individual. As she writes:

communal goodness is the root and foundation of African religion and that the individual within this community derives all his individual needs from participating in the entire life of the community.<sup>24</sup>

Jacob's religion works on this very principle of community co-operation. No one is turned away from his doors, man or woman, rich or poor. All who come to him participate in the exchanging of gifts – in particular the most precious of them all – love. The exiled children become the first to enter Jacob's paradise and by constantly bringing him information of "someone ailing there, someone ailing here"<sup>25</sup> they become his faithful disciples. Jacob continues to live in poverty, yet, unlike Lebojang, he never actually canvasses for membership to his congregation. It is his belief and faith that ultimately makes him victorious over all the odds.

Lebojang's relationship with his congregation however is that of a pure businessman – "You paid your money and that was that."<sup>26</sup> Like him, the people who come to his Church are concerned only with the

superfluous things in life – in particular with material wealth. A clear distinction is made between the rich and the poor – the rich are provided for with various 'good things', but the poor have no alternative but to fend for themselves. Ultimately, Lebojang is revealed as a ritual murderer and is sentenced to death. However, as the narrator tells us, is it only in death that he realises his mistake. And therefore, like Lazarus in the Biblical parable, his soul rises from the dead, warning people against participating in such evil customs. It is as though the suffering he has had to endure for his sins have become too much for him to bear, and that is why his conscience looks for ways to redeem itself, if only in death. This is a comment by Head on the inherent evils of power. In his lifetime, Lebojang had resorted to all methods, including black magic to harm Jacob, but ultimately, it is he who suffers the most. Evil therefore does not do anyone good; and ultimately it is Jacob's small idyllic world, which becomes 'paradise' to the children, Johannah as well as so many others who come to his congregation.

In the conflict between old and new religion therefore, the only real winner for Head is true faith and belief. She is against Christianity and organised religion, yet at the same time, she also does not condone the various profit -making and illegal activities that take place in the name of tradition, and belief. The two customs are diametrically opposed to each other, and it is perhaps not at all possible to hope for a “compromise of tenderness”<sup>27</sup> between them.

When the 'old' world and the 'new' merge together, it leads only to chaos and destruction. This is clearly brought out in the story 'Life', a clearly allegorical tale. In this story, “the visible Head landmarks of good versus evil, Life versus Death are obscured, as the tension between the realistic and allegorical modes never resolves itself.”<sup>28</sup> Life Morapedi, the first prostitute of the village here represents the 'new' world, a city girl, returning to her native home from the false paradise of Johannesburg, a

place where material glitz and glamour hide the utter desolation beneath. The language of money is all she knows and desires. She is totally incapable of realising the actual emptiness of her life – “an inability to look inside her own soul leave Life occupying the barren reality of an existence.”<sup>29</sup> The village women are initially fascinated by this young girl, yet being very aware that “one could not be honest and rich at the same time”<sup>30</sup> they are also wary of the seemingly never-ending amount of money she always seems to have.

In making sex a purely commercial activity, which works on the economics of demand and supply, Life adds a new dimension to this aspect of human relationships, where previously sex had been regarded as a part of the necessity of everyday life, as integral to survival as food and water. It is through the activities of Life that a whole new world of commercialisation opens up to the villagers; further, it also highlights the fact that her body is considered the only effective way in which a woman can exert her power over a man.

In opposition to Life, there are the simple, rustic villagers, representative of the steady, sedate 'old' world, conservative and hardworking. In addition, there is Lesogo, who becomes symbolic of 'Death'. Lesogo emanates power and control, a man who by his words and deeds has earned the respect of all the villagers. Lesogo is attracted to Life as he sees in her “the freshness and surprise of an entirely new kind of woman”<sup>31</sup> while “she saw in him the power and maleness of the gangsters.”<sup>32</sup> Successful and dominant as they both are in their own spheres, their union is a natural disaster and the subsequent fatalistic actions almost inevitable.

The marriage of Life and Lesogo is an attempt to achieve the "tender compromise", between the old and the new. However, the resulting actions and violence that occurs further highlights the view that this is not at all possible between two worlds which are as different from each other



as chalk and cheese. The routine monotonous everyday existence that Life has to tolerate after marriage makes her yearn for her old way of life:

The boredom of the daily round was almost throttling her to death and no matter which way she looked... she found no one with whom she could communicate what had become an actual physical pain.<sup>33</sup>

Ultimately, as she attempts to break out of the shackles of this routine life, and revert to her old ways, Lesogo takes on the form of death and kills her by stabbing her with a knife. This murder further demonstrates that “when two worlds collide”, it brings nothing but death, destruction and disorder:

People clutched at their heads and began running in all directions... They were so disordered because murder, outright and violent, was a most uncommon and rare occurrence in village life.<sup>34</sup>

Even Lesogo, for all his clarity of thought and deeds, loses his cool in his murder of Life. This shows that the “quiet indifference of thinking”<sup>35</sup> that he is known for actually “lacks compassion and a vision where violence would not be seen as a solution to resolving life's complex tensions.”<sup>36</sup> Love is the anti-dote to all kinds of evil; perhaps, if Lesogo had tried to change his wife through love and compassion, rather than attempt to subdue, control and ultimately triumph over her, the ending of the story would have been happier. Lesogo and Life could have become symbolic of how love and care can construct paradise even out of seemingly impossible situations; yet their own self-centredness and desire for power causes not only their own destruction, but ensures that life in the village will also never be the same again.

