Womanhood in Bessie Head's fiction

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Bessie Head, a South African woman who lived in Botswana, was a prolific writer whose literary interest centred on the lives of black people. Her interest addressed and challenged the marginalised lives of black people who were victims of apartheid. Later when she settled in Botswana, Head found the ethnic division in Botswana to parallel the racial segregation of South Africa. In *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969), *Maru* (1972) and *A Question of Power* (1974), Head addresses and deals with the racial tension in both South Africa and Botswana.

Yet as is the case in most literature by black women from Africa and the Caribbean, women and women's issues are also fundamental to Head's narratives. Like writers such as Erna Brodber, Olive Senior, Buchi Emecheta or Ama Ata Aidoo, Head portrays several strong, resilient and resourceful women. In addition however, her narratives also depict mentally fragile women. Through these diverse female characters, Head explores women's socio-cultural conditions, roles and disadvantages and more significantly, she celebrates their achievements. The focus on women challenges their oppression but also reinforces Head's vision of an ideal environment in which all humans, regardless of gender, race and class, will live in harmony. In the world she envisions, love and reverence for other humans is fundamental. Despite this political concern, it is documented that Head was always reluctant to accept the title of feminist: 'I am not a feminist (...) in the sense that I do not view women in isolation from men' (Eilersen 1995: 238, quoted from Khama Memorial Museum (KMM) 44, Bessie Head Papers (BHP) 26.01.1981 and KMM72, BHP 19.19.1982, Serowe, Botswana). Commenting on the relationship between feminism and writing in Southern Africa Head says: 'Writing is not a male/female occupation. My femaleness was never a problem to me, not now, not in our age (...) I do not have to be a feminist. The world of the intellect is impersonal, sexless' (*A Woman Alone*, p.95).

I suggest that Head's reluctance to identify herself as a feminist is linked to two factors. Firstly, it is a result of the connotations attached to the term 'feminist' within most of Africa in her time, a situation that still exists to now. A significant number of African men and women associate

feminism with deviation, an aping of western women's ideology that is 'destroying' traditional African culture. In an excerpt from his poem 'Letter to a Feminist Friend', which the Malawian poet Felix Mthali first presented in 1982 at Women in Nigeria Conference, Zaria, Nigeria, articulates this position succinctly when he writes:

> And now
> the women of Europe and America
> after drinking and carousing
> on my sweat
> rise up to castigate and
> castrate their menfolk
> from the cushions of a world
> I have built!
>
> Why should they be allowed
> to come between us?
> You and I were slaves together
> uprooted and humiliated together
> Rapes lynchings –
> the lash of the overseer
> and the lust of the slave-owner
> do your friends "in the movement"
> understand these things?
>
> ....
> No, no, my sister, my love,
> first things first!
>
> ...
> When Africa
> at home and across the seas
> is truly free
> there will be a time for me
> and time for you
> to share the cooking
> and change the nappies –
> till then,
> first things first!

From such a perspective, feminism is regarded as an undermining of the liberation efforts of the anti-colonial and anti-apartheid movements.

Secondly, I would like to propose that in an environment of racial exclusion such as the one Bessie Head belonged to in South Africa, Head's reluctance to label herself feminist is understandable, especially considering the effect of apartheid on black people. To adopt the term feminist would have suggested identification with white women who were seen as the 'originators' of feminism and by implication, suggest participation in the racial atrocities of the apartheid regime. In addition, it is clear that Head's refusal is linked to her philosophy of life, which is concerned with all humans regardless of race, gender and class. This is an ideal she holds throughout her fiction. Women and womanhood nonetheless play a crucial role and remain pivotal to Head's telling of her stories.

Ravenscroft (1976) points out that Head's novels inter-connect and form a trilogy. Although Ravenscroft's analysis is based on thematic content, it is also true in relation to Head's exploration of womanhood. In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Head looks at rural semi-literate women through Paulina Sebeso, Maria and Mma Millipede. Dikeledi and Margaret in *Maru* represent educated modern black women. In *A Question of Power*, Head deals with these groups through Kenosi and Elizabeth respectively. The novels explore women's challenges, illustrating their strengths as well as the dilemmas that characterise their daily existence. Through Margaret and Elizabeth Head also explores the link between ethnicity/race and womanhood.

