

SHADES OF POST-COLONIALISM: REVISITING MARGINALITY AND RESISTANCE IN BESSIE HEAD'S *THE COLLECTOR OF TREASURES*

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ABSTRACT

The present study seeks to uncover the shades of post-colonialism in Bessie Head's short story "The Collector of Treasures". Post-colonialism takes into account the political, cultural and gender aspects of the colonial past as well as the neo-colonial configurations. In doing so, the postcolonial writers and critics oppose the past mistakes committed by the colonial rulers. This paper exposes the social, cultural and economic marginalization of women during and after colonial period as perceived in Bessie Head's "The Collector of Treasures". Head's story deals with the abuse of women. The story questions the border line that not only separates men from women but also defines their past and present positions as well as functions. "The Collector of Treasures" concerns such a border line that becomes the force behind the creation as well as the dissolution of binaries between men and women. In the story, there are two women characters—Dikeledi and Kebonye having such dominant qualities that set up their purpose of appearance. These women are trapped in a chain of social traditions and therefore feel restrained and constricted. This leads to their marginalization and the subsequent instances of violence and death as in the case of the protagonist Dikeledi who insists on maintaining her honesty and upholding her liberty. The current paper deals with the struggle between the dominant and oppressive forces represented by the male dominated precolonial/postcolonial patriarchal society. The present study reveals the strong-minded forces symbolized by the humanists including both men and women that are rooted in rejection and repudiation of the male authority.

Keywords: Marginalization, Patriarchial, Post-colonialism, Social traditions, "The Collector of Treasures", Violence.

INTRODUCTION

Bessie Emery Head (1937-1986) was born in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa but later migrated to Botswana. She became the most influential writer of her adopted country, Botswana. Being an African author of novels and short stories, she dealt with the inconsistencies and inadequacies of pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial African social order. During her infancy, Head underwent denunciation and estrangement in the form of racial discrimination due to her status as the illegitimate child of a black father and a white mother. Bessie Head published her collection of short fiction entitled *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales* in 1977. In the anthology, Head focuses on the social and communal life of the people of Botswana. The title story 'The Collector of Treasures' is basically an attack on male prejudice of Africa. It reveals the storywriter's empathy with women and children who face problems and suffer oppressions that eventually mould their life and characters. "The Collector of Treasures" delineates the nature of men and women of Botswana who undergo a series of alterations in their lives. The story is in a sense an exposition of the exiled status of women. Through her story, Bessie Head strives to form an idea of a

future society where women would be free from all kinds of sufferings.

Head's Story: *The Collector of Treasures*

The story, "The Collector of Treasures" is placed in post-colonial Botswana. In the story, the village of Puleng in its miniature reflects the greatness of the traditional Africa. The story portrays the life of Dikeledi Mokopi and her husband Garesego Mokopi. Dikeledi is at odds with her husband as he has left her and their three children for the purpose of satisfying himself sexually with other women. Now Dikeledi has to take care of the children and in the process she behaves thoroughly with her next door neighbour Paul and Kenalepe Thebolo. However, the association between Paul and Dikeledi makes Garesego envious. Although, Garesego was separated from Dikeledi for a long time, he wrongly blames Paul of treating Dikeledi as a concubine. Garesego feels that Dikeledi desires for sexual contact with him as she invites him to her house to discuss the matter related to the payment of school fees of their eldest child. But Dikeledi was in no mood to have sex with her husband after eight long years as "her life had become holy to her during all those years she had struggled to maintain herself and the children." (Head, p.10). During those years she had lived life gathering treasures of compassion and love from others and "it was all this that she wanted to protect from defilement by an evil man." (Head, p.10). Therefore, Dikeledi takes a kitchen knife and cuts off the genitals of her husband. Garesego's wife Dikeledi Mokopi is so courageous that she hits at the root of African phallocracy by mutilating her husband. Writing about the courage of Dikeledi, Ruchi Sharma says, "What enables a character to challenge social convention in Head's scheme is a strongly developed sense of individuality. These are the people who have the strength to risk public censure in order to follow their convictions." (Sharma, "Humanism as a Political Method"). The story shows that a woman has to live with such a deep psychological trauma that she ultimately murders a man and that too her husband by his genitals being slit off. She gets life imprisonment for this act. She makes friends with three other women who have also killed their husbands and are now spending their life in jail with her. These women are marginalized to such an extent that they are forced to resist against the male dominated postcolonial society. Hence, the story centres its attention on "the hardship women of the village experience". (MacKenzie, p.16).