'Life' shows that although villagers are fascinated by and show themselves to be adaptable to change and advancement, in case asked to chose between change and status quo, they would most probably opt for the latter. The changes and confusion that are evident in society in the

aftermath of colonialism are present in the minds of the people. At one level, they are quite receptive to new ideas, always looking “for the light”, and yet they are still not prepared to whole-heartedly endorse female emancipation and education. As the narrator of 'Snapshots of a Wedding' asserts, educating females is a bad bargain in the long run, as they end up like Life or Neo. However, the decision of Lesogo or Kegoletile to marry “women who were big money-earners”,<sup>37</sup> albeit through very different means is never questioned. As Sara Chetin points out:

The villagers never question their own contradictory attitudes to money and status, a by-product of colonial education, but channel their malaise into an overzealous attachment to traditional ways, their defensiveness exposing their own vulnerability to change.<sup>38</sup>

The education of women in Southern Africa is still therefore considered to be a privilege – at the most, educated women may get jobs as typists, bookkeepers or secretaries. Women themselves do not make their situation any easier, and it is women like Neo, who display a sense of snobbishness at being more educated than the other villagers who actually draw negative marks for the value of education. No where in her works does Bessie Head imply that women's education is not imperative. Rather, she stresses its necessity for progress, but with the clear implication that it does not simply mean literacy and degrees, but a real growth and development of the personality. This is important, for South African literature abounds with numerous characters, cutting across genres, of the educated village 'Jim', who goes to make his living in Johannesburg in hope of a better future.<sup>39</sup> Rob Nixon further attributes this trend of predominant male urban experience to the lack of space and identity for women in village life – in terms of gender inequities in literary, restricted access to leisure, as well as “a consequence of the geography of apartheid, whereby disproportionately large number of women were consigned to the impoverished bantustans.”<sup>40</sup> For Bessie Head, education is crucial if any

kind of compromise is to be achieved between the old and the new, and education of women is especially important for them to attain a space and identity in society. This education should however be put to good use as Rose does in 'Kgotla', not for selfish means. This also becomes clear in another manner in the story 'The Wind and the Boy', which brings alive the enchanting world of children, filled with laughter and joy, yet which also demonstrates once again the total incompatibility between Western ideas and African ones. Given the fact that the entire socio-cultural milieu of both these places is so drastically different, it is not possible to incorporate Western thought directly into African custom without any form of modification. The name Friedman after the 'foreign' doctor who took care of him when born is definitely both allegorical and ironic. As Sara Chetin points out, it can be translated as "Freed-man", thereby suggesting that Friedman has become a "free man" simply by hearing stories of Western progress, particularly, Robinson Crusoe.<sup>41</sup> Crusoe's world is constructed by the narrator, Sejosenyane as a paradise, where brave warriors achieve heroic deeds and become masters of technology. But, when Friedman attempts to do the same deeds in the jungle he suffers the ignominious fate of getting destroyed and killed by the ferocious vampire-fly.

The use of the story of Robinson Crusoe is significant. This well-known story of Crusoe, the British sailor marooned on an island for 27 years, and Friday, his slave and servant is one of the most widely circulated propagations of colonial hegemonic practices, especially given the fact that Crusoe is white and Friday black. It is Crusoe who is in command throughout in attempting to 'civilise' Friday by converting him to Christianity and moving him away from the practices of cannibalism. Furthermore, this story also propagates ideas of capitalism, directly linked to the concept of individualism. In Head's story, the 'roles' are in a manner, reversed, where Friedman, the symbol of the erstwhile Friday attempts to take on Crusoe's role by mastering technology and exercising his

individualism. Yet, he is totally destroyed by this move. This reiterates once again Head's commitment that in order to achieve a balance between the past and the present, to move ahead with the times yet keep ancient traditions intact the entire community should work in unison. It is this communal identity which is the life force of African custom.

Custom demanded that people care about each other... someone had to be buried... there were money loans, new born babies, sorrow, trouble, gifts.... It was the basic strength of village life.<sup>42</sup>

Individualism and capitalism are in contrast, ugly forces of power, clearly associated with evil, and have the capacity to destroy the entire fabric of community life. At the end of this story, Bessie Head signals the beginning of this new phase, far more deadly and dangerous than even the missionary activities:

In this timeless, sleepy village, the goats stood and suckled their young ones on the main road or lay down and took their afternoon naps there. The motorists either stopped for them or gave way... The driver of the truck...belonged to the new, rich, civil-servant class whose salaries had become fantastically high since independence. They had to have cars in keeping with their new status... they were in such a hurry about everything that they couldn't be bothered to take driving lessons. And thus, progress, development, and a pre-occupation with status and living - standards first announced themselves to the village.<sup>43</sup>

It can therefore be seen that the theme of old versus new with its conflicts become evident in its various manifestations in many of the stories in *The Collector of Treasures*. Parallel to this never ending conflict and Head's deep-centred scepticism on religion and organised religion runs her critique of the rituals associated with these traditional ways. 'Looking for a Rain God' and 'Witchcraft' depict two contrasting aspects of these rituals and the sheer helplessness of the villagers who seem to have no choice but to acquiesce to such evil practices. Although community life and customs are still predominant, there is a lot of confusion in people's

minds as they try and grapple with the reality of the times. In 'Looking for a Rain God' the vicious and evil practice of child sacrifice is highlighted. The sacrifice of the innocent and vulnerable girls in order to make the rains fall brings to light the desperation of families as they comprehend a summer of starvation, and the lengths they are prepared to go to ensure survival. The heat and desolation has led the family to lose their minds, and that is what provokes them into this nightmarish act of desperation.

On the other hand, in 'Witchcraft', Mma - Mabele's suffering, in many ways reminiscent of Elizabeth in *A Question of Power*, however still allows her to retain her sanity. It is this belief in her own inner powers that allows her to have faith in herself. The supposed 'faith-healers' in the village are once again portrayed as pure materialists, interested only in their own self-aggrandisement. For instance, when Lekena, the local Tswana doctor of the village hears about the baloi having suddenly taken hold of Mma - Mabele, he reacts by thinking to himself that "I have a customer."<sup>44</sup> However, the futility of making use of such 'powers' is exposed as the narrator informs us that all of Lekena's previous cases had ended up as fatal failures. Mma - Mabele, like Galathebege is a devout convert to Christianity, yet unlike her, is ostracised from the community for allegedly being a 'he-man'. In the final analysis though, her sudden illness and equally sudden recovery remain a mystery. She comes across as a very strong woman, determined to resist the self-destructive streak resulting from her exiled status in society.