An outstanding feature of Head's women is that each character is an individual in her own right. Head shows the women engaged in industry side by side with men to engender a new community of humanity. Regardless of the confines of their rural setting, the women demonstrate politicisation, dynamism and determination thereby revolting against subjugating traditions in their communities. As well as showing women's dynamism and industry, Head also highlights issues of ambivalence. Such representation calls to mind Gloria Chukukere's comments in which she perceptively points out that 'in their attempts to present a balanced viewpoint, female writers are equally objective in their analysis of female roles especially in exposing the inherent weakness of their victims which assist to perpetuate their subjugation within the patriarchal society' (Chukukere 1995: 10). This exposition of the women's weakness includes what Obioma Nnaemeka calls 'woman on woman violence' and includes issues such as female circumcision or the ridicule of barren and unattached women, which many African feminists see as important to black women's lives (Nnaemeka 1995: 83).

Like the other members of Golema Mmidi, Paulina Sebeso in *When Rain Clouds Gather* is a refugee. She comes to Golema Mmidi to find a new life after she is widowed. As is the belief in many Southern African societies, Paulina's native community believes that marriage takes precedence over a woman's academic and personal achievement. Consequently, in spite of an excellent performance at school, Paulina gives up education for the prospect of security in marriage (p.90). Unfortunately however, her teenage marriage to a traditional man from Rhodesia ends in early widowhood when, in the way of his tradition, the man commits suicide because his honour was at stake (p.72). Thereafter, with her two children, Paulina moves to Golema Mmidi to start a new life. In her new environment Paulina distinguishes herself once again. What sets her apart now is her inexhaustible energy, organising ability and individuality. She takes lead and capably organises the other women in all communal activities. However, her awareness of the multiple and complex issues that make up womanhood in her society set her apart from the majority of traditional women and men who regard sex and sexuality as the sum total of womanhood. Thus, despite her physical frustrations, Paulina ignores the sexual taunts of the men and women. She adheres to her moral principles that value women for their humanity and not as mere sex objects. When one day the women challenge her principles, she recognises the aim and patriarchal basis of the attack:

> It was bait-talk. It had been planned. They all had permanent lovers or husbands while Paulina Sebeso had none, and even a tradition was forming about her. A few men had said she was bossy. Then they all said it (...). They were determined to keep her trapped in a frustration far greater than their own. (p. 89)

Paulina's attitude challenges the traditional subordination of women on the basis of gender. She is critical of women who fight over men regardless of the men's morals (pp. 107-108), thereby participating in their own subjugation, just as much as she is scornful of men who see women as purchasable merchandise 'the way you bought a table you were going to keep in some back room and not care very much about' (p.120).

The old woman Mma Millipede similarly comes to settle in Golema Mmidi as a refugee. Like Paulina, she is a victim of the brutal power of traditional custom and practice. Initially forced into marriage with a chief's son named Ramagodi, she is later divorced because her husband falls in love with his younger brother's wife. When she moves to Golema Mmidi, Mma Millipede meets and

becomes neighbours with Dinerogo, a man she was prevented from marrying when they forced her to marry the chief's son. After she settles into her new environment, Mma Millipede soon establishes herself through her hard work and unique individuality which she expresses through a generosity and kindness that surprises and challenges all.

By portraying Paulina's militancy and Mma Millipede's kind generosity, Head illustrates the possibility of challenging tradition from within. Paulina not only rejects the traditional perception of women as mere sexual objects, she also demands recognition and acknowledgement of women's physical and emotional contribution to society. Paulina's eventual union with Makhaya, a refugee fleeing political persecution in South Africa, who is alienated from traditional beliefs that see men as superior and privileges them as a result, represents what Chukukere (1995:278) calls a 'reordering of societal values'.

