

Race, Gender and Exile in National Discourse: Another Reading of Bessie Head's *Maru*

- Adamu Pangmeshi

Abstract

From history, since 1994, South Africa is undergoing a process of social change though at a slow pace. This is probably due to the multiethnic and multicultural situation of that country. Writers are the thermometers of their epochs. Bessie Head is one of the most prominent writers who in her works project the inevitable change that had to come in South Africa. The objective of this paper however is to chart the argument that art cannot be discarded in national discourse and national life. In this light, we have demonstrated that racism, gender and exile are not any barrier to social transformation. Head has created a 'new world' where mankind should live together without any regard to skin, colour or gender. Additionally, we have demonstrated that Head has moved far beyond the stereotype of the white oppressing the blacks to unfold in Maru that systems of privilege and discrimination also work within the black community. Head's meticulous interrogation of racism, exile and gender in Maru, is an indication of her concern with the complexities of power.

Keywords:

Racism, Exile, Gender, inferiority, empowerment, consciousness

INTRODUCTION: When apartheid was instituted in South Africa in 1912 and later adopted as a government policy in 1948, a number of things went wrong at the socio-economic and political levels. *Mallaby Sebastian* holds that it was a policy of separate governance which was put in place to stagnate the growth of the blacks who make up a majority of the South African population. This tense background brought about many problems amongst which were racism, gender problems and exile. This has not gone unnoticed by the South African writers especially because writers are the thermometers of a given society. Consequently, most if not all the positive and negative ills that apartheid brought with it has been captured in all the genres of literature produced in South Africa. Bessie Head, a creative writer from South Africa did not ignore it especially because the policy of apartheid affected her much. This explains why she is not only focused on her biography but is also particularly concerned with the issue of apartheid in her works. *Desiree Lewis* in 'Power, Representation, and the Textual Politics of Bessie Head' informs us that:

Among her various narratives, the best known concern her origins; in many autobiographical stories and the third of her published novels, the child of a union between an upper class white woman and a black stable hand is placed into the foster care while her mother is incarcerated in a mental hospital.(124)

Our contention in this paper is to chart the argument that art cannot in anyway be discarded from national discourse. *Maru* is a story that deals with complex issues. This explains why it provoked much literary thought when it was published. The idea of racism, exile and gender inequality have received much attention from Head herself. Lewis further tells us that it is because 'For Head, fictionalizing herself became a matter of inserting a dissenting voice into fields of oppressive cultural stories of selfhood. In her autobiography writings, she constantly reworked past memories which often bore little or no relation to those of others. (125) This keeps surfacing and resurfacing in her works. The concepts of exile, gender and racism will be identified and analysed with the objective of revealing how they have become issues of national discourse or concern within the world of *Maru*.

Racism/ racial discrimination is one of the terms that have been derived from the word race. When a group of people identify themselves as one, they tend to look down on those from a different tribe. This is the kind of situation that I have realized here. It is segregation amongst races. It has taken the form of differences in tribes, skin colour, hair and eyes. It is an assumption that of an inherent racial superiority of certain tribes against others. This often leads to the domination of the supposed superior races over the inferior which intend leads to hatred and conflict between the races. We realize that it is common in areas where there is a multiplicity of races like South Africa, the United States of America, and the West Indies to name these few.

Racial discrimination has as earlier mentioned received much attention from Head in this novel. In this context, we have the Botswanans, who consider themselves as originating from a superior race and the Masarwas who are considered as people from the '*bush tribe*' or the inferior race. Consequently, the Botswanans exercise a lot of racial power on the Masarwas. Aspects of racial domination are repeatedly articulated in Head's *Maru*. This has to do with the domination of a weaker race by a tribe which thinks that it is stronger. This is manifested through racial discrimination and open prejudice. The Botswanans look upon themselves as the '*real people*' and the Masarwas '*bush tribe*' as the inferior race. The Botswanans enjoy certain undeserved and unjustified privilege which are associated with racial superiority, to the detriment of the Masarwas. Consequently, the Masarwas feel subjected and relegated to the background. In a bid to dignify their own race, the Botswanans do just everything possible to bring to the limelight all the elements of prejudice against the Masarwas. Craig Mackenzie underscores thus:

Maru is read better as a sort of parable, a moral discourse on the evil of racial prejudice. Indeed, the power of the novel can be felt in the richly evoked tension of the village of Dilepe, where racial prejudice is a

tangible presence. Perhaps an authentic revoking of the author's own experience. (56)

