

Women's Role in Bessie Head's Ideal World

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BESSIE HEAD IS A CRUSADER for sexual and social justice for all men and women. Her favourite theme is the drama of interpersonal relationships and their possibility for individual growth and regeneration. She explores not only social harmony but also what is unique in each individual who contributes to it. In the realization of this task she employs an imaginative power and an original grasp of style which match her forceful moral vision. In all this, the woman's identity is fundamental; for it is still easy to encapsulate the central issues of all Head's novels into the vital issues of power and identity. In her own words:

All my work is scaled down to this personality need, with the universe itself seen through the eyes of small, individual life dramas. ("Biographical Notes" A)

She truly approaches her characters as individuals and, with her usual sensitivity and thoroughness, journeys through the innermost recesses of their lives. The product of this exploration is the emergence of that uniqueness which makes each of them special. To Bessie Head, South Africa typifies power in its ugliest form, and the revulsion with which she views such a moral wasteland has aroused in her a special reverence for human life and dignity.

Head's characters are refugees, exiles, victims, all of whom are involved in a personal and very private odyssey of the soul from which they finally emerge regenerated, as well as spiritually and psychologically enriched. These characters inhabit the harmonious new worlds which operate in her novels; but like Ngugi, she seems to imply that it is only from the interaction of both men and women in relationships of mutual love and respect that such

a society can be created. Like Ngugi also she has a number of solid, resilient, and resourceful women in her novels. Through them she explores the limitations of women's roles, their disadvantages and their bruised self-image, and celebrates their occasional successes.

Head saw herself as the paradigm of the African woman struggling against entrenched social and sexual prejudices. As an exile in Botswana she has come to know the realities of alienation, racial prejudice, rejection, and victimization. Although she admitted that her earlier works, *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *Maru*, were filled with personal data and responses to challenges that were on the whole internal and private, she has attained a degree of objectivity which allows her to expose and analyze the problems of the African woman both in the narrow village circle, where she is handicapped by age-old traditional mores and taboos, and in the slightly wider world of the town and the cooperative, where the challenges of a new phenomenon often expose the particular qualities, strengths, and weaknesses of the individual. In most cases these women help to build rather than destroy the harmony which Head is searching for.

Her first novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, deals with the search for roots from different perspectives and as it affects characters of different social backgrounds, with different personal problems. In this first novel three women emerge. They trail the usual characteristics of Bessie Head's women, who normally fall into a pattern of social abuse, emotional trauma, suffering, and finally growth in wisdom, peace, and partial happiness. Although a very important theme in this novel is Makhaya's search for peace and stability within a harmonious social order, his destiny is tightly controlled and eventually resolved by his association with the old woman, Mma-Millipede and his future wife, Paulina Sebeso. Mma-Millipede has been a victim of the crude and brutal power that Head criticizes in all her novels. She was initially forced into an unwanted marriage with a chief's son, Ramogodi, whom the author describes as "a drunkard and dissipated boaster" (68). Eventually she is divorced by the same Ramogodi, who soon falls in love with his younger brother's new wife and marries her after the offended brother hangs himself. It is

part of Head's moral idealism that Mma-Millipepe and old Dinorego, whom she was initially prevented from marrying, should finally come together as friendly neighbours. Through her own resourcefulness she soon settles down to a new life in Golema Mmidi. Her early exposure to some amount of missionary education has also had an impact on her personality:

Perhaps Mma-Millipepe was one of those rare individuals with a distinct personality at birth. In any event, she was able to grasp the religion of the missionaries and use its message to adorn and enrich her own originality of thought and expand the natural kindness of her heart. (68)

Mma-Millipepe emerges from her harrowing experience wiser and more generous. Her kindness and concern for everybody soon make her the mother of all. She watches, counsels the young, and participates in their problems. The young man, Makhaya, is the greatest beneficiary of the old woman's wisdom and love. He has come as a drowning man to a strange community searching for a few simple answers on how to live well and sanely:

It was to amaze Makhaya after all this that an old woman in the village of Colema Mmidi, named Mma-Millipepe, was to relieve his heart of much of its ashes, frustration, and grief. (126)

This statement comes after a period of friendship and trust, deliberately engineered and initiated by the old woman, who is partly motivated by her liking for the young man, and partly for the sake of her friend, Paulina Sebeso, who had shown some interest in the refugee. From the old woman Makhaya also learns that generosity of mind and soul is real because the old woman sustains that precious quality at a pitch too intense for him to endure. "He was never to know how to thank her for confirming his view that everything in life depended on generosity" (132). Their long conversations yield more fruit than the old woman herself ever expected. Mma-Millipepe therefore broods over the world of this novel like a guardian spirit, yet operates with the familiar human tools of observation, understanding, kindness, and generosity.