In addition to illustrating women's militancy, Paulina's character, which foreshadows Dikeledi in Maru, also exemplifies some of the dilemmas of women seeking to assert their identity within traditional society. This dilemma is demonstrated through Paulina's retaining of internalised notions of what constitute female and male roles and traditional custom. She is, for instance, alarmed when Makhaya lights a fire, a chore socially designated as female in her community. Though she challenges the idea of male superiority through her independence, her attitude illustrates submission born of traditional practice. In addition, after they get to the cattle post where her son dies of a combination of tuberculosis and malnutrition while tending her cattle, Makhaya refuses to allow her to see the boy's body. Paulina's argument, which is based 'on our traditional custom', illustrates the powerlessness and therefore, dilemma of her character:

> She scrambled out of the car and raced towards the hut. But Makhaya reached the door before her and pulled her back and looked at her briefly with an angry expression....
> "The boy is dead," he said sharply, "Why do you want to go in?"
> "I must see the body", she said, but with dry, taut lips. "I must see the body because it is our custom."
> "You see," he said, in a deliberately harsh voice. "All these rotten customs are killing us. Can't you see I'm here to bear all your burdens? Come on." (*When Rain Clouds Gather*, p. 158).

Paulina's position and mentality also characterise Maria, another young woman in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. Similarly portrayed as innovative and ingenious

in a community steeped and entrenched in 'traditional custom', Maria fails to carry through an initial refusal to accompany her English husband Gilbert to England. When, in accordance with the tradition that allocated superiority and leadership to husbands, he demands obedience from her: "You're my wife now and you have to do as I say. If I go back to England, you go there too" (p.99), Maria abandons her earlier resolve to stay at home and acquiesces. Paulina's reaction is similar when Makhaya decides to take over the role of head of her household. Maria's story, like Paulina's illustrates some of the dilemmas of black women trying to assert their womanhood within traditional culture.

In the case of Margaret in *Maru*, Head illustrates that as an adult, she is confronted with gender discrimination in addition to the racial and ethnic marginality she had suffered since childhood. When the discovery of Margaret's Basarwa origins culminate in the decision to get rid of her, Head points to the multiplicity of her problems. Head demonstrates that Margaret's womanhood comes into play in the principal's decision to get rid of her: "she can be shoved out...It's easy. She's a woman." (p.41). Based on Botswana cultural perceptions of the female sex, Margaret's femaleness becomes a tool which the principal intends to use to his advantage.

After foregrounding the socio-cultural conditions Margaret faces in Dilepe, Head is particular about illustrating Margaret's strength and personality as a way of challenging Batswana gender and racial perceptions. For instance, Maru's royalty makes him a revered figure and beyond reproach in the community. Hence, when he demands that a bed lent to Margaret when she arrived at Leseding be returned, despite awareness of the harshness of his decision, Moleka, as well as the two men sent to collect the bed, silently carry out his command. The traditional expectation of silent submission from women (and the Basarwa), is however challenged when Margaret, who embodies both, goes to the offices where Moleka and Maru are and asks to keep the bed until she is able to buy her own. Margaret's action here reveals exceptional urgency, especially in the context of her inferior status as a woman and a Mosarwa.

In spite of the urgency she displays, there is ambiguity in Margaret's character which serves to illustrate the complexity and dilemmas of women's lives. Margaret's character illustrates women's internalisation of social beliefs rooted in traditional custom and the difficulty of breaking away from such practice. When Maru decides to marry Margaret, he does not ask whether she wants to marry him. He simply takes her away to be his wife in the distant place he

decides to settle in. While marrying Margaret is meant to demonstrate the equality of all humans that Bessie Head advocates, the idea that Margaret silently follows also reinforces the exclusion of the Basarwa and women's docility. Maru can only have a life together with his chosen wife outside the community. Additionally, it also shows how a traditional imposition on women has been internalised and became cultural practice. Because she is a woman, Margaret has no say in the marriage decision. She simply follows where she is led. This ties in with Schapera's study of Batswana life which shows that traditional practice allocates women inferior status (Schapera 1955).

