

LITERARY COMMITMENT IN BESSIE HEAD'S *MARU*

Elizabeth A. Odhiambo¹, Dr. Jack Ogembo², Dr. Kitche Magak³

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ABSTRACT

This was a study of Bessie Head's literary commitment. The objective of the study was to interrogate the extent to which the writer is committed as a woman and as a Third World person based on the text *Maru*. The study adopted the analytical research design. The data collected through content analysis was coded according to thematic concerns, stylistic choices, the mode of characterization and vision of the author. The postcolonial theory was employed in the reading analysis and interpretation of the selected text. The findings reveal that as a woman, Bessie Head is committed to reconstructing a positive image for her female characters by challenging stereotypical perception of women through dismantling of patriarchal structures that previously relegated women to subordinate roles. This is seen in the presentation of the female characters as strong willed, determined, assertive, independent and enterprising. In delineating the experiences of women as women, she explores their most personal convictions thereby presenting their perception of issues as women. As a Third World writer, Head is committed to social justice, exposition of suffering and dehumanization resulting from ethnic prejudice and superstition. She voices for the voiceless by advocating gender equity as a basis for development. On the political arena, she examines issues that ail African politics such as selfish and greedy leadership, oppression and discrimination on basis of race. The text particularly dwells on the racial prejudices and class difference in the society.

1.0 Introduction

Modern African writing, a literature that responds to the African people's plight, feelings and aspirations, has a special commitment to formulating the basic values of society and is both a reflection and criticism of those values. The themes arising out of the contemporary milieu stare the writers in the face daring them to ignore them. If they do, they will be irrelevant to the human drama daily enacted there. If they accept the challenge, they inevitably situate their characters within the daily trials that surround the people's life (Gordimer, 1991). The writer must, therefore, be devoted to a course relevant to his/her society.

Nyamndi (2006) observes that the tradition among the great majority of African writers to undertake a curative pilgrimage into their society's past has come to be viewed as self evident. That return seems to be validated by no other reason than that Africa needs to redeem its shattered past, a consensus having been reached that awkward Europeans damaged the past in the process of scooping up material and spiritual wealth for themselves in the continent.

The fact that the African past deserves attention is acceptable. However, whatever should be the focus of this attention has continued to generate a lot of controversy. Nkosi (1981: 31-32) ascribes to the writer a redemptive mission, 'Out of the raw materials of history the novelist constructs for us 'fictions,' in so doing, they create patterns of meaning out of a jumble of meaningless chaos.'

In Nyamndi's view, Nkosi's patterns of meaning are redeeming strengths that underline history's ability to wrest itself from chaotic negativity and transform into source material for human worth. History incessantly confronts the writer with a jumble of meaningless chaos. His duty is now to extract from this jumble, such

¹ Doctoral Student, Department of Literary Studies, Maseno University, E-mail: e.achieng39@yahoo.com

² Department of Literary Studies, Maseno University

³ Department of Literary Studies, Maseno University

elements as can restore meaning to existence, now and tomorrow, and to craft such elements into works for the vivification of his society. Like Nkosi, Soyinka (1968: 58) advocates a similar view: 'It is about time the African writer ceased to be a mere chronicler and understood also that part of his purpose is to write with a very definite vision...he must at least begin by exposing the future in a clear and truthful exposition of the present.'

The writer is therefore not only a teacher in the retrospective sense of the word; he is also a social seer who identifies and highlights the weakness of the present day society, someone who rips open the fetid boils of mismanagement and misdirection in today's Africa and causes the future to veer into sight on a cleansed pedestal (Nyamndi, 2006).

Feminists have posited that the woman writer has two major responsibilities; first to tell about being a woman; secondly to describe the reality from a woman's perspective. According to Ogundipe (1987), the female writer should be committed in three ways: as a writer, as a woman and as a Third World person and her biological womanhood is implicated in all the three.

As a writer she has to be committed to her art, seeking to do justice to it at the highest level of expertise. She should be committed to her vision whatever it is, which means, she has to be willing to stand or fall by that vision. She must be certain that what she is telling is the truth and nothing but her own truth.

Being committed as a woman would mean delineating the experience of women as women, telling what it is to be a woman and destroying male stereotypes of women. On the other hand, being committed as a Third World person would mean being politically conscious, offering readers perspectives and perceptions of colonialism, imperialism and neo colonialism as they affect and shape lives and historical destinies. The Third World in this context implies nations that share a colonial past.

In line with Ogundipe's prescription, the current study interrogated the extent to which Bessie Head – a multicultural writer is committed as a woman and as a Third World person. This was inspired by the literary debate that surrounds the concept of commitment in African literature, particularly with regard to what the duty of the writer in Africa should be. As Azuike (2008) puts it, writers in Africa have a duty to the society to address issues instead of indulging in the luxury of aesthetics.

The focus thus, was on how the author, a colored, grappled with commitment on the African literary scene and whether her works were authentic instruments of investigating historical and social issues peculiarly African.

2.0 Theoretical Framework

The study was be guided by the postcolonial theory. This is because post colonialism is the platform through which one can investigate issues of identity and commitment of the Third World writer. This theory deals with the writing and reading of literature written in previously or currently colonized countries or literature written in colonizing countries which deals with colonization or colonized people. Notable theoreticians in this field include Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha among others.

The theory focuses particularly on the way in which literature by the colonizing culture distorts the experience and realities, and inscribes the inferiority of the colonized people. It also focuses on literature by the colonized people which attempts to articulate their identity and reclaim their past in the face of that past's inevitable 'otherness.' It can also deal with the way in which literature in colonizing countries appropriates the language, images, scenes, tradition and so forth in colonized countries (Lye, 1998).