The Botswanans look upon the Masarwas as people who are closer to the animal kingdom. Consequently they are branded as 'backward race associated with 'Bushmen'. Nurses by the ethics of their profession are public servants who should save lives and attend to the public without any regard to race and skin colour. We rather see the contrary here. Racism has become an issue of national concern in the Botswanan society. It is discussed by almost every person. We realize that the Botswana nurses are unwilling to clean the corpse of Margaret Cadmore II's mother, who dies after child birth. Washing the corpse of an 'untouchable' will amount to stooping too low. This phenomenon was common in South Africa during the apartheid days. This racial animosity has been handed down to the children by the elders. At the Leseding mission school, where Cadmore II attends school, she is jeered at, spat at, checked and isolated by her young Botswana mates. Head explains that

It is only when she started going to the mission school that she realized that something was wrong with her relationship to the world. She was a kind of child who was slyly pinched under the seat, next to whom no one wanted to sit ...what did it really mean when another child walked up to her and looking so angry said, you are just a bushman. (17)

Cadmore II is considered as a strange element whose presence is not needed. Her school mates dance wildly around her in a mocking tone, expressing surprise and disgust to see a bushman at school. About this concept of racial differences in Maru, Head in *A Woman alone* underlines thus;

With all my South African experience, I longed to write an enduring novel on the hideousness of racial prejudice. But I also wanted the book to be so beautiful and magical so that I, as the writer would long, to read and reread it. (68)

As a result, racism is seen here as an instrument of domination. Faced with this race conscious society, Cadmore becomes powerless. A society wherein racial prejudice has become the song of the day. She is helplessly moved to tears. I think that by encouraging racial prejudice from one generation to the other, the Botswana race wants to continue to subdue and enslave the Masarwa people till the end of time. When Cadmore II is appointed to the post of teacher at the Leseding School, her situation does not change. She witnesses prejudice at its most undesired form. Seth and Pete are rather the instruments of torture. They manifest prejudice in its entirety. Pete and Seth consider it abnormal to have a Masarwa as one of their staff. Seth wonders thus;

I really do not know how it happened.... I really wonder what Maru is going to do about the Masarwa problem. Things are moving ahead for this country and they are the only Milestone. I do not see what we can do with people who can't think for themselves but always need others to feed them. Mind you, they seem quite content with their animal life. (44)

This is what is going on in the minds of the Botswana people. They see the Masarwas as the forgotten lots. As such, Margaret is seen

more as a problem than something good to the Leseding School. Consequently, Pete and Seth are bent on doing away with her. Pete emphatically discloses '*either the Masarwa teacher goes or I go* (89). It becomes evident that Pete and his people are unable to draw the line between one's tribe and her experience. They use race and skin colour as the yardstick to determine the standard of competence. Pete says, he is convinced that Cadmore II will unteach rather than educate the kids. Pete is aware that the children of Leseding School hate Margaret. To make things worse for her, he incites the children to disrupt Cadmore's lessons, the outcome of which is total pandemonium. He out rightly reprimands Cadmore in his drafted report. As is expected of a school administrator to put order in school, Pete rather takes advantage to humiliate her more. Pete's reaction is underscored in the following lines thus '*But Miss Cadmore, why can't you control your class? You are disturbing the whole school... I find Margaret Cadmore an ineffective teacher. She is totally incapable of controlling her class*' (46). He does everything to get Margaret Cadmore expelled from his staff. The totems or law makers who are also the king makers, are supposed to ensure equality among the races and see to it that, justice is implemented. *Ironically, the Masarwas are slaves, they sleep on the ground near outdoor fires, their only blanket being fire* (59). *They suffer from malnutrition, they on shoes and sleep on the floor* (15). We see Dikeledi discouraging Maru from getting married to a Masarwa '*But you can't marry a Masarwa, not in your position*' (66). If the totems who are supposedly the lawmakers and king makers of this society can only fold their arms and see racial prejudice being perpetrated by a group who claim that they come from a superior race, then we can insinuate that they are behind the whole evil. And so this explains why it has become something of national concern. It has taken an upward trend. It is moving from one generation to the other. That is from the elders to the younger generation. This presupposes that if it is not checked, the spill over will continue and the society will continue to be contaminated.