Paulina Sebeso is the other woman who stands out in Golema Mmidi, first on her own merit and personality, and ultimately as

the wife of Makhaya. Sebeso, like Mma-Millipede, had an unsuccessful marriage with a Rhodesian man who also killed himself to prove his innocence in a story of official scandal and embezzlement. In the process, she lost a home and all her property, and came to Golema Mmidi with her two children. The motifs of victimization, injustice, and suffering are present in the life of this impetuous and passionate young woman, who is also steadied in her emotional life by Mma-Millipede. Sebeso too learns from her fate, and comes to Golema Mmidi toughened and determined to start a new life. From the start the author sets her apart from the other women around her, for although, according to Head, "she was born into their kind of world and fed on the same diet of thin maize porridge by a meek, repressed, dull-eyed mother" (94), even as a child she was very inquisitive and meddling. Her athletic ability assured her more education than other women. Even her gait was decisive, and betrayed a sense of direction:

But throughout her life she had retained her fresh, lively curiosity and ability to enter an adventure, head first. It was all this that really distinguished her from the rest of the women, even though her circumstances and upbringing were no different from theirs.

She had travelled a longer way, too, on the road of life, as unexpected suffering makes a human being do. . . . (94)

Her gift in organization is amply demonstrated in her role at the co-operative. Even the old woman, Mma-Millipede, admits that Paulina is the only woman who can persuade the other women to attend lessons at the farm. Naturally, most of the men find her too bossy. Her courage and strength of character also stand out in her quiet acceptance of the death by tuberculosis of her son, Isaac. The final union of this impetuous woman with the reserved Makhaya marks the end of the refugee's morbid speculations on the oppressors and the oppressed and his journey towards self-discovery, peace, and happiness.

Dinorego's daughter, Maria, is the third significant female character in this novel. Reserved, clever, and unpredictable, she forms a perfect match to the simple and uncomplicated Gilbert, the practical man and the originator of the little agricultural

miracle which is one of the interesting phenomena of this novel. She is soft-spoken and meditative but at the same time full of ruthless common sense. For a long time she has quietly served her father, and after three years she agrees to marry Gilbert whose "strange" ways she reveals to Mma-Millipede when she goes to seek her advice. In her relationship with her husband she remains the dominant personality, quiet but retaining a mind of her own.

Through these women Bessie Head presents us with her ideal; they are all tough, resolute, schooled in suffering, and endowed with shrewd common sense. Their relationship with men is an equal one. They stand out from the generality of Botswana women, whom Head criticizes for acquiescing in their oppression, for remaining their same old "tribal selves, docile and inferior" (68) despite their exposure to the opportunity of missionary education. Head laments such a wasted opportunity by women who are naturally disposed to hard work. Nevertheless, her final picture of them remains admiring:

It was always like this. Any little thing was an adventure. They were capable of pitching themselves into the hardest, most sustained labour with perhaps the same joy that society women in other parts of the world experience when they organise fêtes or tea parties. No men ever worked harder than Botswana women, for the whole burden of providing food for big families rested with them. It was their sticks that thrashed the corn at harvest-time and their winnowing baskets that filled the air for miles and miles around with the dust of husks, and they often, in addition to broadcasting the seed when the early rains fell, took over the tasks of the men and also ploughed the land with oxen. (104-05)

In *Maru*, Head becomes more autobiographical but manages with enough artistic distance to make the history of Margaret Cadmore, named after her British foster mother, a representative one. It portrays the intense racial prejudice and tribal politics which inform life in a Botswana village, and under which women too often become victims. The background story is that of Margaret Cadmore, a Masarwa — the Masarwa are a despised group among the Botswana people — who arrives in the village of Dilepe and becomes the centre of a controversy, not just in the school, but between two friends, both members of the royalty and

both in love with her. Insults from children and adults alike fail to discomfit the heroine, since from childhood she has come to live with a feeling of being "permanently unwanted by society." Eventually, the situation is resolved into her marriage to Maru rather than Moleka, whom she loves. She is therefore a passive agent in this drama of power. However, she never stops loving Moleka, to the eternal chagrin of her husband, Maru.

Head invests Margaret with an air of mystery which complements Maru's mysterious personality. In addition, Margaret possesses a mine of inner strength and individuality which is her legacy from her British foster-mother. She represents Head's ideal woman, and in her retention of her love for Moleka even after her marriage to Maru, she symbolizes Head's ideal woman confronting the issue of male protectiveness and possession on one hand, and crude male power on the other. In other words, she is Maru's equal and, as an artist, dreams Maru's dreams, as Maru discovers later to both his dismay and joy. This issue is not resolved in the novel. Suffice that Maru's idyllic married life with Margaret is permanently tainted by a dark boiling cloud, typified by moments of brooding jealousy and malicious meditation.