For the purpose of this research it was useful in interrogating the extent to which Bessie Head- a multicultural writer, is committed as a woman and as a Third World person.

3.0 Literature review

Varous scholars have studied literary works of Bessie Head and come up with various findings. In his examination of themes and styles in African literature, Nkosi (1981) for instance, believes that Bessie Head

has little or no commitment and that for most of the time she seems politically ignorant. She has none of the political involvement of a writer like La Guma. Furthermore, he sees Head's lack of political involvement as a handicap, weakening rather than aiding her grasp of characters. Nkosi's analysis was important for this study in that it too touched on commitment. However, the difference lay in the fact that the present study examined all levels of commitment and not merely political commitment.

Dieke (2007) argued that Head's *Maru*, more than *A Question of Power* distils the very essence of her creative enterprise laced with an overriding concern for an investigation into the enigma of human prejudice. He points out that although *A Question Of Power* can be said to be an important site for unraveling the strands of her anguished life story with instances of immense suffering, privation and crippling alienation, *Maru*, on the other hand, provides the fertile site for mounting a literary resistance to the mistaken ideology which often gave rise to the anguished life story. For, without this insane ideology there would not be crippling alienation. Without this ideology there would not be suffering and privation. Both the ideology and its accoutrements represented the same morbid state. The current study however interrogates the extent to which the writer is committed as a woman and as a Third World person with reference to *Maru*.

Other researchers, Rafapa, Nengome and Tshamano (2011) recognized that the layers of complexity in Head's novels still have to be decoded more fully from a number of perspectives. Their aim was to highlight some increased lucidity which may be obtained through considering Head's novel from the point of view of Africanism and Feminism. These scholars research closely related to the present study in that in this case, interest lay in whether Head's selected works were authentic instruments of investigating African issues. It also examined her commitment as a writer though the difference lay in the fact that the texts were examined from the postcolonial perspective with focus on literary commitment and not Feminist point of view. Of importance too was the fact that the three scholars recognized that several gaps of study still existed in the works of Bessie Head.

From the above review, it was evident that a lot of studies had been carried out on works of Bessie Head. A few scholars had looked at the element of commitment in her literary works with particular focus on political commitment. However, the present study presumed that commitment goes beyond politics.

4.0 Methodology

The research was mainly qualitative. It was conducted through an analytical research design. Analytical research, as a style of qualitative inquiry is a non interactive document research which describes and interprets the past or recent past from selected sources (Macmilliam & Schumahr, 1997). These sources may be documents preserved in collections or participant's oral testimonies or as in the case of this research, a literary text of an author. This design is ideal in a situation where a researcher attempts to analyze a situation and make evaluation. For the present research, it was instrumental in interrogating the extent to which Bessie Head is commitment as a woman and as a Third World writer in *Maru*.

4.1 Data Collection Techniques

The study was mainly library based. It began with a preliminary study of the available related literature in the library which formed the basis for secondary data.

The primary data was generated through content analysis of the selected text. Nachmias (2009) defines content analysis as any technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics of messages. Qualitative content analytical approaches focus on analyzing both the explicit or manifest content of a text as well as interpretations of latent content of texts- that which can be interpreted or interpolated from the text, but is not explicitly stated in it (Granhein & Lundman, 2003).

In the current research, reading, analysis and interpretation of the selected text was done to establish the extent to which the writer is committed as a woman and as a Third World person. This process was accomplished through use of the postcolonial theory.

4.2 Data Analysis

The data collected through content analysis of the selected texts was then coded according to thematic concerns, the mode of characterization and vision of the author. The postcolonial theory was applied in the textual analysis to establish the nature of the writer's commitment as reflected in the text of choice.

5.0 The Woman in *Maru*

The woman in Head's *Maru* is presented at different levels as seen in the portrayal of the various female characters in the text. The protagonist, Margaret Cadmore is depicted as marginalized. She is the 'other', an outcast in society by virtue of her Masarwa identity. Instead of her marriage to Maru boosting her self image, it only serves to silence her further. She marries Maru not of her own free will but as a result of his skilful manipulation of the situation. Maru thus controls her every move and emotion. Her happiness is dependent on his mood. So that whenever he was in a bad mood, his foul mood denied her happiness since he would use very harsh words that reminded her of the sad past she had experienced.

Despite such interruptions to her happiness, no memory remained in Margaret's heart of the previous suffering she had undergone. As Head observes, quite often Margaret was overwhelmed with happiness and would walk around for a whole day with an ecstatic smile on her face. The reason for this consistent happiness was that "the days of unhappiness were few and far over balanced by the days of torrential expressions of love' (p4).

Margaret's present happy state is thus contrasted with the continuous unhappy encounters she had had prior to this marriage. The man Maru thus becomes her source of joy. Her inability to remember her previous suffering depicts her total acceptance of her present situation and her inability to change her destiny. From the Freudian psychoanalytic perspective, Margaret's suppression of the painful memories of her past may be construed as a coping mechanism. Interestingly, Moleka who from the beginning had been the object of her adoration is now relegated to the realm of dreams. However, on waking up she has no mental impression of her dreams except those of the room in which she loved Maru. Only her husband Maru has a grasp of the whole situation but feigns ignorance about it. Dreams then may be construed as manifestation of suppressed feelings or thoughts.