Women are the medium by means of which these conflicts come to light in all the stories in *The Collector of Treasures*. The linking theme in the stories is "the status and position of women in Africa, ...being used as sexual objects...the difficulty of bringing up children in extreme poverty."<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, the last four stories, and in particular the title story focus closely on the breakdown of family life in Botswana, and womens decisions to fight back for their rights, their space in society and

most importantly, their question of identity. Head uses the familiar concept and theme of exile and combines it with the art of story telling to explore the various realms of female experience and creates a vision of society where women would be able to live with dignity and honour, rather than as an inferior form of life.

As has already been stated, the stories in *The Collector of Treasures* have been arranged according to a certain plan. Head's women characters undertake a journey of their own, at both a microcosmic as well as a macrocosmic level i.e. at one level, they undertake an invisible, internal journey within their souls, which forms the foundation stone of the particular story, while at another larger level, all the stories together form a unified whole, depicting women at various stages of their journey until the final story, which sees them coming a full circle. The growth and development within themselves as well as the changes they bring about in their society ultimately lead women to carve out their own space, allows their voice to be heard, and ultimately becomes a part of Head's moral utopia – her mythical paradise.

Rankwana and Thato, the two major women characters in the opening and closing stories in the collection are both extremely lucky. They are loved by men who truly love them and who are prepared to stand by them and uphold the ideals of love at all times. The only difference between both of them is that Rankwana becomes the centre of conflict in a village where women were of no account; a place where old men in future continue to portray her as the evil over whom they lost their place of birth, i.e. the evil behind the so-called madness of Sebembele. Yet, the idea is very implicit that the exiled, erstwhile Chief and his followers will actually find and construct their mythical paradise away from the village. On the other hand, Tholo and Thato live in the post-independence period where times and the way of life are constantly changing and evolving. Whereas in the first story, people blindly followed the dictates of the Chief, in the

present, they have the freedom to group and choose partners according to their wish. Tholo's choice of Thato as wife is based on this kind of choice. What sets her apart from many of the others is that she is “a woman who could think”, rather than “a gay and frivolous plaything with an empty head.”<sup>46</sup> Although she has undergone hardship and mistrust, an illegitimate child being the most direct manifestation of her past, she is portrayed as a strong character, who has the ability to live with various conflicts and to ‘sift and sort out all the calamities’,<sup>47</sup> of life. It is an ideal relationship –Tholo and Thato are both endearingly 'good' people, two sides of the same coin who “merge together to create one vision of how people could live”<sup>48</sup> – the ideal representatives of Head 'new world'.

In this continually changing world, however, we continually meet new characters, who in their own individual ways, contribute to the gradually evolving face of women in the community. It is significant that in spite of being treated as an inferior from of life, many women in Head's stories, do enjoy a position of respect in the community. In many cases, like Galathebege and even Mma-Mompati, their actions and deeds allows them to be placed on a high pedestal, almost 'saint-like'. Galathebege, like Thato, also knows her own mind, and is a thinking woman, but ironically, is denied the privilege to think for herself until her death. Throughout her life, she has followed what others have told her, even though it may be against her better judgement. For instance, she tells Ralaoke:

What you mean.... is that I must chose you over my life with the Church. I have a great love in my heart for you so I choose you.<sup>49</sup>

Galathebege emerges as a victim of society, where women cannot be involved in controversy and protest, resulting in her stifling of the real desires of her heart. Ralaoke too, however good a man, like Gilbert Balfour, Makhaya or Maru still has his pre-conceived notions of patriarchy and male superiority, although perhaps in his case it is not manifested so

directly. The relationship of Galathebege and Ralaoke therefore, however happy and successful and based on love, is not entirely a complementary partnership. There is still some way to go in the journey.

Johanna and Jacob in the story 'Jacob: the Story of a Faith-Healing Priest' on the other hand, have a relationship desired by God himself and therefore are one more step ahead in this continuing journey on the road to utopia. Both Jacob and Johannah are exiles, their individual journeys join together as one road in the tiny village of Makaleng, where Jacob's small hut and yard provide a vision of Head's ideal world. Johannah brings stability into his life, running his house in accordance with traditional customs and with clockwork precision, bringing back to Jacob a childhood which he had never had:

Jacob had no full knowledge of these customs as his upbringing had been that of an outcast living apart from the household.<sup>50</sup>

He finally finds a stable home and a sense of identity, and Johannah too carves out a space for herself. She is a 'real lady' in the true sense – a perfect companion to her partner, and in their constructed paradise, "children do not get lean or die"<sup>51</sup>, rather, they form the pillars from which the paradise derives its strength.

Sometimes however, women themselves are responsible for losing this political and cultural space within the community by means of their own actions. Community is primary in Bessie Head's world, the individual secondary. And just as it is the community that collectively grants one individual a special position, it is the same community which can ostracise and insult the same individual if he or she fails to uphold the dignity of the position. This is most aptly illustrated through the stories 'Life' and 'The Village Saint'.