The association of women with men is the most important characteristic of Bessie Head's "The Collector of Treasures". It is a short fiction where a woman takes the most important position. The story centres on the position of women in the postcolonial African social order as Femi Ojo-Ade observes: "Bessie Head takes sides with the woman, the silent partner whose story must be told". (Ojo-Ade, p.81). In the story, women experience social inequality in an organized manner due to their femininity. The prevailing social system regards phallus as the symbol of power. Phallus symbolizes male dominance in society. Since a woman does not have phallus so she holds an unenthusiastic place in the social order as if "she was a lower form of human life." (Head, p.9). In Bessie Head's story, Garesego Mokopi stands for the phallocratic misogynist. He acts as an agent of the phallocratic superiority of males in the social order. The storywriter compares him to a dog who "imagined he was the only penis in the world and that there had to be a scramble for it." (Head, p. 4). Garesego was a man who not only lived near the level of an animal but also behaved like an animal. He was one of the most horrible men as he produced children like machines and left them at the lap of poor women. He did not accept the responsibility for the babies he procreated and the children had to fend for themselves. He was responsible for the complete breakdown of the existence of family as an institution. He had become a beast in his effort to quench his hunger for sex and alcohol. The narrator describes him as "a cock hopping from hen to hen." (Head, p.7).

Bessie Head seems to hold both the ancient traditional system and the colonial system responsible for the plight of man and woman in the postcolonial African society. The ancestral laws were full of mistakes in the sense that they assigned men a higher place in the tribe while women were regarded “as being an inferior form of human life.” (Head, p.4). The women were still suffering from the misfortune that happened to a lower category of human life. This kind of problem also arose because of the colonial system. The colonial period further added to the misery of these men and women as it made loose the grasp of the ancestors on the public life. Colonialism ruined the age old traditional system of the existence of family. It forced men to separate themselves from their families and work as labourers in the mines of South Africa thereby becoming “the boy of the white man and a machine-tool of the South African mines.” (Head, p.4). Before the onset of colonialism women took part in a significant manner as “an agricultural producer within her husband's homestead; 'fertility' meant that she had to produce children whose labour would, in time, be used for the benefit of the homestead” (Guy, p.39). However, colonialism created such an environment that men were coerced into carrying out household tasks that were generally performed by women in the earlier times. Thus, British colonialism hardly improved the life of the local people of Botswana and South Africa. It did not make the people ready for independence. Nor did it make the people competent enough to run their newly independent country.

“The Collector of Treasures” seems to convey the idea that African independence only added to the suffering of the local people. Right to self-government brought an abrupt and drastic transformation in the form of obedience before the colonial authority. The government of newly independent countries started providing more jobs to the local people and as a result their income increased manifold. For instance, Garesego Mokopi was earning R50.00 a month as salary before independence. Just after independence his salary increased up to R200 a month. However, he used the resources extravagantly and for bad purpose such as womanising and drink. After gaining wealth quickly, Garesego started considering his wife Dikeledi as 'boring, semi-literate traditional sort.' (Head, p.4). He left his own house and his wife and three children and went to sleep with other women of the village. His wife and three children had no choice but to live on their own resources. It drastically changed the existence of the family as an institution when compared to the strict discipline of the ancestors and the dreadful conditions of colonialism. The indigenous marginalized people were forced to live on their own income and man became “a broken wreck with no inner resources at all.” (Head, p.4). On the one hand the black ladies act as an alternative mother in the modern white culture, on the other hand their own sons are banished or murdered in custody. Thus the function of African women in the contemporary times has changed significantly as De Marigny writes: “Modern African women are thus obliged to take over traditionally male roles in the present even when men do not credit them with so doing.” (De Marigny, p.72). Bessie Head's 'The Collector of Treasures' takes a close look at the post-colonial Botswana where men feel baffled due to their strangeness regarding the modifications and tasks that they have to comply with. In that sense, postcolonialism idealizes colonial societies. Though the countries have become officially independent but in reality they adhere to the colonial practices.