Much as Maru's marriage to Margaret may be construed as an attempt at miscegenation, it is also an attempt to satisfy his selfish desires. He had wanted to marry a woman that would be loathed by everyone and in Margaret, his ambition is realized. No regard is given to Margaret's feelings as a woman. In fact her reason for accepting this marriage had been the fact that she had been left with no alternative. For her thus Maru had been a godsend, appearing just in the nick of time to save her from despair and a broken heart. Maru revels in this fact, in his view, until the time he married Margaret, 'she had lived like the mad dog of the village, with tin cans tied to her tail' (p5).

The portrayal of Margaret as having caught the attention of both Maru and Moleka, both of whom are royalties however, reveals her as good enough, that is, as deserving of male attention. Moleka, despite his attraction to Margaret, is unable to openly confess his love to her. Interestingly, his new course of action, the acknowledgement of the impression Margaret creates on him, the subsequent rivalry with Maru when he realizes that Maru too was interested in the same woman and even his invitation of his slaves to his table all point at his change of heart.

The change that comes over Moleka upon his first encounter with Margaret may be viewed as Head's attempt to ridicule prejudices leveled against women and individuals in general. This is revealed in the fact that Margaret being a Masarwa was regarded as a low breed in the society - the scum of the earth, yet here were two men of royal status rivaling for her attention. In essence therefore, individuals should be honest in their feelings towards others and not be captives of unfounded prejudices.

At another level, Head's attempt to destroy stereotypical images of women is depicted in her portrayal of the white woman, Margaret Cadmore. She is above petty prejudices. Her good sense of organization is revealed through her habit of doing things simultaneously so as to speed up the end result. Her personality is contrasted to her husband's who is depicted as naturally dull and stupid. These traits are however downplayed by the fact that he was a priest and by virtue of his calling, he mercifully remained silent for hours on end. His appearance as outlined by the author does not improve public opinion of him either. In

Head's description, he 'had a long mournful face. His mouth was always wet with saliva and he frequently blinked his eyes slowly like a cow' (p8). Given such a contemptuous portrayal, the white man thus operates in the periphery, overshadowed by his wife.

His wife, Margaret Cadmore on the contrary is depicted as having common sense in abundance. This virtue makes her timeless as though she could belong to any age or time, but always on the progressive side. This positive portrayal however does not make her impeccable. On the contrary, it makes her 'abusive of the rest of mankind' (p 8). In Head's description, her high strung nervous and energetic temperament made her live at the speed of a boat shooting over the rapids. Her continuous abuse of the rest of mankind which moved at three quarters of her pace had sometimes led her into situations where she was in danger of being assaulted. In this way Cadmore is painted as impatient and insensitive.

Though this portrayal may reveal her as a well rounded character with faults and strengths, it could also be understood as Head's way of acknowledging Cadmore as the oppressor. As a woman, she is painted as responsible, organized and self driven. But as a white she is domineering and contemptuous towards the black race. This gives her a sort of ambivalence.

This ambivalence is further developed in her actions in view of the existing circumstances. Though white, she is the only one who is willing to bury the dead Masarwa who had been shunned by others of her own race. Her caring nature is seen when she opts to adopt the child of the Masarwa woman. In her view, the Botswana nurses are indecent people, instead of washing the woman's body for burial they had let it lie on the stone floor unmoved by the fact that the loose shift dress in which she still was, had been soiled from the birth of the child.

Her intention for adopting the baby brings in the race equation. In her nurturing of the baby she still remains the colonizer, subjecting the child, named Margaret Cadmore like herself, to a kind of upbringing that alienates her from her roots. The end result is a timid individual who makes no conscious effort to claim her own space.

The other female character, Dikeledi, is portrayed as quite independent. She was the daughter of a paramount chief and the first of that crowd to put good education to useful purpose. Unlike the rest of her social class who merely used their education to adorn their social status, Dikeledi has a more practical view of the world. This is evident from the fact that she had no need of employment but unlike others who made wealth synonymous with idleness, wealth gave her the freedom to specialize in what interested her most. She thus does not let her Diploma in Early Childhood Education go to waste but takes up a position as a primary teacher at Leseding school.

Despite her privileged background, she is modest and accommodative. She is aware that the Masarwa are the underprivileged of the society but still remains cordial to Margaret. Between her and Margaret, there was no tension, restraint or false barriers characteristic of most human relationships particularly when individuals believe that they are of a higher social status than their counterparts. This respectful attitude towards Margaret further elevates the position of Dikeledi. She is strictly concerned with the individual worth of a person as a human being.

This outlook sharply contrasts Pete, the principal's opinion of Margaret. His composure is totally shattered upon learning that Margaret is a Masarwa. He impatiently waits for the noon bell and when this is finally rang, he walks at the desperate pace to the office of the education supervisor to complain of chicanery. Dikeledi thus emerges as emotionally superior to Pete. She is able to contain her emotions even in shocking instances as in the case when she discovers that Margaret is a Masarwa and not a colored as she had earlier on assumed.

Male contempt towards women is also portrayed through Pete. To him, Margaret being a woman was an easy target to handle. He says to Seth, 'She can be shoved out. It's easy. She is a woman' (p36). The woman is thus equated with weakness. She is a weak spot that poses no threat to the male ego thus would not be a hindrance in any way since she is easy to shove out. This implies the patriarchal nature of the society. The woman, by virtue of her gender may have her rights violated without much ado. Margaret is however saved from this predicament by virtue of her good qualifications. In Seth's assessment, she could not have got to her present position on her own brains. It was likely that someone was pushing her. To shove her

out of the way would therefore be risky because it was not clear who was doing the pushing. It was also possible that whoever was behind her might be important.

