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## POWER POLITICS AND RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN BESSIE HEAD'S MARU

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### Abstract

Thus, Head's *Maru* provides ample illustrations of Botswana society in which women experience traditionally articulated oppressed position due to cultural practices. Racial displacement plays a vital role in framing image of women. Women are identified not on the basis of achievement but according to race. The image of woman in Botswana is distorted due to misrepresentation of womanhood. Women are marginalized on gender perspective. The prejudice that men are superior has led the women in Botswana to unpredictable condition. On the basis of gendered bias, women are tortured, treated cruelly and silenced their voice. Since the Botswana society is powered by male gender, space provided for female is limited. All these elements lead women to suffer psychologically. Head as a refugee resident has put her experiences to illustrate the prejudiced view of community that predict the unpredictable condition of women in Botswana.

**Key words:** predicament, racial discrimination, racial segregation

**Bessie Emery Head** (6 July 1937 – 17 April 1986), though born in South Africa, is usually considered Botswana's most influential writer. Bessie Emery Head was born in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, the child of a wealthy white South African woman and a black servant when interracial relationships were illegal in South Africa. In the 1950s and '60s she was a teacher, then a journalist for the South African magazine *Drum*. In 1964 she moved to Botswana (then still the Bechuanaland Protectorate) as a refugee, having been peripherally involved with Pan-African politics. It would take 15 years for Head to obtain Botswana citizenship. Head also published a number of short stories, including the collection *The Collector of Treasures*. She published a book on the history of Serowe, the village she settled in, called *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*. Her last novel, *A Bewitched Crossroad*, is historical, set-in 19th-century Botswana.

She had also written a story of two prophets, one wealthy and one who lived poorly called "Jacob: The Faith-Healing Priest". *Maru* (1971), Bessie Head's second novel, explores a love story of Margaret Cadmore, a San orphan, who is adopted by an English missionary. After completing her education, she is sent to Botswana village to take up her first teaching position where she experiences a powerful disruptive presence and a lifetime abuse from her peers in the life of village that makes her virtually silent and expressionless. She also experiences that the people of her tribe are kept as slaves in that village. She loves two men in her life; Maru, a future chieftain of village and his friend Moleka, those who later becomes bitter opponents because of their love for Margaret. Moleka's inability to proclaim his love openly for Margaret as a San woman advents Maru, who wins her love by tasting her dignity and creativity. Though Margaret seems to be impassive outwardly, she anchors her tumultuous inner life in her art.

This simple love story of Margaret though initially seems to be lucid and sensible, it is pathetic especially of women's point of view in the culture of Botswana, where interracial relationships are neglected as immoral act and outlawed from community. It clearly rejects the very existence of other racial people called as Basarwa in Botswana. In this sense, it is double pathetic to women; first, they are treated as an object of pleasure and second, racially they belong to Coloured, non-existent of indigenous and bushy people in Botswana. In her first two novels, *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *Maru*, Head offers love stories of men and women, who are fully alive for each other. No cultural barriers or laws can restrict the lovers. Bessie Head depicts love as an intimate relationship between man and woman that cannot be banned by the South Africa's Immorality Act of 1950.

Women characters play a crucial role in Head's tales as the whole stories revolve around them and represent their life and predicament in African cultural context. She has very purposefully put the compassionate love stories of her protagonists in the cultural context of West Africa where "people are 'frightened into' showing each other compassion, and only give way to love 'under extreme pressure and pain'. Her love stories highlight the great risk of making a gesture of faith in mankind, whose wickedness can be extraordinary". Head believes in

love that only can barely stop the terrible vulnerability of African woman. Head's love stories are much related to her autobiographical element as she was born in a mental asylum in Johannesburg to a white South-African mother and adopted by Coloured family in Natal due to rejection of her own mother's family; Margaret Cadmore also suffers from the similar trauma in the novel. Margaret has also been rejected the same familial and communal love as that of Head had. So, in her letter to Randolph Vigne, she writes, "The best and most enduring love is that of rejection". This ironical statement clearly reveals the predicament of African Black women who were culturally denied their fundamental right of expression by the Acts of government the then, Racial segregation, gender discrimination and communal practices. Being rejected, one leads to psychological trauma that has been implicated in Head's novels, *Maru* and *A Question of Power*.