Bessie Head's story “The Collector of Treasures” expresses the cruel and repressive behaviour of males to females in the African society and culture. However, the duty of these males is to love and care their wives and children. In her story, Head presents two kinds of men that exist in the post-colonial African society. On the one hand, there is a man like Garesego who has sex with women like dogs. He creates such misery and chaos that he can easily be regarded as an evil figure. On the other hand there is a man like Paul Thebolo who treats women as human beings. He

does not behave as if he is mad for sex. He uses his emotional and material resources for the welfare of his family. Hence there is a sharp difference in the marriage of the central character Dikeledi, and her husband Garesego and that of their neighbours, Kenalepe and Paul Thebolo. Garesego made Dikeledi pregnant three times in four years and then left her. He did not bear the responsibility for his wife and his sons. However, their neighbours Kenalepe Thebolo and Paul share a married life that is filled with affection, tenderness and devotion. They enjoy a superb sex life. Paul's behaviour opens the eye of the protagonist, Dikeledi. She realises that there is no correlation between sex and wealth. Rather sex is related to love. Since there is no love between Dikeledi and her husband Garesego therefore it would be futile for Dikeledi to have sex with Garesego. That is why Dikeledi kills her husband as she understands that her existence in such a situation would be meaningless. The fact that she would be found guilty of manslaughter does not discourage her from killing her husband as she has simply purged him of his sins. Ruchi Sharma writes, "*The Collector of Treasures* [the collection] abounds in female characters learning to survive the emotional, sexual and psychological violence built into the everydayness of life in a patriarchal society." (Sharma, "Humanism as a Political Method").

Head's "The Collector of Treasures" articulates the existence of men and women and their struggle through the complex web of patriarchy and colonialism in rural Botswana. Though the protagonist, Dikeledi behaves gently but wields her own individual power that is free from class, gender or social position. The story makes the reader familiar to the tone and viewpoint of a community represented by the village, tribe and country in both precolonial and postcolonial African world. The central character seems so strange and ill at ease that she appears to be all-time rebels. Though her conditions may be different from us but she reflects our ache and happiness in life. The author boldly depicts the social and psychological environment of the time in which the character feels socially segregated. The characters bear this social alienation by developing a particular internal world of their own for which they are misinterpreted and criticized. Therefore, in a postcolonial world, the protagonist gets new opportunities to correct the past mistakes as Kailash Kumar writes: "Thus post colonialism gives the oppressed, the suppressed and the underprivileged a new tool whereby they can oppose the previous misdeeds." (Kumar, p.20).

Bessie Head's story is especially devoted to village life in Botswana. Her women protagonists find themselves incompatible in a patriarchal society. The characters in her story strive for the establishment of a fresh, new world order. This they want to achieve by creating a new abode for themselves where they can adjust themselves properly and thereby build a community life. The story showcases the vividness and optimism of the author. It is notable for its uncomplicated settings and impressive plots. The author sensitively portrays African life and culture. The writer's reflection on the position of women in post-colonial African society is quite significant and inspiring. According to the author, women are the worst sufferer in the post-colonial society. Men are filled with a false notion regarding change in structure of the society in the post-colonial period. Indecision and chaos prevail in the society due to male arrogance in the form of career in the administration, money and power. Women undergo pain and suffering as men behave like pack of wolves who stalk women. This has been largely due to many decades of colonial oppression that has made man sexually inhuman. In Bessie Head's "The Collector of Treasures", Garesego is an instance of sexist bestiality as he discards his wedded wife and opts for illicit relationship with other women. He replaces his marital relationship with happy-go-lucky pursuing of women. In order to reiterate his position as patriarch of the family, Garesego visits his wife and children after a gap of eight years. However, his wife Dikeledi confronts his place as phallocratic man. She defies his phallic superiority by cutting off his genitals. Dikeledi pulls apart

the phallocratic social order as she cuts off her husband's genitals. It shows the anguish of an oppressed woman. In the process Garesego has to part with his phallic superiority and that brings to a close the domination of the male. Consequently Dikeledi gains and enjoys the position of a new phallic leader as she controls the alternative phallus i.e. the kitchen knife. Writing about Bessie Head's contribution to the portrayal of man-woman relationship, Kwadwo Osei-Nyame Jnr observes: "Head not only wrote at length and in detail on Africa's relationship to Western modernity, but also at a local level examined the social arrangements and relationships between Botswanan men and women." (Osei-Nyame Jnr, p.2).