To outrightly rule out that Margaret could not have got to that position on her own brains shows the contemptuous attitude society has towards women. There seems to be certain designated levels beyond which women cannot go on their own. In desperation Pete couches a fourteen year old boy in Margaret's class so as to put Margaret to shame. His plan is unfortunately foiled by Dikeledi who incidentally was the only person who did not understand backstabbing.

The fourteen year old boy was expected to ask the humiliating question, 'Since when is a Bushy a teacher?' The rest of the class was to join in the chant. 'You are a bushman' (p41). Pete was to use this as evidence of Margaret's ineffectiveness as a teacher and thus have her sent out of the school. His calculations had unfortunately excluded Dikeledi who streaks ahead of him into the class and restores calm. Unlike Pete, Dikeledi is depicted as being mature and above petty prejudices, an individual who recognizes the inner value of people. Pete on the contrary is sadistic and malicious. He and his like were only angry when their plans to inflict suffering went haywire. Dikeledi is thus cast in a mould superior to that of Pete, the principal. In this way, the writer paints a positive picture of the woman. Dikeledi emerges as assertive and independent. She is not cowed by Pete. When he warns her not to be running around school during school hours as a way of trying to cover up his embarrassment, she does not hesitate to tell him off.

Through Dikeledi and Moleka's relationship, Head explores the intricate emotions of love. The quarrel between the two lies in where Moleka has actually hidden his heart. Dikeledi is unrelenting in her adoration of Moleka. Moleka on the contrary has had several sexual excursions in the village. However, he does not attach any value to these relationships. He is indifferent and insensitive to his partners' opinion. For him these relationships merely provide an outlet for sexual gratification. Whereas Dikeledi truly loves him, he is only attracted to her physically. He finds her dressing provocative. Her tight skirts, construed as elegance by Margaret are for him, an advertisement of her thighs intended to draw male attention. As he puts it,

Then why do you advertise your thighs? I'd like you to stop that. You think men don't know what you mean when you walk around swinging your thighs like that? They can't take their eyes off you and here you want to pretend all kinds of innocence before me'(p78).

In Moleka's view Dikeledi's mode of dressing is a kind of bait - an open invitation towards intimacy with the opposite sex. The contradictions in Moleka and Margaret's perception of Dikeledi's attire calls to mind the foundational assumption of Reader Response theory that a text does not have a sole inherent meaning but has as many readings as its readers bring into it. According to Culbertson (1998), Social Constructionism and Reader Response theory help us to understand that we read meaning into many things other than the printed page. What we are able to see, value and respond to in a text is socially constructed, and the meaning we draw from whatever we encounter is a priori resident within, generated by ourselves and shaped by the complex interaction of culture, life experience, and individual need.

Moleka's view of Dikeledi is shaped by his treatment of women as sex objects. To wear revealing skirts that expose the female anatomy, in this case, the thighs, construed as organs of eroticism is to indirectly offer one self for male advances indiscriminately. This assessment finds likeness in what Mulvey (1975) refers to as 'the male gaze'. Mulvey argues that within the classical structure of cinema, men possess the gaze and women are its object. This view is further explained by Schehr (1997: 82-83) who asserts,

It is the gaze, the defining mode of operation of masculinist discourse, that constructs the 'woman' as textual object, prevents the woman from being herself... from 'being,' from 'Being,' from having a 'self' separate from or prior to the sociovisual construct imposed by the male gaze and its/his discourse.

Moleka's sentiments may therefore be seen as his attempt to deconstruct Dikeledi's appearance from a masculine angle. It depicts his way of perceiving women as sex objects as inferred from his countless adventures with women and may not necessarily be in tandem with Dikeledi's motives. This is exemplified when it turns out that contrary to Moleka's perception of Dikeledi, Dikeledi only had eyes for Moleka and no other man. She had ignored all his love affairs because in her assessment of herself, she towered above every other woman of her kind in her world, intellectually and morally. Her obsession with Moleka however makes her gullible. She thus becomes an easy target for Moleka's vengeance

when he realizes that he has lost Margaret to Maru. Her only fear is the possibility of being encumbered with a fatherless child.

For Moleka's mother life with Moleka was a series of high dramas always ending in paternity cases. There were already eight motherless children living in her yard, their only justification for being there was that they all looked like Moleka having particularly inherited his distinctive thundercloud brow. Through Moleka's mother, Head explores maternal feeling for children as projected by mothers. Moleka's mother has no objection to his reckless behavior. Her life was a continuous harassment of women, fighting for her son. However, she puts up with it all mainly because she herself had only brought forth one child yet she possessed an enormous amount of maternal feeling.

Despite this reckless lifestyle Moleka's mother does not condemn him, she coddled and pampered him as if he were a three year old boy since after all he was her only child. In this way, Head evokes the woman's protective nature towards the object of her affection. Quite often she is able to tolerate even what may be considered as bothersome. Besides Moleka's many children making up for her own deficiency since she herself had only brought forth one child, it may be viewed as a survival strategy from a Darwinian perspective.

According to Charles Darwin's theory of Natural Selection which emphasizes the idea of survival for the fittest, the fittest does not necessarily refer to the strongest, biggest or smartest and most cunning individuals. On the contrary, the fittest are those with the combination of traits that allow them to survive and produce more offspring that in turn survive to reproduce. What makes an individual fit all depends on the environment at the time and the combination of traits that are most suited to flourish in it (O'Neil, 1998).