When Life Morapedi returns to her village, after spending many years in the city, it is to find that in accordance with village custom, "she



still had a home in the village.”<sup>52</sup> The contrast between the smartly clad vivacious girl and the desolation of the yard is extremely striking, all the more so, since soon after Life settles in and establishes her trade this desolation is replaced by an entirely different scenario:

...the din and riot of a Johannesburg township was duplicated.. in the central part of the village. A transistor radio blared the day long. Men and women reeled around drunk and laughing and food and drink flowed around like milk and honey.<sup>53</sup>

The ‘cultural contestation’ which Erica Carter talks about is here replicated. The sedate, routine village life has been invaded by the city, bringing with it an entirely alien way of life:

.. they could get al the sex they needed for free in the village, but it seemed to fascinate them that they should pay for it for the fist time.<sup>54</sup>

However, like all things new, the gloss and glitter of this life soon wears off, and Life is revealed as shallow personality who has no interest in the dull monotony of everyday life, and her ultimate murder at the hands of Lesogo “had this complicated undertone of rejection”<sup>55</sup> – rejection, not only of her harmful way of life, but also of the space that the villagers had given to her.

The stories of Life and Mma -Mompoti in 'The Village Saint' are similar in that both of them actually lose their position in society. In the case of Mma - Mompoti, her entire persona is in reality a facade, an act she manages to keep up for twenty-six years. Long regarded as the village saint due to her carefully cultivated image and her actions, like attending funerals of the dead and praying for the ill, Mma - Mompoti maintains the charade of the wronged, good woman even in the divorce court, thereby getting the villagers on her side. They prefer rather to insult the husband, who walks out of the marriage, in favour of true love, instead of the status of false divinity that Mma - Mompoti has been given. Rra -Mompoti

undergoes the journey that leads him to a different kind of exile, where he can lead a peaceful life with his love, far away from the insulting curses hurled at him by the villagers for his apparently appalling deed.

What however becomes crystal clear by the end of the story is that beneath all her saintliness, Mma - Mompoti is an extremely power hungry woman, “in search of nothing except her material comfort.”<sup>56</sup> Her facade is the mask behind which she conceals her true self. Power, for Bessie Head has unquestionable associations with evil. Mma-Mompoti, in her unquenchable thirst for power “fools her community.. and exploits her own family.”<sup>57</sup> The only person who is able to see through her deception is Mary Pule, “a thin, wilting willowy, dreamy girl with a plaintive tremulous voice.”<sup>58</sup> This seemingly weak exterior however is also a façade “that concealed a tenacious will.”<sup>59</sup> Mary, equally power-hungry as her older counterpart plays her at her own game of deceit and deception. She emerges the winner on all counts – not only is Mma-Mompoti’s saint-like facade destroyed forever, Mary succeeds in taking over her mantle and placing herself as the dominating and manipulating force in Mompoti’s life. This is brought out by Mompoti’s concluding statement in the story:

I'm sorry.. I never do anything without first consulting my wife.<sup>60</sup>

Mompoti, his mother and his wife therefore all come across as characters who are satisfied at maintaining a façade, rather than undertake a journey into the depths of their own soul. The villagers too become victims of their own illusions – they see their closed small universe as a microcosm of the entire human race and are not self-critical or inward-looking. If they were, they would not be so quick to denigrate Rra Mompoti, who is revealed as the only person in the story who does not hide his true self behind a façade, nor would they repeat their mistake again with Mary Pule. As Sara Chetin writes:

The villagers, desecrating the myth of Mma-Mompatati's saintliness end up facilely erecting another myth of her unsightliness...Mary Pule's façade ... remains intact.<sup>61</sup>

Both Mma-Mompatati and Mary are, in the final analysis compared to the evil vampires, who instead of embarking on a forward journey actually regress back into the future, causing harm to none but themselves. They look for a world based on power and not on the shared ideals of love, and that is the reason why for Head, these women ultimately need to be destroyed.

The changing times also imply a changing world view for most of the villagers, especially women. Whereas previously, they were regarded as simply dogs in society, emancipation has allowed them to have a greater control over their own lives. The Botswana villagers are repeatedly portrayed as people eager to improve their lot in life. In order to achieve this, education becomes the major tool. The villagers are not averse to trying out new things, but ultimately, they decide what to accept and what to reject. Yet, one thing is clear - they are not in favour of the 'new', shallow women which education is increasingly producing. Bessie Head continually stresses, not only on female education, but also for a better standard of life for the future generation. Literate women can also go beyond the traditional occupations of farming and housework, and do teaching, nursing and clerical work. Education is also an important factor in male -female relationships. As Thato tells Tholo in 'Hunting':

uneducated women... they are just there to be misused by men.. those women work for them and support them and get no happiness out of marriage.<sup>62</sup>

Anjum Katyal notes that the asymmetrical balance seen in the sexual relations between the uneducated female and males arises out of illiteracy and leads to a loss of self-worth in the woman – “women became hard and callous within no values of tenderness and respect.”<sup>63</sup> Further, it

teaches her the hard way that issues of motherhood and marriage may not necessarily go hand in hand.

Education however also has its own pitfalls – creating women who end up as snobbish, shallow characters, looking down on others. Ideally, education should lead to a growth of personality which should then be used for educating others, and thereby allowing everyone to embark on this journey towards self-development. The contrast Head posits, between Neo and Mathata in 'Snapshots of a Wedding' and between the outcast Rose and Tsietso in 'Kgotla' demonstrates the difference between the shallow educated lady and the simple, village girl. Both Neo and Mathata are pregnant by the same man Kegolitele. Yet there is such a difference between them. Neo is a haughty, arrogant girl, utterly disliked by her relatives as well as the villagers for her manners. She regards illiterate relatives as inferior, and does not give them the respect they deserve. Although willing to keep up with the changing times, they are not impressed and awe-struck simply because of her qualifications:

'That girl has no manners!' The relatives would remark. 'What's the god of education if they have no respect for the people? Oh, she is not a person'.<sup>64</sup>

In contrast to Neo, Mathata is completely uneducated, the only work she would ever do was that of a housemaid.<sup>65</sup> Mathata knows she is no match for Neo, and therefore keeps silent. She is the epitome of the kind of person Thato talks about, she is misused by Kegolitele, and saddled with an illegitimate child, while he goes on to marry someone else.