Bessie Head through her story "The Collector of Treasures" fervently attacks African male prejudice. The story serves as a means for Head to portray tradition through the lens of postcolonial feminism. At the core of the story lies the fact that five women have been sentenced to life imprisonment for murdering their husbands. The central character Dikeledi Mokopi is one among the five women. She cuts off the genitals of her cruel husband using a sharp kitchen knife. The murder is well-organized and ably carried out by Dikeledi as she is "the woman whose thatch does not leak." (Head, p.3). Dikeledi takes an unusual step as she castrates her husband but she does so in order to survive in this world. The story correlates the end of colonialism in Botswana in 1966 leading to official independence with the idea of freedom and decolonization as understood by women residing in the countryside. The story recognizes that the idea of independence was out of order before it even began especially in the context of Africa. The factors responsible for creating hindrance in the successful celebration of independence were pre-colonial patriarchy, British imperialism and South Africa's mining industry that treated African people as "machine tools". (Head, p.4). In the post colonial period, the prospect was bright as "more jobs became available ... and salaries sky-rocketed" (Head, p.4) for the people of Botswana. However the hope was shattered as many people misused the opportunity. These people were mentally in a bad shape with no source of inspiration inside them. In order to avoid the bareness inside their soul they chose the path of destruction and debauchery. The storywriter ponders over the fact that the meaning of independence as perceived by the rural women of Africa is different from the meaning as understood by the people who take independence in its official and constitutional context.

"The Collector of Treasures" takes into account the effort made in the postcolonial period by the women of Botswana to absorb into the age-old and inequitable society of their country. In the process they fought back to stay alive in an atmosphere subjugated by the patriarchy. The marginalized women of Botswana find it difficult to exist in a post colonial society that is shaped by its local culture, categorizations of society, and the gender bias. The author uses Dikeledi's observations to open our eye to the unjust and particularly cruel societies of the postcolonial period. The culture and society of Botswana in the postcolonial period were such that women were considered of little value and their families received small support. The post-independence society of Botswana assured men the maximum opportunity to improve their own life and the life of their families. However, the men misused this opportunity as they ignored the requirements of their families. They treated women and children as less significant. Men are penalized least for their disgusting acts while the result of an offense committed by a woman is damaging. It proves that most men in the short story "The Collector of Treasures" are misogynist and most women are victims of misogynistic thinking. Therefore, Head portrays such men "responsible for the complete breakdown of family life." (Head, p.4).

The misogynistic thinking has ultimately led to the diminishing of the reliability of the society. The pre-colonial behavior of men in the Botswana community got worse in the

postcolonial period as the males of Botswana were made weak by the colonizers. The impact of colonialism in Botswana was such that man forgot his true personality and identity. In the post independence period the condition of man further deteriorated due to the bad effect of post colonialism on man's mental awareness of his own true nature. The postcolonial social order of Botswana encouraged the age-old discrimination based on native culture and practices of pre-colonial times. The condition of women did not improve in the postcolonial period as they were viewed with the same eye which was that of neglect and intolerance. There was endless censure put on women. Women were without any liberty and they totally depended on male for financial help. The women wanted their husbands to help them in looking after their families. Often the males declined to help the family and the result was that the women and their children were left to fend for themselves. Culturally, the postcolonial society was so much male oriented that women found it hard to incorporate themselves in such a society. Their independence was shattered by patriarchal interference. In the story, it is done by a man like Garesego. Bessie Head's familiarity with estrangement and disaffection in life and her curiosity in the existence of rural communities in Botswana is clearly revealed in her story "The Collector of Treasures": "Though Bessie Head's life might be seen as somber and traumatic, her works presents love and joy alongside images of hardship and isolation... She praises good as she condemns evil, and expresses her hope for peace and change with her criticism of the current political system." (Bissell, "Bessie Head- Postcolonial Studies").