From a Darwinian perspective, we may deduce that Moleka's habit of carelessly siring children with different girlfriends was a deliberate strategy for survival. It was a protective mechanism to ensure the survival of his genes through diversity in procreation. His mother tolerates this as an assurance of the continuation of her lineage. Her sole proof and consolation was the physical resemblance between the children and their father. In essence therefore, it is the desire for survival that motivates Moleka's behavior.

Over the years, Moleka's mother had put a crease in her forehead to help her pretend anxiety for all the women who fell in love with her son. Ironically when Moleka falls in love with Margaret and begins to stay home each evening, passing many hours in brooding silence, his mother becomes truly alarmed, in fact the crease in her fore head becomes very real. This is a clear confirmation that she did not regret Moleka's recklessness.

5.1 The Third World Writer in *Maru*

In the text *Maru*, Head is committed to challenging racial discrimination. *Maru* is an exposition of human prejudice and racial discrimination. This is captured in the exposition of Margaret Cadmore's experiences. Head seems to acknowledge that prejudice may be learned by children from their parents. She says,

"Children learnt it from their parents. Their parents spat on the ground as a member of a filthy, low nation passed by. Children went a little further. They spat on you. They pinched you. They danced a wild jiggle, with the tin cans rattling. Bushman! Low breed! Bastard! (p6)."

Such discrimination is thus depicted as cyclic in nature in the sense that it is handed down from generation to generation. This also alludes to the difficulty of rooting it out. Margaret Cadmore's experience is one riddled with discrimination from a tender age. The kind of treatment she received when she started going to the mission school made her realize that there was something wrong with her relationship to the world. This was evident from the fact that she was the kind of a child who was slyly pinched under the seat, and next to whom no one wanted to sit.

Young Margaret is discriminated for no other reason than that she is a Masarwa. This inflicts a lot of psychological torture in her since like all other discriminated people she is a helpless victim of her race. Her helplessness is reflected in the writer's description of her,

What was a Bushman suppose to do? She had no weapon of words or personality, only a permanent silence and a face which revealed no emotion, except that now and then an abrupt tear would splash down out of one eye. If a glob of spit dropped onto her arm during play time hour, she quietly wiped it away. If they caught her in some remote part of the school building during play time hour, they would set up the wild giggling dance: since when did a Bushy go to school? We take him to the bush where he eats mealier pap, pap (p13).

Head at this point emphasizes the injustices of racial discrimination. Difference is treated as a crime, yet the victim has no power to change her appearance. The irrational attitudes of man are ridiculed. Discrimination imprisons the victim's personality. The young child adopts a permanent silence and a face that revealed no emotion. The only expression of her torment is an abrupt tear that would splash down out of one eye.

Young Cadmore is thus a victim of circumstances. She is condemned to undergo the same discrimination her mother underwent. Being Masarwa, her mother was untouchable so that at her death the nurses were reluctant to wash the body and when they did so upon instruction of the senior Cadmore, they wear expressions of disgust on their faces.

Globally discrimination among races is depicted as an age old phenomenon, so that members of different races discriminated against others which they felt were inferior to them as Head puts it,

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 South Africa could still smile- at least, they were not Bushmen (p7).

The global scenario depicts a socially stratified world with the European at the apex and the African at the bottom. The nature of discrimination in *Maru* is unique in the sense that it is practiced among individuals of the same race. The Bushmen in particular are placed at the lowest rung of the ladder so that of all things that are said of oppressed people, the worse things are said and done to the Bushmen.

Jenkins (1996) views identity as the way in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities. To be at the bottom rung of the identity ladder is equivalent to being equated to the scam of the earth. To remedy the situation, Head proposes love for mankind as the antidote for such discrimination. Her statement against racial discrimination is captured in Margaret Cadmore's attitude towards the nurses. She takes an instant dislike for them based on the treatment they accord the dead Masarwa woman. This dislike of the nurses flowed out of her observation of the manner in which they treated the dead woman. They let the dead woman lie on the stone floor, still in the loose shift dress, more soiled than ever from the birth of the child instead of placing her on the stretcher.

The caption she scrawls at the bottom of the sketch she makes of the dead woman in which she likens the woman's appearance to that of a goddess is her way of emphasizing her appreciation of the woman as a human being. In the white woman's estimation, the dead woman ranked pretty high from the expression on her face. To ridicule the nurses further, Margaret Cadmore sums up their hatred of the dead woman as the hatred of the fortunate. She wonders how much more the nurses hated those of the woman's tribe who were still alive if they so hated a dead body. Her sense of humanity is reflected in the adoption of the dead woman's child.

Noteworthy, however, is the fact that young Margaret is intended for experiment as indicated in the white woman's motto: 'environment everything; heredity nothing'(p 11). In reality Margaret Cadmore's interest was to see whether environment could create a difference in man depending on nature and level of exposure. As a result young Margaret's mind and heart were composed of a little bit of everything she had absorbed from senior Margaret Cadmore. This indiscriminate exposure that defied restrictions of race is the author's attempt to create a global identity. The end result was hardly African or anything but something new and universal, a type of personality that would be unable to fit into a definition of something as narrow as tribe or race or nation. The creation of a character that defied specific categorization thus results in a character of malleable identity.

This ideally seems to be Heads utopian solution to racial discrimination. It presents a universal vision of man. That is, beyond the skin color, individuals are basically the same. It was human prejudices that created differences among people. Yet ideally human beings are helpless in the face of nature since nature gives immutable definitions of man. The best they can do is to accept themselves as they are. As if to emphasize

man's inability to change his physical appearance, Margaret senior advises the young girl: 'They are wrong. You will have to live with you appearance for the rest of your life. There is nothing you can do to change it' (p14).