As well as illustrating the complexity of women's lives, the narrative of the marriage also demonstrates Head's romanticism. Even though Margaret is an unaccepted member of society, her lifetime of racial persecution and deprivation comes to an end when the most highly placed male in the society chooses her for his wife and she gets to marry the most eligible bachelor in the community. In fact, in spite of the complexity and significance of the issues raised, romantic love always plays a big role in Head's fiction. There is always romance in her stories and it is possible to ascribe this to Head's own deprived childhood and failed marriage. In *Thunder Behind Her Ears*, Eilersen suggests that Head always harboured a dream of finding the perfect partner and living happily ever after. Such a dream is clearly expressed through the happy marriages at the end of *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *Maru*. Although Head is a romanticist, she is however, also very perceptive of the realities in her society. Through characters such as Matenge, Dan and Sello of the brown suit, she foregrounds and addresses oppressive, insensitive and destructive nature of some men.

Dikeledi, the other woman in *Maru*, is the quintessence of modern womanhood in Botswana. Highly liberated, Dikeledi is presented as a revolutionary in many ways. As daughter of the reigning chief, social expectations would allocate her the position of role model in the community; a repository of Batswana tradition and customs. Dikeledi, however does not conform to such a position. She wears short tight skirts and smokes cigarettes. She is the first female member of the royal household to put a 'good education to useful purpose' through employment (p.25). Unlike other female members of the royal family, Dikeledi uses her education to gain freedom. She turns a personal interest in people into a career in teaching. And as part of the teaching team at Leseding, she displays independence and individuality of character. Against local belief and practice, she does not subscribe to the idea that the Basarwa are less than human. A part

of her inheritance as daughter of the reigning chief is two slaves. Yet contrary to tradition, 'without fuss or bother, [Dikeledi] paid them a regular monthly wage' (p.25). Dikeledi's love and concern for other humans is also responsible for her affection for Margaret. When Margaret comes to Leseding, she quickly gains the friendship and respect of Dikeledi. Dikeledi's belief in Margaret's humanity is the reason for her angry outburst when the pupils in Margaret's class undermine her humanity through their racist chants. In a voice 'like murder, shrill and high like the shattering of thin glass against a wall' Dikeledi shouts: "stop it! I'll smash you all to pieces! She's your teacher. She's your teacher!" (p.146).

Dikeledi's treatment and defence of the racially marginalized, and expression of her wrangle with oppressive traditionalism, is however problematized by what amounts to a traditional outlook towards men. Dikeledi has clearly internalised traditional notions of what it is to be a woman in her society. Like many other women, Dikeledi feels a sense of inadequacy because she is not attached to a man. Thus in spite of her independent personality, Moleka's love is important to Dikeledi's sense of self-worth. Unfortunately however, her obsessive affection for Moleka blinds her to his moral faults. She does not see through his deception. When he makes her pregnant, it is not out of affection but because he sees her as a sexual object, a tool for exacting his revenge against her brother Maru. Dikeledi's feelings for Moleka are regardless of his corrupt and irresponsible morality. I suggest that Dikeledi's individualism and independent personality is compromised through dependence on Moleka's affection for a sense of self-worth.

In A Question of Power, Head revisits rural womanhood through the village woman Kenosi. Portrayed as poor and struggling to make ends meet, Kenosi is the only Motswana woman who unconditionally accepts and befriends Elizabeth. She meets Elizabeth at the gardening project set up to teach modern agriculture methods to the locals in Motabeng as a way of helping them achieve economic self-sustainability and independence. Kenosi's bond with Elizabeth is despite the other villager's suspicion and rejection. Because Elizabeth is a foreigner and multi-racial, the village women decide that she is physically weak and, therefore, incapable of coping with the hard work of farming. Whenever the cropping season comes, they consequently leave her alone in the village as they head off to their fields. White women such as the Danish woman Camilla on the other hand, bases her identification with Elizabeth on the fact that they are both foreigners and cannot speak Sestwana. Yet Elizabeth quickly becomes

aware of the insincerity of Camila's identification. She realises that Camilla's constant condescending reference to the Batswana and particularly the apprentices Kepotho, Dintle and Small-Boy as 'these people' actually also includes her. There is not much difference in the way Camilla addresses the apprentices and herself. To both she flings incomprehensible and meaningless information in order to demonstrate her cultural and racial superiority. Later when Camilla throws herself into an association with Elizabeth, it is obvious that it is because she believes that an association with one of the 'natives' is one way of 'helping' the native. The social exclusion Elizabeth faces in Motabeng contributes to the mental breakdown she eventually suffers. The idea that women are in the forefront of Elizabeth's exclusion illustrates, in my view, one form of the 'woman on woman' violence that Chukukere draws attention to.