Kegolitele himself is symbolic of the changing times and the increasing impact of capitalism and individualism. His marriage to Neo is calculated; even though he knows that he is marrying "a new kind of girl with false postures and acquired grand - madame ways."<sup>66</sup> In contrast, Mathata is "always smiling and happy... her own natural self."<sup>67</sup> Kegolitele

makes a calculated judgement in allowing his head to rule over his heart, and as the narrator comments:

...it did not pay a man these days too look to closely into his heart. They all wanted as wives, women who were big money - earners and they were so ruthless about it.<sup>68</sup>

The relationship between Mathata and Kegolitele would come close to fulfillment of Head's moral utopia; however, Neo and Kegolitele through their marriage are both only interested in their own material prospects. The villagers' internal conflict and contradiction also become apparent. They "never question their own contradictory attitudes to money and status, a by-product of colonial education"<sup>69</sup> and this is reflected in their attitudes towards educated women like Neo, which perhaps owes a great deal to their own inferiority complex. What the villagers seem to be saying is that education is good, only as long as it is limited to males. Society's utter disregard of women is so deep -rooted that no amount of education can actually overcome such traditional insecurities.

However, in 'Kgotla', there is the first direct hint of a change of attitude towards women. This story highlights the positive impacts of education, and also deals with the underlying issues of petty jealousy and polygamy. Rose, as a foreigner is treated with contempt and a lack of respect by the narrow - minded villagers, who resort to the age old tactics of spite and jealousy to poison her blind husband's mind against her. Tsietso, on the other hand is a man-hungry woman, who is not afraid to go against traditional custom and take up home with another man within three months of the death of her husband. Rose not only challenges her husband's practice of polygamy in 'Kgotla', she also displays the inherent goodness of her character by stating that she would use her education to get a job as a book-keeper and thus pay back the money owed to Tsietso bit by bit. This noble gesture takes everyone by surprise, and leads Kelapite,

the old man to comment that “the finest things often come from far-off places.”<sup>70</sup>

It is however also significant that when Rose goes back to her parents house, they refuse to let her stay there in fear that they would have to return the cattle acquired during the marriage as *bogadi*. This fact fortifies Bessie Head's view that “despite broken bondage, Batswana women are still unloved.”<sup>71</sup> As she writes:

Bogadi made a woman a silent slave and chattel in the home of her in-laws... Her parents were always anxious that she do nothing to destroy the marriage in case they lose the *bogadi* cattle offered at the time of marriage.<sup>72</sup>

The fate of women therefore seems to be tied. One of the positive effects of Christianity was the abolition of polygamy as well as the ultimate abolition of *bogadi*, but ultimately, women find themselves “as unloved outside the restrictions of custom as she was within it.”<sup>73</sup> Abolition of *bogadi*, intended to give women more dignity actually also had the “unintended result of undermining marriage and ... destroying the family as an effective unit.”<sup>74</sup> In 'Kgotla', Bessie Head provides a variation on this ancient custom; people like Rose do not keep quiet, rather they challenge the patriarchal attitudes related to these practices and come out victorious.

All the themes and issues related to women and their role and position in society come together in the title story 'The Collector of Treasures', which along with the final story 'Hunting' brings the collection to a close and completes the journey of women in their quest for a better standard of living. The protagonist of 'The Collector of Treasures' is Dikeledi Mokopi, whose murder of her husband by cutting off his genitals and subsequently stabbing him to death is a graphic portrayal of women's challenge to patriarchy. They are sick of being regarded as dogs in society and as sub-humans. Unlike many of the women in the earlier stories like Mrs. Malebege, Mathata and Galathebege, who never really challenge the set-up of society, Dikeledi refuses to be used as a door-mat by her long-

estranged husband, whose patriarchal conditioning not only allows him to flaunt his various conquests in front of his wife, but also leads him on occasions to demands vivid displays of conjugal alliance from her. She openly challenges the social order of her community, like the other women who are in prison with her for the same crime. None of these women are naturally sorry about their actions. Their manner of protest against society's treatment of them is certainly dramatic, but has larger implications and recasts the entire crime in political terms, thereby "suggesting the kind of structural and afflictive reorganisation of bonding rather than bondage of male-female relationship."<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, Harlow locates Dikeledi's actions in the historical framework, it is determined by African history and at the same time a challenge to it, a step forward that will perhaps lead to a better life for women in the long run in the post-independence era.<sup>76</sup> These men are really "the victims of their historical heritage"<sup>77</sup> who escape from the inner emptiness in them by using women as the scapegoats of their destructiveness.

In contrast to Dikeledi's unsatisfactory marital relations with her husband, Paul and Kenalepe share an ideal relationship, inhabiting a world that does not exile anybody, man or woman. Dikeledi's husband is compared to the stray dogs who all run after the same bitch; he is the man accused as being "responsible for the complete breakdown of family life"<sup>78</sup> in South Africa. Paul and Kenalepe's relationship also embodies a kind of 'sexual idealism', which complements the 'love idealism' seen in the story of Jacob, and offers us a glimpse of the glorious future if only we can transcend the miserable reality surrounding us. The real world however is full of "the other kind of man in society",<sup>79</sup> like Dikeledi's sadistic husband, who only create misery and chaos for everyone around them.