And indeed the young girl had to bear with her situation no matter how intimidating. The racial discrimination did not stop as signified by the tin cans that did not stop rattling. The only alternative was to find out how to take the discrimination in her stride. This depicts the difficulty of erasing racial prejudice. Thus the white woman's experiment only succeeds halfway 'that if an environment provided stimulus and amenities of learning, any human mind could absorb knowledge, to the limit of its capacities' (p14). The victim Margaret is however, condemned to remain at the fringes of society by the human prejudice that she is subjected to.

Head further present a paradox surrounding the myth of racial discrimination. This is evident in the assertion that those who spat at what they thought was inferior were really the low, filthy people of the earth, because decent people could not behave that way. The author thus implies that absolute perfection is elusive. Even those who regard themselves as great have peccadilloes thus the best option in the treatment of each other is to exercise tolerance. This presents the writer's criticism of racial discrimination, a vice that seemed to characterize Margaret's life all the time.

Through Margaret and her foster mother, Head dramatizes the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Colored resulted from interaction with the West. It implies a relationship of dominance of one culture over the other. Thus Head's narrator says of the missionaries,

When no one wanted to burry a dead body, they called the missionaries not that the missionaries really like to be involved with mankind, but they had been known to go into queer places because of their occupation. They would do that but they did not like you to walk into their yard. They preferred to talk to you outside the fence (p 8).

The missionaries in this instance are projected as being above the petty prejudices and superstition held on to by the natives. Margaret Cadmore's racial distinction for instance, places her above the irrational attitudes and contempt exhibited by the Africans. To bury an untouchable as defined by the African taboos was for her, part of execution of her duty to mankind. However, even in such circumstances, the social distance between the races is maintained. This is reflected in the fact that the missionaries preferred to talk to those reporting such incidents outside the fence instead of admitting them into the compound.

The distance between the colonized and the colonizer thus remains unresolved. The colonizing culture is the dominating culture. This is further emphasized by the fact that the white woman who adopts the baby intends to use her as an experiment. The end result is an alienated person of malleable identity.

The nurturing process is characterized by oppression stemming from the restricted options at the child's disposal. This is evident from the fact that 'there was nothing the child could ask for; only take what was given, aware that she was there for a special purpose'(p12) because now and then the woman would remind her that she would one day help her people.

Thus having shaped her candidate in her own way, the child was to be entrusted with a messianic role. This messianic role is depicted as achievable only if a difference is created in identity. This difference may be seen in terms of independence from racial prejudice as in the case of Margaret. This was necessary if the individual was liberated from the tether of prejudice. This role is emphasized in the post card she receives from her adopted mother, a month later in which there is a declaration that she had to remain behind for the sake of her people. Margaret thus occupies a liminal meditative position.

Her years at the teacher training college had passed by with little torture. This was attributed to the regular appearance of the white woman and the unashamed kisses on the cheeks. She had thus been mistaken for a colored. 'Is that your relative?'(p15). They asked curiously. And she had replied in the affirmative. The assumption that she was colored had granted her a little more respect though as an individual, "she had grown beyond definition" (p15).

This growth implies that Margaret, by virtue of her upbringing, had transcended racial prejudice. She had been subjected to so much discrimination in her lifetime that she had finally reached an emotional

equilibrium and had accepted herself as she was. Like her mentor, Margaret Cadmore, she recognized people for their worth as human beings and not on basis of race. Her helplessness in the face of discrimination had made her realize that basically people were the same and that one could not change their natural identity. Margaret's maturity and likeness with her foster mother is aptly summed up in the writer's observation that she was a little bit of everything in the whole universe, because the woman who had educated her was the universe itself.

In a separate incident when she reveals to Dikeledi that she is a Masarwa, Dikeledi draws in her breathe with a sharp hissing sound due to surprise. She then advises Margaret not to reveal her true identity to anyone else. Based on Margaret's appearance, she could be easily mistaken for a colored. Evidently, there was a little more respect granted to a half caste than to a Masarwa. In Dikeledi's view, disowning her true identity would better Margaret's prospects. Dikeledi's hiss of surprise depicts the uniqueness of Margaret's situation. By rising to the level of a teacher, she had become the 'other' of her race. Thus both her academic achievement and her tribe alienate her from mainstream society.

The encounter with Pete, the school principal acclimatizes the depth of racial prejudice. On learning that Margaret is a Masarwa. He is shocked beyond reproach. As Head puts it, 'the shock was so great that he almost jumped into the air' (p35). He is shattered by the prospect of being the sensation of high society circle for the whole week as a result of having a Masarwa in his staff. He thus frets the whole day, hardly able to wait for the school to close. He is incensed by the seeming friendliness of Dikeledi towards the Masarwa and wonders whether to warn Dikeledi that she was talking to 'it'. 'It' surely had the appearance of a colored' (p35). In desperation he goes to the office of Seth the education supervisor and complains of chicanery. The reference to Margaret by use of the inanimate pronoun 'it' marks the height of Pete's contempt for Margaret and her race.

To Seth, the presence of a Masarwa teacher was bound to raise hell among the Totems. According to Merriam Webster dictionary the term totem refers to an object serving as the emblem of a family and which often serves as a reminder of the family's ancestry. Etymologically, totem comes from the Ojibwe word 'dodaem' and means brother or sister kin. It is the archetypal symbol, animal or plant of hereditary clan affiliations. Totemism is a religious belief that is frequently associated with Shamanistic religions. Hutton (2001) describes Shamanism as a practice that involves the practitioner reaching altered states of consciousness in order to encounter and interact with the spirit world.