In the same light, women are still discriminated upon in spite of the stiff resistance that is continuously being mounted. Gender inequality is still made manifest. I am referring here to the domination of women by the men. This, I think is flamed by patriarchy. Mariam Lowe notes that female domination comes from the patriarchal and hierarchical division of labour in which the women are confined to domestic duties. Over the years, women have been given secondary roles. Head in presenting women as people on whom we can count is insinuating that the disparity between men and women should be deconstructed. This explains why she strives to do away those patriarchal norms that render the woman subordinate to her male counterpart. Head places the woman at the forefront where she plays major roles to improve on her status and on her society as a whole. She represents women as assertive beings seeking recognition and visibility their society. She consciously attempts through fiction to reverse the image of the African woman as opposed to the

image that women have given since time immemorial. She has succeeded in putting in place women who violate and go against societal norms put in place the men against them. Head does not think that men are wittier, skilled or superior in any way than the Women. Consequently, she brings up female characters to work alongside their male counterparts. Some of them exhibit some talents and skills which are deficient or completely absent in some men. These women are able to shape their own lives and destiny.

Margaret Cadmore II is used by Head to demystify the thought that education is reserved for men. She successfully graduates from a teacher training school and qualifies to teach at the Leseding Secondary School. Cadmore II is best in her class. She comes second after Dikeledi as a female member of staff. Like men, the women can successfully impart knowledge. Dikeledi and Cadmore II are intellectuals. They are financially independent, contrary to the African mentality which holds or held that a woman has to be dependent on her husband. At a given point in time, Dikeledi is uplifted to a position of prominence. She takes over from Pete as Principal of the Leseding School. By placing Dikeledi in such a leadership position, Head in her own way attempts to equate and bridge the gap between the men and the women, hence decentring the centre and bringing those at the margin (women, to the centre of activities in a male dominated society).

Margaret Cadmore II is endowed with the rare and unique power of artistic and imaginative creativity. Cadmore is able to preview and foretell the future and destiny of Dilepe through her artistic creations and paintings. Her paintings have a prophetic impact on society. They are great and very striking. Maru appreciates. Cadmore II feels that her relationship with Maru has not yet reached a level where she should manifest her own emotions. She is able to withhold her emotions so that the relationship works out itself. She has proven to be a cultured woman who knows her worth and so pulls an air of self respect. She does not just give in to Moleka who engages in all kinds of funny deeds and tricks just to win her love. It could be said that this is the attribute that Head recommends for the women folk.

In the same light, Dikeledi exercises some degree of self control. As a decent and educated woman, she is aware of her rights and as such determined to maintain her dignity. She scolds Moleka when he makes his first amorous pass at her home. *'I see that you are just going on undressing yourself but it is not to my liking'* (82). She is conscious that before love is consummated, the participants must come to an agreement. She is aware of the effects of an uncalculated sexual act. And so is very determined not to have children out of wedlock. She points out to Moleka *'as you know, I am not narrow minded about anything but could not endure to have fatherless children'*. In this way, Head makes real her feminist dream.

By creating female characters who strive to be self independent, Tistsi

Dangaremba in *Nervous Condition* like Head wants to erase the notion that women should depend on men for their livelihood, thus bridging the gender apartheid. Both of them opt for the society which is free from gender inequality. This has become an issue of nation discourse in the world of *Maru*. Firstly, women who have all through been allocated subordinate roles have raised themselves to the status of men. Dikeledi has been appointed principal of the Leseding School, in a society where the Totems or law makers are the men. On the other hand, Maru the paramount chief has crossed the taboo line. He does this by getting married to Cadmore II, a 'Masarwa'. A girl from the 'Bush Tribe'. This creates a kind of general pandemonium within the Botsawana society, for it is common belief that the Masarwas are people from the inferior race. By so doing, Maru has succeeded in dismantling the idea of racism. The Masarwas can now have a voice. They have been moved from the margin to the centre. When the people of Delepe village heard about the marriage of Maru, they began to talk about him as if he had died. It was a general concern. They were no longer seeing Maru as their own kind. On the contrary, when the Masarwa people heard of the marriage, they were overwhelmed. Head attest:

When 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 hurt for a long time. The wind of freedom, which was blowing through out the world for all people, turned and flowed into the room. (126)

The Masarwa people were in the end given their voice. This is what runs through the lips of every person. They even had to question why they were being denied their own status as human beings. And so they said '*We are not going back there*' (127). Through this, Head has demonstrated that change is an inevitable issue in the human society. As we continue to grope in the dark, there will come a time when things will change for the better.

Exile is also one of Head's preoccupations. It is suggested here not by physically leaving a place one belongs to, even though that is never absent, but rather by exclusion. Margaret is exiled a second time into oblivion after her marriage to the paramount chief (Maru) This shows change which sort of moves Margaret from a state of psychic instability to psychic stability.