'The Collector of Treasures' is a harshly realistic story, depicting the fate of women in post-independent Africa. Their situation in life has not really improved, and it takes a good woman like Dikeledi to bury her goodness and the little treasures she has collected and take control of her own life. Paul and Kenalepe point forward to the relationship of Tholo and

Thato in 'Hunting', which becomes the epitome of Head's moral utopia. Life is rich, survival guaranteed, people can choose to live how they want to. The mythical paradise that everyone has been in quest of is found here – a place which does not exclude, but accepts; which does not blame but understands. Moreover, the chiefs are not power-hungry exploiters, but ordinary people who live and work with everyone else.<sup>80</sup> The “tender compromise”, which all people had been searching for during their journeys is here achieved. It is an idyllic world, the epitome of Head's "new worlds - where both men and women are equal. As Sara Chetin writes:

Head is no longer "reconstructing" a world based on men's memories, but is creating "what could be" through the lively voice of the female storyteller. ...Head has created new symbols, a new mythology...a paradise based on an ideal compromise between "individual" face and "the one face."<sup>81</sup>

The increasing space given to women during the course of the stories points towards the ultimate objective of reaching this idyllic destination at the end of the journey. The community must learn to incorporate and not marginalise women, as it is only when men and women work in tandem that the health can improve and empowerment of the community can take place. Oppression and evil operate across gender lines, affecting both men and women. The disquieting note which remains in the overall picture of the community is the defensiveness and vulnerability of the villagers to change; for some reason they are unable to totally reconcile to the irreversible changes taking place in their hitherto unruffled “deep river.” However, the spirit of hope that remains long after all the stories are complete is symbolic of a community that has taken independence and progress in its stride. The sense of community remains – one's primary identity still lies with the land, but at the same time it also creates a new space for technology and new opportunities – which enables everyone to grow and develop together.



## End notes

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- <sup>1</sup> C. Brian Cox ed. *African Writers*. p.311
  - <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.313
  - <sup>3</sup> Bessie Head. *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*. p.70
  - <sup>4</sup> C. Brian Cox. *op cit.* p.312
  - <sup>5</sup> Rob Nixon. 'Rural Transnationalism and Bessie Head' in Kate Darian Smith et al eds. *Text, Theory, Space*. p.245
  - <sup>6</sup> Bessie Head. *op cit.* p.27
  - <sup>7</sup> Jean Marquard. 'Bessie Head: Exile and Community in Southern Africa. *London Magazine*. vol.18(9-10). p.56
  - <sup>8</sup> Bessie Head. *Tales of Tenderness and Power*. p.11
  - <sup>9</sup> C. Brian Cox. *op cit.* p.313
  - <sup>10</sup> Bessie Head. *The Collector of Treasures*. 'The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration'. p.6
  - <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*
  - <sup>12</sup> Sara Chetin. 'Myth, Exile and the Female Condition: Bessie Head's **The Collector of Treasures**. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, V.24.1. p.118
  - <sup>13</sup> Bessie Head. *op cit.* p.6
  - <sup>14</sup> Bessie Head. *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*. p.66
  - <sup>15</sup> Bessie Head. *The Collector of Treasures*. 'The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration.' p.3
  - <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6
  - <sup>17</sup> Bessie Head. *The Collector of Treasures*. 'Heaven is Not Closed'. p.8
  - <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.12
  - <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11
  - <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*
  - <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*
  - <sup>22</sup> Bessie Head. *A Woman Alone*. p.4
  - <sup>23</sup> Bloke Modisane. *Blame Me on History*. pp.184-185
  - <sup>24</sup> Bessie Head. *op cit.* p.52
  - <sup>25</sup> Bessie Head. *The Collector of Treasures*. 'Jacob: The Story of a Faith-Healing Priest'. p.27
  - <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.28
  - <sup>27</sup> Bessie Head. *The Collector of Treasures*. 'Heaven is Not Closed'. p.10
  - <sup>28</sup> Sara Chetin. *op cit.* p.127
  - <sup>29</sup> Bessie Head. *The Collector of Treasures*. 'Life'. p.39
  - <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.42
  - <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.41
  - <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*
  - <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p.44
  - <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p.45

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- <sup>35</sup> Sara Chetin. *op cit.*. p.128
- <sup>36</sup> Bessie Head. *op cit.*. p.38
- <sup>37</sup> Bessie Head. *The Collector of Treasures*. 'Snap Shots of a Wedding'. p.78
- <sup>38</sup> Sara Chetin. *op cit.*. p.133
- <sup>39</sup> See Rob Nixon. *op cit.* p.250
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p.251
- <sup>41</sup> See Sara Chetin. *op cit.* p.132
- <sup>42</sup> Bessie Head. *The Collector of Treasures*. 'Life'. p.43
- <sup>43</sup> Bessie Head. *The Collector of Treasures*. 'The Wind and the Boy'. p.75
- <sup>44</sup> Bessie Head. *The Collector of Treasures*. 'Witchcraft'. p.51
- <sup>45</sup> Hans Zell ed. *A New Readers Guide to African Literature*. p.210
- <sup>46</sup> Bessie Head. *The Collector of Treasures*. 'Hunting'. p.108
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>48</sup> Sara Chetin. *op cit.*. p.137
- <sup>49</sup> Bessie Head. *The Collector of Treasures*. 'Heaven is Not Closed'. p.11
- <sup>50</sup> Bessie Head. *The Collector of Treasures*. 'Jacob: The Story of a Faith-Healing Priest'. p.34
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p.30.
- <sup>52</sup> Bessie Head. *The Collector of Treasures*. 'Life'. p.37
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p.40
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p.37
- <sup>56</sup> Sara Chetin. *op cit.* p.21
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>58</sup> Bessie Head. *The Collector of Treasures*. 'The Village Saint'. p.17
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18
- <sup>61</sup> Sara Chetin. *op cit.* p.122
- <sup>62</sup> Bessie Head. *The Collector of Treasures*. 'Hunting'. p.103
- <sup>63</sup> Anjum Katyal. 'Congruent Feminisms: Women in the works of Bessie Head and Mahashweta Devi'. *African Literatures: Remembrances and Constructions*. p.107
- <sup>64</sup> Bessie Head. *The Collector of Treasures*. 'Snapshots of a Wedding'. p.77
- <sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p.78
- <sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>69</sup> Sara Chetin. *op cit.*. p.133
- <sup>70</sup> Bessie Head. *The Collector of Treasures*. 'Kgotla'. p.68
- <sup>71</sup> Bessie Head. *A Woman Alone*. p.54
- <sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p.56