The Totems in *Maru* thus serve as an emblem of reverence. They are the highest authority in the land and are bestowed with the responsibility of resolving disputes and charting the way forward for the community through making appropriate decisions. The confusion arising out of Margaret's posting as a teacher at Leseding School is considered so great that it can only be resolved by the Totems. To preempt that Margaret's employment at Leseding is bound to raise hell among the Totems is to acknowledge racial discrimination as deeply entrenched in the community. It is a practice that is propagated by the very organs of authority whose position is also emblematic. Seth's sentiments therefore emphasize the depth of marginalization on basis of ethnicity within the community.

Unfortunately for Margaret, there was no requirement for anyone to define race or tribe when seeking employment. In any case, she had topped her class through and through. This in Seth's view was not easily achievable unless there was someone important pressing the buttons. The matter was thus to be left to the Totems to resolve.

In Pete's assessment, Margaret was mysterious. He says, 'There's a real mystery about the one at the school. They don't look in the face and say, I am a Masarwa' (p39). Margaret's confidence in her race is viewed as a deviation from the norm. Like all Masarwa, she was expected to be docile since she had no space in ordinary society. In Pete's view, her acknowledgement of her Masarwa identity was like a slap in the face. He had given her a loophole which she could have exploited by exclaiming that she was colored but she had not. In Pete's opinion, to be colored was equally trash but at least Margaret could have passed as one and saved them a lot of brother.

To brand Margaret as mysterious is to acknowledge her as profoundly inexplicable. Indeed this is the case with Pete since this was his first encounter with a Masarwa teacher. His world view had so far been limited to interaction with those of his tribe. Ordinarily the Masarwa were associated with servitude roles. Margaret as a Masarwa teacher was therefore a baffling phenomenon too complex to be deciphered. Her confidence

and pride in her tribe upsets Pete's world for it threatened the status quo. Pete's reaction to Margaret's revelation of her true identity can be seen as Head's way of emphasizing the binary distinctions that arise out of prejudice. It may also be an expression of the fact that knowledge is not the preserve of any specific tribe and that if given equal opportunity everyone can excel, tribe notwithstanding.

Ramelb (1989) states that despite differences in their perceived level of value to society,
Both Bushmen and coloreds share the experience of marginalization in twentieth century South Africa, where racially mixed children fall under the heading of colored and are often exiled socially, economically and culturally by both white and black people and are forced to stay within colored neighborhoods and communities.

Pete's reaction thus exemplifies this marginalization. His plot to humiliate Margaret however ends up humiliating him instead, thanks to Dikeledi who goes into Margaret's class and restores peace. Pete who had been halfway to Margaret's class is forced to retreat to his office in humiliation. The teachers of the senior classes laugh at him thus adding to his humiliation.

Through Dikeledi, Head offers her criticism of racial discrimination. She was royalty itself, had two Masarwa slaves in her custody and like all royalty was aware that the Totems kept numerous slaves in their household to serve their interests. However, she does not hesitate to come to Margaret's aid. She shouts, 'Stop it! Stop it! I'll smash you all to pieces! She is your teacher! She is your teacher' (p 41). Dikeledi's screams echo the fact that individual value should be placed above ethnic prejudices. Later she comments about the pupils' behavior, 'Poor little swine. They have been taught to be brave and laugh about the wrong things. Someone will have to teach them decency because their parents won't' (p42). Dikeledi seems to point out the fact that the mode of socialization of individuals always impacted on their perception of others. Prejudicial attitudes were often inculcated in children by their parents. At another level, Dikeledi's statement also implies a proposition for change. That in order to dismantle the cycle of prejudice, external intervention was necessary so that the children would imbibe from an expansive pool of perceptions that defied the bounds of tribal identity.

Likewise, Moleka's encounter with Margaret depicts Head's statement against racial prejudice. For the first time in his life Moleka, meets a woman who has a profound effect on him. He had had several sexual excursions but in each instance, was indifferent and unfeeling. On each occasion, he was the only one to emerge unhurt and smiling. Rumor in the village had it that 'he had taken his heart out of his body and hidden it in some secret place while he made love to all the women in the village' (P 22). His encounter with Margaret on the contrary makes him reflect on his past and realize that he had come to a turning point in his life. He declares that he had come to the end of one road and was now taking another. He acknowledges the fact that he had kept his heart for Margaret alone. The realization that basically all human beings were the same thus results to a more honest and truthful assessment of one's feelings.

Like Dikeledi, Moleka is royalty whereas Margaret belongs to the lowest category possible. Moleka's attraction to Margaret thus emphasizes the idiosyncrasies equated to ethnic prejudices. This attraction further results in revolutionary tendencies. Moleka invites all the slaves in his compound to sit at table with him during meals; he even goes to the extent of sharing a spoon with one of them. Head at this juncture seems to point out that basically all people are the same and share similar emotions irrespective of race or social status.

The attitude of the parents who enroll their children at Leseding School also highlights the baselessness of prejudice. On learning that the new mistress is a Masarwa, they laugh and say, 'The eye is a deceitful thing. If a Masarwa combs his hair and wears modern dress, he looks just like a colored. There is no difference' (P 48). The writer in this case warns against presumption. She emphasizes that it is often unwise to make judgment on basis of appearance since appearance may be deceiving. As a final acceptance of the situation the parents say, 'Prejudice is like the old skin of a snake. It has to be removed bit by bit' (P 48). This implies that change is a gradual process.