Maru and Cadmore's desire to marry each other and become one with the other group is indicative of their primary motivation - which is to belong. Here, Head suggests the possibility of merging the dominant with the marginal discourse. It is curious that the notion of the 'Masarwa' can liberate herself in the same way, because with marriage, she becomes god's anointed and must respond appropriately to her new position thus exiled her cultural values. She is therefore a changed person. She has been changed as a Masarwa and her status as a colonized subject has equally changed. Maru on the other hand is exiled though voluntarily. By exiling himself Maru himself has become a messianic figure by turning

away from kingship. Exile becomes an inherently disruptive force and as such necessitates the creation of a 'new world'. Maru decides to turn down wealth and Power for the new world that he dreams of a retreat into the personal world outside time and space. This makes the Botswanas to think that he has betrayed them by abandoning their cultural values. They fail to know that change cannot be stopped. At the end of the novel, the Masarwas come out of the 'dark room' of their oppression. Their liberation comes as result of Maru's elopement with Cadmore II. This is to the surprise of the people of Botswana. This becomes an issue of national concern. This explains why the Botswanas rather consider Maru dead. Head attest thus '*When people of Dilepe heard about the marriage of Maru, they began to talk about him as if he had died. A Dilepe deceased prostitute explained their attitude. 'Fancy' she said. He has married a Masarwa, they have no standards*' (126). Head does not want to look at the fact that if you belong to a minority group, you should be exiled from national and gender discourses. I think that she is proposing that mankind should endeavour to live as one for mankind is one. She successfully does this by letting Maru the paramount chief who is supposed to be an incarnation of their cultural values to get married to a Masarwa. This is the idea that she envisages for humanity.

CONCLUSION

Racism, exile and gender have been discussed here with an ulterior motive. Racism as discussed here should be understood in terms of racial prejudice perpetuated by the Botsawanas against the Masarwas. The Masarwas as earlier indicated are despised and stigmatised as people from the 'bush tribe'. Head has not just presented this but she has proffered a solution to it. She has done this by letting Maru the supposed custodian of tradition to defile it and get married to a lady from the 'bush tribe'. In doing this, Head has created a new world wherein people should live together without any regards to skin colour, tribe and race. She has also attempted to break the racism that is identified in gender. She has done this by successfully uplifting the image of the women. She has made us to realize that women are capable of contributing meaningfully towards the forward movement of the society. Within this context, we see Cadmore as a very intelligent student, a good teacher and a good painter. Dikeledi has also been portrayed as a good teacher. She has just taken over from Pete as the principal of the Leseding Secondary school. Exile has been analysed here as a solution to racism. Maru does not consider whether Cadmore is from his own tribe, black or coloured before eloping with her. His elopement with Margaret takes the form of exile. This comes in at the right time. Maru does become a kind of saviour here. This is somebody who has turned down the chieftaincy post in favour of a girl from the 'bush tribe', knowing well that he is going against the tradition of his people. This goes a long way to erase the notion of discrimination in the world of Maru and by extension to humanity in general. Beyond this novel, it should be understood that Maru is a

microcosm of the world of South Africa during the days of apartheid which was plagued by numerous problems. Head has given an artistic solution to the problems. I think that her dreams have been realized. With the collapse of apartheid that was adopted as a government policy in South Africa in 1948, this country could be said to have moved forward. At least apartheid is no longer a legal issue in South Africa.

I have demonstrated here that the role of art is very important in national life. We expected that Maru should keep to the norms and cultural values of the Dilepe people given that he is the custodian of tradition. He turns it down and goes on wilful exile with the Masarwa girl. This is where his people become very angry and rather prefer him dead than alive. Although the social impact of Maru's departure is laudable, it does not present well for the people of Delepe. But the point one is further making is that change is inevitable in the human society. Maru becomes a symbol of change for the human development especially within the world of Maru.

Above all, I have additionally demonstrated that Head has moved far beyond the stereotype of the white oppressing the blacks to unfold in Maru that systems of privilege and discrimination also work within the black community. Head's meticulous interrogation of racism, exile and gender in *Maru*, is an indication of her concern with the complexities of power.

Works Cited :

- Abrahams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 3rd Ed. New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston., 1971.
- Head, Bessie. *A Woman Alone*. Ibadan: Heinemann, 1990.
- _____. *Maru*. London: Heinemann, 1973.
- Lewis, Desiree. 'Power, Representation and Textual Politics of Bessie Head' in *Emerging Perspective on Bessie Head*. Ibrahim Huma Eds. Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 2004.
- Mallaby, Sebastian. *After Apartheid: The Future of South Africa*. London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1992.
- Mackenzie, Craig. *Bessie Head*. New York, Twayne Publishers, 1999.