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p.57

<sup>74</sup> C. Brian Cox ed. *op cit.*, p.31

<sup>75</sup> Barbara Harlow. 'Prison Memoirs of Political Detainees'. *Resistance Literature*. pp.136-137

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Sara Chetin. *op cit.* p.135

<sup>78</sup> Bessie Head. 'The Collector of Treasures'. p.91

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Sara Chetin. *op cit.*, p.136

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

# *CHAPTER FIVE*

## CONCLUSION

The previous chapters have attempted to place the writings of Bessie Head within the domain of place, identity and location, and thereby take them one step forward from the often used and highly generic term 'autobiographical'. In doing so, we have observed the unique features of Head's works, which takes her beyond the domain of the 'ordinary'. The issues she deals with are certainly not new to South African literature, but it is the meaning with which she invests them that makes her work stand out and allows her characters to rise above mere cultural groupings. Her novels and short stories are certainly autobiographical to a large extent and conditioned by her life, yet their main aim is to allow the woman to make a place for herself with dignity and self-worth, while all the time remaining within the fold of the community. The importance of individual and private growth as essential for change to take place is just as explicit in her works, evident through characters like Makhaya, Maru, Margaret or Elizabeth.

However, the question that nags us even at the end of this analysis is – where does Bessie Head the person fit in this complex interweaving of gender and identity? As we know, she was born in South Africa, but for more than half her life she lived in Botswana. Even in this country, which she loved, but “which did not want me (her)”<sup>1</sup> she lived as a refugee till 1979, required to report to the local police every week. Furthermore, as Head writes in *A Woman Alone*, it was in Botswana, a country very lightly colonised, that she saw for the first time, various aspects of human personality – in particular, greed and avarice – far removed from the almost dehumanised existence that she had led in South Africa. It is not therefore surprising to note that Head herself “struggled her whole life for a sense of identity and a sense of self-worth”<sup>2</sup>, a fact that becomes amazingly clear during the course of her writings. This viewpoint is strengthened by Head's opinion about herself as stated in *A Woman Alone*:

I have always just been me, with no frame of reference beyond myself.<sup>3</sup>

This grappling with the notions of self and identity pervades through all of Head's writings and is manifested through her protagonists. All of them, by the conclusion of the novels succeed in finding an inner peace and a sense of belonging, derived out of their own inner growth. Elizabeth's visibly dramatic and possessive gesture of lying down on the land and putting her hand on it in *A Question of Power* can therefore be regarded as a symbolic manifestation of this sense of mental peace and belonging. Later in her life, Bessie Head commented that her lack of identification with any particular environment was probably a blessing in disguise, as she would "have found an identification with a special environment too small."<sup>4</sup> We notice a fluidity in her works, not constrained by boundaries of race and nation, which transports us between Botswana and South Africa, between fact and fiction, and it is almost impossible to tell where one ends and the other begins. It also compounds the difficulties of trying to assign Head with a clear national identity. Is she a South African writer or a Botswanian writer? Both countries today claim her as their own, particularly since she has attracted increasing critical acclaim, but the uncertainties remain. Perhaps therefore, it is better for us to stick to Head's own definition of herself as a "Southern African" writer – this removes her from any dangers of strict compartmentalisation and gives her a larger universal appeal.

Even in terms of her 'feminist' viewpoints, Bessie Head does not conform to the western notions of feminism. The crux of western feminist theory that has been prevalent in Europe from the 1960s is an assertion of the woman's point of view while excluding the male, and simultaneously an expose of the inherent and patriarchal practices in society. African feminism as has been discussed does not fit into this stereotypical model, since Africa was a place where colonisation actually succeeded in

constructing women in such a manner that they were reduced to virtual non-entities. In the pre-colonial days, women had occupied positions of dignity in society and the western image of the subjugated, dormant human being is therefore nothing more than a construction to satisfy their own notions of superiority. Women in Africa and South Africa have always been active in not only tending their land, participating in community affairs as well looking after home and hearth, but have also been involved in the various resistance movements against colonialism. The works of writers like Head and Buchi Emecheta are notable for their women characters – neither marginalised nor valourised – but independent, contributing members of the community as a whole. Characters like Paulina in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Thato, Johannah in *The Collector of Treasures* or even Elizabeth are examples of such people. Furthermore, unlike in Western feminist practices, the idea of sex is considered as a part and parcel of life. It is not given the all-consuming importance that the western feminists give it. In Head's works, and the various thematic concerns – exile, tradition against modernity, both men women are seen as equally capable of bringing about change, and in achieving a relationship based on love, trust and understanding. In her utopia or “new world” therefore, the two sexes complement each other and work together. There is no place for people like Dan in *A Question of Power*, Matenge in *When Rain Clouds Gather* or those like Lebojang and Dikeledi's husband in the short story collection *The Collector of Treasures*. These men are clearly sources of evil, interested only in the abuse and misuse of power in all fields of life and are contrasted with characters like Paul, Jacob, Sebembele and Tholo who treat women with respect and equality and thus inhabit Head's moral idyll.