Like in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Head in *Maru* is committed to the quest for a perfect society, free of social evils. This is exemplified by the main character Maru. His marriage to Margaret Cadmore is geared towards the attainment of a perfect society free of prejudice, a society in which all people operate on the same plane irrespective of race or social status. Margaret is a Masarwa, an inferior individual by virtue of her down

trodden community. The Masarwa were mainly slaves. Maru himself owned several Masarwa as slaves. They took care of his one thousand cattle and fifty cattle posts and slept on the ground near outdoor fires. Their only blanket was the fire which warmed them on one side after which they turned over to warm the other side. Maru's marriage to Margaret thus signifies the liberation of all Masarwa people. As Head puts it,

When the people of the Masarwa tribe heard about Maru's marriage to one of their own, 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 (p 122).

The fulfillment of this marriage implies an attempt to dismantle all racial barriers. The fusion of royalty and a low breed is an attempt to dismantle all class barriers or rather an attempt to erase all binary distinctions. For the Masarwa, it was a step towards achievement of liberty and equal opportunity for all mankind as signified by the door that silently opened on a small, dark, airless room in which the souls of the Masarwa had been shut for so long. The smallness, darkness and airlessness of the room from which the Masarwa emerge signify the oppression and dehumanization to which they had been previously subjected.

Their recognition by the rest of mankind as human beings deserving of equal opportunity and dignified treatment is emphasized by the fact that the wind of freedom which was blowing throughout the world for all people, turned and flowed into the room. A sense of awareness dawns on the people as reflected in the fact that as they breath in the fresh clear air, their humanity awakens. This also implies that the Masarwa realize their worth and claim their dignity as human beings. The extent of the injustices that had for so long been exercised against them now dawns on them. With their consciousness awakened, the Masarwa adopt a revolutionary spirit swearing not to fall into the snare of oppression again. This may be viewed as the final mark of maturity. The Masarwa are now ready to take up their position in the society and shun all possible manner of evil against them.

At a wider level, the final liberation of the Masarwa alludes to the liberation of the vulnerable. Such liberation is only possible with the dismantling of racial prejudice. In this way Head voices for the voiceless. She proposes a scenario where everybody is accorded equal opportunity regardless of race or ethnic affiliation.

Not only does Maru bridge the gap between the royalties and the downtrodden but his leadership promises several positive elements which are absent in a dystopian society. He thus opts to renounce his heritage and marries a wife loathed by everybody. He says,

"Three quarters of the people on this continent are like Morafi, Seth and Peter – greedy, grasping, back-stabbing, a betrayal of all good in mankind. I was not born to rule this mess. If I have a place it is to pull down the old structures and create the new. Not for me any sovereignty over my fellow men. I'd remove the blood money, the cruelty and crookery from on top, but that's all (P 63)."

Maru thus expresses his dissatisfaction with the present state of affairs. He would prefer a society devoid of all manner of evil. To consider all evil people symbolized by Morafi, Seth and Pete as traitors of all that is good is to exonerate himself from this negative clique. His declaration that he was not born to rule that kind of mess is Head's way of emphasizing Maru's desire for perfection and subsequently her own desire for a perfect society. Maru would not be a partner in evil but would be an agent of cleansing. This is implied in the possibility of pulling down old structures to create new ones.

In this way, Head advocates a society in which there is good human relationship, a world in which people are sensitive to others' feeling and express genuine love. Above all, it should be a society in which sex, race and the color of one's skin are not parameters for judging human value or competence. As envisioned by Maru, 'There was a world apart from petty human hatreds and petty human social codes and values where the human soul roamed free in all its splendor and glory. No barriers of race or creed or tribe hindered its activity' (p 62). Apparently, this is the world of Head's dream.

The mental destruction and subsequent fleeing of Seth, Pete and Morafi signifies the purging of a society initially riddled with all manner of social evils. It is a symbol of cleansing. The three friends had been vehicles of oppression, discrimination, backstabbing and greed. Their evils deeds had placed them on the wrong side of Maru, and being intelligent they knew that life was not worth living if one was on the bad side of Maru. Maru thus becomes a symbol of purity and perfection. Head in this way strives towards a perfect society in which everyone has the space to exercise their freedom so long as they desisted from evil.

6.0 Conclusion

The study revealed that as a woman, Bessie Head is committed to reconstructing a positive image for her female characters. She does this by challenging stereotypical perception of women through dismantling of patriarchal structures that previously relegated women to subordinate roles. This is seen in the presentation of the female characters as ambitious, determined, assertive and independent as in the case of both Dikeledi and Margaret's foster mother.

The chief protagonist Margaret Cadmore who at first appears timid is depicted as quite mature in the outlook; she is not cowed by her Masarwa identity. She is the pivot around which two prominent males wrangle for attention. She goes around unruffled by the prejudicial attitude of the people around her. In addition, she is bestowed with a messianic role by her foster mother. Indeed Margaret later becomes the channel through which her tribe is liberated.

In delineating the experiences of women as women, she explores their most personal convictions thereby presenting their perception of issues as women. This is so in the case of both Dikeledi and Margaret who silently nurse their feelings of love towards Moleka.

As a Third World writer, Head is committed to social justice, exposition of suffering and dehumanization resulting from ethnic prejudice and superstition. She voices for the voiceless by advocating gender equity as a basis for development. On the political arena, she examines issues that ail African politics such as selfish and greedy leadership, oppression and discrimination on basis of race. The text particularly dwells on the racial prejudices and class difference in the society.

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