Through Elizabeth, Head deals with the psychological effect societal marginalization can have on women. *A Question of Power* documents how the pain of oppression and marginalization can lead to mental breakdown. As well as her exclusion by the women, Elizabeth loses her job as teacher in Botswana because she rejects the sexual advances of the Head teacher/principal of her school. The principal's behaviour links with the victimization Elizabeth faces at the hands of the phantom figures of Dan, Medusa and Sello of the brown suit. All three figures torture Elizabeth with accusations of sexual ineptitude. On more than one occasion, Dan actually performs sex in front of Elizabeth and thereafter goes on to boast of his and his women's sexual energy. Medusa also taunts Elizabeth by throwing her blinding thunderbolts in addition to also accusing her of sexual incapability. Medusa flaunts her own genitalia in front of Elizabeth and arrogantly challenges her: 'You haven't got anything *near* that, have you?' (*A Question of Power*, p. 44, emphasis in original). Though Dan and Medusa are phantom figures and exist only in Elizabeth's mind, they are real to her. She sees and interacts with them. Consequently, as a result of their torture and the social marginalization she faces in Motabeng, Elizabeth ends up mentally fragmented and needing hospitalization.

Besides using madness to demonstrate the extent of women's pain and suffering, *A Question of Power* illustrates and emphasises women's ability to resist and overcome their marginality and oppression. An important difference between Head and other African women writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo who also deals with madness in texts such as *Anowa* (1987) and *Changes* (1991), is that in *A Question of Power* Head does not deal with madness *per se*. Rather, she focuses on the process of mental breakdown. By portraying the process,

Head is able to communicate the women's strength and determination through their ability to eventually triumph over the threats to their sanity. Elizabeth's nightmarish 'journey' starts when the monk-like Sello first appears in Part I. He appears frequently until Elizabeth gets used to his presence and starts to communicate with him as she would any living person. Soon he creates the figure of Medusa (37), and from his figure also emerges the figure of Sello of the brown suit. Medusa and Sello of the brown suit are joined with Dan in Part II and together embark on torturing and terrorizing Elizabeth with accusation of sexual inferiority and perversity. Every night the three figures rise in Elizabeth's room denying her rest and sleep. One night she is brought to a cesspit:

> It was filled almost to the brim with excreta. It was alive, and its contents rumbled. Huge angry flies buzzed over its surface with a loud humming. He caught hold of her roughly behind the neck and pushed her face near the stench. It was so high, so powerful, that her neck nearly snapped off her head at the encounter. She whimpered in fright. She heard him say, fiercely: "She made it. I'm cleaning it up. Come. I'll show you what you made". (p.53)

The extreme cruelty of this repulsive incident does not kill Elizabeth. Head suggests that the fall into the deep darkness that follows this tormenting experience provides Elizabeth with an opportunity to look inside herself and reclaim her life. Thus to the amazement of the nurse attending her at the hospital, Elizabeth abruptly jumps out of her sick bed, declares herself well and discharges herself. Elizabeth's fight and determination for survival is displayed again a year later when she experiences two hands opening her skull and screaming unintelligible noises in the exposed area (p.177). Though this incident, like the others involving the phantom figures, is at a spiritual level, it causes a real knife-like pain to shoot through Elizabeth's body. Head emphasises the interconnectedness of the real and the spiritual by portraying that Elizabeth wakes up from her haunted sleep gasping for breath (p.177). I suggest that these incidents and the other occasions when Elizabeth experiences ostracization and rejection provide portraits of women's social positioning not only in Botswana, but in many other African societies as well. Through Elizabeth who always manages to confront and overcome the source of her pain and suffering including pyschosis, Head illustrates women's determination and possession of an inner capacity for survival.

Although Bessie Head refused to accept the title of 'feminist', the social position of women clearly remains one of the central themes of her texts. Through her portraits of strong and resilient women, Head challenges women's subjugated position and claims their humanity as important members of society. Her stories illustrate that inspite of their oppression and marginalization, women have held on and survived the exploitative persecutions of society.

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