Head's depiction of women characters has its sources in the many magnificent women that she had the fortune to meet or hear about during her life. In particular, her concern naturally is for the black woman in

society. She considers the black woman as oppressed by men, by politics as well as tradition. They have always occupied a secondary position in society, and the disregard of characters like Gaserego for even such inherently good women like Dikeledi is essentially based on the fact that he considers her as inferior or sub-human, and as a woman who will quietly endure any kind of torture that he may wish to inflict on her. This kind of oppression only increased with the onset of colonialism and apartheid and further aggravated the already present multi-layered forms of discrimination – as woman, ‘primitive’ woman, black woman and also ‘coloured’ woman and allowed men to further assert their ‘superiority’ using any excuse. An example of this may be seen in the character of Dan in *A Question of Power*, who is able to taunt at Elizabeth’s lack of identity by flaunting his ‘superiority’ as a black man. The act is as heinous and gross as his other habit of ‘flaying his penis in the air’ More than the physical oppression, it is therefore the mental oppression of women, especially black and coloured women that becomes one of the major thematic concerns of Head’s writings. Her strong women characters dispel the Western centre versus margin construction of identities as reflected in literary discourses and seeks to provide a “sub-altern” theory, by locating women in their own contexts, and identifying various problematics in their realities, concerns and issues.

*The Collector of Treasures*, Head’s intricately constructed short story collection is therefore in many ways a microcosmic vision of the world, inhabited by both good and evil. The women characters range from the uneducated to the educated, from the typical rural girl and mother figure to city-bred women and prostitutes. Head therefore goes beyond the traditional roles ascribed to women in African literature and creates a wide-ranging gallery of characters. The characters, especially the women undertake journeys of their own in addition to the steps already carved by Head in order to reach towards this mythical paradise. It also represents the



culmination of another journey of Bessie Head's own growth as a human being and as a writer. A journey which started from *When Rain Clouds Gather* continues through *Maru* and *A Question of Power*, finally climaxing in *The Collector Of Treasures*. In between, this journey is broken while Head wrote her smaller non-fictional pieces like *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* and the autobiographical writings collected in *A Woman Alone*. A reading of all these books allow us to understand the intensity and power of Head's writings and trace the path by which her characters finally reach their ideal world, which is not heaven, but any place on earth, which fulfils the criteria set for happy, human relationships. She has herself stated that through her writings, she aimed to "shape the future"<sup>5</sup>, a future when the world will be habited by more men like Paul Thebolo and there will be no place for the likes of Gaserego, Dan, Matenge or Lebojang.

Bessie Head remains unique among all South African authors due to another reason. As discussed, most apartheid period literature that came out of the country contained vivid descriptions of protest against this crippling, life-taking Government machinery, which denied an individual even his basic rights. Anger is the pre-dominant emotion in these works, whether written by male writers like Peter Abrahams, Ezekiel Mphahlele or Alex la Guma or women like Miriam Tlali, Farida Karodia, Ellen Kuzwayo and Nadine Gordimer. In the writings of Bessie Head, the focus is more on the individual and his position within the community, the anger and protest is much less subdued at an explicit level. Implicitly however, in her dealings of racialism, of religion and of the conflicts between old and the new in various forms, the protest is clearly evident. It is the South African experiences that imbibe a lot of Head's writings: the turbulence and violence of the city give way to a more calm and fulfilling life in the village. Her position within the genre of protest writing is thus clear, in

spite of its implicity, there is no ambiguity in her position or her commitment.

In these discussions, which have mainly focussed on Head's delineation of her women characters, one aspect has not been dealt with in much detail, and that is the similarities which she saw between the concept of apartheid in South Africa and the Hindu 'caste' system. As a coloured who had no place in South African society, Head often compared herself and identified with the 'Sudra' or untouchable in Hindu religious caste practices. At the same time, she found points of similarity in Hindu Gods, Goddesses and religious practices and her own beliefs, although the larger aspects and ramifications of this are still largely unexplored. However, this grappling with various modes of identification is perhaps the most telling comment on Bessie Head's own feelings of rootlessness and marginalisation, and the reason why her characters ultimately are able to achieve this sense of belonging that she craved all her life.

To conclude therefore, it can be said that in the works that have been discussed, what becomes clear is Bessie Head's gift for "rediscovering the turbulent power-plays within the expanses of rural society"<sup>6</sup>, which however contribute to the growth of the individual and moves him forward in the quest for utopia and 'moksha'. As the only black, exiled South African writer writing in English, Head is unique in two respects: a) she is the only exiled writer to locate her texts in her adopted homeland and b) she is the only writer to have grown up in the city but transformed into a rural, writer. The various journeys, literal and metaphorical, which she undertook in her life – city to country, South Africa to Botswana, male protagonists to women, have all contributed to her own growth and challenged South African literatures traditional obsession with male, urban space and conflict, rather than everyday living, in their depictions of the village Jim's journey to Johannesburg and experiences there. Yet, Head remains one of the most underrated writers in

African fiction, a woman, who through her detailing of experiences, succeeded in becoming a literary and cultural pioneer. Normal boundaries of race, gender and nation cannot define her, neither can she be contextualised simply within the genre of ‘protest’ writing against apartheid. She brought into focus ideas of rural space as opposed to the previous focus on urban locations and the city, particularly in its relation to the experiences of women. In doing so, she “has drawn attention to the possibility of a Southern African literature that is more than the sum of the region’s various national literatures.”<sup>7</sup> Her place in history notwithstanding, Bessie Head therefore still remains an unexplored writer, who has given a voice to the oppressed refugee classes, themselves battling issues of race, nationality and nation-space.

## End notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Marquard. 'Bessie Head: Exile and Community in Southern Africa.' *London Magazine*. Vol. 18, 9-10, pp. 51-52

<sup>2</sup> Bessie Head. *A Woman Alone*. Introduction

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Craig Mackenzie et al eds. Bessie Head interview. *Between the Lines*. p. 17

<sup>5</sup> Craig Mackenzie et al eds. *op cit.* p. 14

<sup>6</sup> Rob Nixon. 'Rural Transnationalism and Bessie Head' in Kate Dartian Smith et al eds. *Text, Theory, Space*. p. 249

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 252

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