The story "The Collector of Treasures" concerns with the manner in which village men treat women and children after the official decolonization of the society. The story makes it clear that two broad categories of males existed in the post-independent Botswana society. The first category included those who actually behaved like dogs when it came to having sex with their women. They did so only to satiate their carnal desire. Though they were free from the external rule of the British but internally they were devoid of the essential ingredients that might have made them an ideal human being. Garesego, the husband of Dikeledi Mokopi belongs to the first category. He leaves his wife and three children and does not take the trouble of providing them any assistance. He is devoid of his own inner self. Kebonye's husband is another by product of the postcolonial society. He brutally abuses his own wife as Kebonye confesses: "You know, my husband used to kick me between the legs when he wanted that. I once aborted with a child, due to this treatment." (Head, p.2). Kebonye's husband was an education officer. He misused his power and position as he made many school girls pregnant. Thus, he not only ill treated his own wife i.e. Kebonye but also spoiled the life of many innocent girls. Talking about the misdeeds of her husband, Kebonye says: "Well, he was an education-officer and each year he used to suspend about seventeen male teachers for making school girls pregnant, but he used to do the same." (Head, p.3). Kebonye decides to punish her husband for the crime that he committed against humanity. Therefore, she kills her husband by cutting off his genitals with a razor. According to the author, the second category of man in the postcolonial Botswanan society is that who is a real human being as he bothers about women. Kenalepe's husband Paul belongs to the second type. Unlike Garesego, Paul is beautifully married and has a superb sex life. He does not behave as if he is distraught for sex. Moreover, he respects his wife. He even cares for Garesego's wife and children. Thus, in her story Bessie Head successfully depicts two different men - Garesego and Paul. These men represent the essence of the postcolonial society of Botswana.

"The Collector of Treasures" makes obvious the social and economic disparity between men and women. Man enjoys his personal freedom but ignores his responsibilities as a father and a husband. Man ignores the fact that freedom comes with duty and accountability. Woman, on the

other hand, fight for their liberty and self-determination. In the story, “The Collector of Treasures,” Garesego Mokopi makes illogical sexual moves that prove to be the reason behind Head's conversation concerning nationalist ideologies. The unjust association and the uneven politics of power between men and women inside the state of Botswana are well exemplified by the connection that Garesego shares with his wife Dikeledi. The emergence of a free Africa in general and an independent Botswana in particular has resulted in the subjugation of women in the society of the newly liberated country. Though Head portrays the actual place of woman in the Botswanan society, she talks about the whole of Africa in her story: “The ancestors made so many errors and one of the most bitter-making things was that they relegated to men a superior position in the tribe, while women were regarded, in a congenital sense, as being an inferior form of human life. To this day, women still suffered from all the calamities that befall an inferior form of human life.” (Head, p.4).

CONCLUSION

Bessie Head in her story “The Collector of Treasures,” discusses problems related to inequity, separation, desertion and emotional mistreatment of black women. She honestly uses her creative power to portray the murky and sinister atmosphere of colonialism. Her understanding of the issues related to women is well reflected in her protest against their oppression and marginalization. She vehemently condemns the unfavorable ideas and deeds of men against women. “The Collector of Treasures,” is basically a short fiction that deals with a woman protagonist named Dikeledi Mokopi whose husband brutally subjugates and exploits her. As a result Dikeledi manslaughters her husband and is put in jail. She kills her husband in order to solve the crisis of her life. She has tried to assert and ascertain that women have power and potential which they can show in the most extreme circumstances. The story shows the profound anger of woman towards a male dominated society that regards women as valueless. The story reveals that the protagonist, Dikeledi has gained more knowledge from her suffering than what her neighbour Kenalepe has gained from her favourable destiny. The tragedy that Dikeledi suffers in her marriage makes her a strong woman. Bessie Head finishes the story on a positive note as she grants women the authority to act in response to their subjugation in a post-independent society. Head's story succeeds in offering solutions to the problems faced by women and children due to their marginalization in the postcolonial African society. Her central character not only overcomes the trauma of her life but also sets up her identity in a superb manner.

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