The victimization of women is further demonstrated in the haste and ruthlessness with which Maru arranges the marriage of Moleka and Dikeledi. Although Dikeledi is born into royalty and has a profession as a teacher in the school at Dilepe she proves incapable of fighting the sexual abuse and arrogance of Moleka, who is notorious for his sexual irresponsibility. Between Prince Ramagodi and Chief Matenge of *When Rain Clouds Gather* and Moleka of *Maru*, the image of woman is that of a sexual object to be used and abused at will. Makhaya and Maru, however, stand for the new male humaneness which insists on seeing women as equal partners.

A Question of Power is Head's most complex novel, and her most ambitious. The nature of the emotional and psychological problems of Elizabeth, the main character, is the most obvious aspect of that complexity. It recounts a harrowing experience based on the reality of power, loneliness, exile, and ultimately insanity. In Arthur Ravenscroft's words:

One wonders again and again whether the phantom world that comes to life whenever Elizabeth is alone in her hut could have been invented by a novelist who had not herself gone through similar experiences, so frighteningly and authentically does it all pass before one's eyes. But there is no confusion of identity between the novelist and the character, and Bessie Head makes one realise often how close is the similarity between the most fevered creations of a deranged mind and the insanities of deranged societies. (184)

The novel is set in Motabeng and the events are filtered through the disturbed consciousness of Elizabeth who, in the process of the story, undergoes severe mental torture, loneliness, fear, and repetitive cycles of nervous breakdown. After each experience she becomes more frightened about the world around her. From her responses and conversations with her tormentors it is easy to identify her hallucinations and fear as the result of her insecurities as a woman and as an outsider in society. Just as in *Maru*, she is discriminated against and reminded that she is a "coloured woman." All these fears are aggravated by her own personal fear of going mad like her own mother.

In her struggle therefore, the issue of her own identity is primary, because her tormentors have come to regard her mind as a battleground on which each is fighting for the domination of her personality. The obscenities with which Dan violates her mind are to him the surest way of demonstrating his prowess as a man. The catalogue of grotesque women, each identified by a name equally grotesque, is Dan's exhibit of his power. Dan abuses his victim in the manner of all tyrants. Head speaks of Dan's "display of wreckage and destruction." This harassment is a most painful problem for Elizabeth. As she says to Birgitte in confidence and with admiration for Birgitte's nobility of mind:

But mine, my destiny is full of doubt, full of doom. I am being dragged down, without my willing, into a whirlpool of horrors. I prefer nobility and goodness but a preference isn't enough; there are forces who make a mockery of my preferences. (85)

The Motabeng Secondary School where Elizabeth works is the only sane centre of hopeful activity in the heroine's environment. Birgitte, in her strength of character and the "stripped-down

simplicity of her goodness," represents honest human relationships devoid of racial hatred or prejudice. Birgitte, with her dark unfathomable eyes and her unobtrusive, hidden, and silent manner, is a direct contrast to the blustering, loud Camilla, who greedily and hungrily draws all attention to herself and who sees everything in stark black and white; nor does she, in Elizabeth's words, "see the shades and shadows of life on black people's faces" (82). Such is the variety of women characters in this novel, but the reader's interest centres on Elizabeth, with all her sorrows, and the unfolding drama of mental torture in Motabeng village. Like Head's other women, however, Elizabeth finally prevails; she has come to her journey's end and attained true self-discovery in her affirmation that "There is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet" (206). In Head's words:

And from the degradation and destruction of her life had arisen a still, lofty serenity of soul nothing could shake. (202)

Head's three novels can be seen as a systematic study of women's roles and handicaps in society, especially an unjust one like South Africa. She has also x-rayed their emotional, psychological, and spiritual endowments in the context of a human society, sane and accommodating. Her women are invariably thrust into a hostile landscape from which they must grow and realize their identity. There are passionate women like Dikeledi and Paulina; reserved women like Maria and Margaret; wise old women like Mma-Millipede; silent but self-confident women like Birgitte; loud and pushy women like Camilla; and frightened and mentally tormented women like Elizabeth. Even weird Thoko has a special value in this landscape. Head assesses the Botswana woman's worth by the degree of inner strength, individuality, and drive with which she is able to rise above the brutalizing and restrictive roles assigned her by an unimaginative society. The degree of humility and sincerity with which she adapts herself to a strange people and society contributes to the harmonious co-existence of all in her environment. In exploring their day-to-day activities Head does not fail to point out that quite often these women perpetuate their own problems through mental conditioning and their acceptance of social norms and taboos and

also because of unfounded inter-personal jealousies. For all, their lives are a constant struggle and movement towards self-discovery. The case of Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* is the climax of this struggle. That she finally triumphs is a measure of Head's optimism. Elizabeth's victory is marked by her symbolic act of falling asleep and placing her hand peacefully over her land in a gesture of belonging. If there is one fact about Bessie Head that stands out in all her novels, it is her love for the Botswana people, the land of Botswana, and humanity in general.

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