*Maru* is the novel about women predicament led by the cultural practices of Botswana society. Racial displacement is the major cause of women predicament. Since, racial displacement in country's system of power distribution, the relationship between politics and race is clearly evident in the behaviours and activities of the local people and management. While emphasizing race relation between different tribal communities, Head restates her belief as it is universal prejudice. Her novel, *Maru*, as Nichols puts a remark is a "thesis against racialism". The prejudice is not the entitlement of the whites: rather it is a wicked mindset that infuses all races. "Before the white man became universally disliked for his mental outlook, it was there". It is the human tendency which is used to differentiate superior-inferior, dark-fair, high breed-low breed, modern-bushy, etc. On these non-existent ideologies man is separated into races as Black, Coloured and White.

The upper class of Botswana hate their counterpart anticipating them as bushy, downtrodden, or untouchables, rather death cannot escape them from this wretched and unpredictable condition. The dead woman represents the dreadful example of racial discrimination. Her phenomenon strongly upholds the truth that they are deadly alive and living death in life. This condition has been noticed by Head, as she says, "if they so hated even a dead body how much

more did, they hate those of this woman's tribe who were still alive". The grief that Head experienced in her life which is executed in fictional diction has of know no bounds in relation to women predicament from South African perspective. Throughout the novel, Head shares insights on the nature of racial segregation as she puts her view: "How universal is the language of oppression, they had said of the Masarwa what every white man had said of every black man: "They can't think for themselves, they don't know anything" (315). The racial differentiation and determination remain same whether it is White or Black or Coloured, each dominates other. So long before the white man appears in South Africa, the tribes of higher social standard tried to impose their cultural values over minority and showed tendency to look down upon them. The only purpose behind it was, they wanted the minority group to be enslaved. So, in Batswana the field works like harvesting crops are traditionally completed by minority groups. In *Maru*, the life of Dilepe village in which, "the stronghold for some of the most powerful and wealthy chiefs in the country, all of whom owned Masarwa as slaves". Hence, slavery, one of the important aspects of Botswana culture, is threat to humanity. At the very first introduction to Dikeledi, who tries to protect Margaret's racial identity without displaying protest shows her intense prejudice prevalent in the community. Another example that emphasizes the degree of racial prejudice is Pete's discovery of Margaret as a new teacher who belongs to Masarwa, his dismay is quickly replaced by contempt. Instead of calling a pronoun 'he or she' for human being, he replaces identity of Margaret with 'it' as she is no longer a human being but an animal. All these prejudices experienced during the life time of Margaret affect mentality of black women.

In Botswana, both societies; Batswana and Basarwa practice discrimination on the basis of physical appearance. But the important issue is that the racism has plagued the mentality not only of Whites but it has also affected the view point of Black Africans. In *Maru*, Head has used the dichotomy of the oppression between black and black and not between white and black. For instance, indigenous Botswana people hate their counterpart rather than white missionaries. Hence, it is significant to note that Head is against power manipulation and anti-racism. She is not anti-whites as it is proved by the

experiment of Margaret Sr., who puts a Masarwa child into her theory in a such a way that she achieves success. According to her theory, “environment everything; heredity nothing”, the circumstances in which the knowledge, training, education and human values impart proper personality. Her personality successfully changes the perception of Batswana people towards her community Masarwa, whom, “no one wanted to, except as slaves and downtrodden dogs of the Batswana” and the words of Margaret Sr., “One day, you will help your people”, come true by her marriage with Maru, the future paramount Chief of tribe.

In patriarchal societies like Botswana, men dominate women. Real battle is for control as male gender attempts to rule female through guile, falsehood, and deceit. Though men delude themselves as superior and women as inferior, it is not proven in relation with sex. It is worldwide that both prefer to hypocrite rejecting the true relationship between them based on humiliation and equality. It is significant to note that woman is held responsible for her own fate as she submits herself to socially ascribed role and exercises the cultural ideology that is imposed upon her. In *Maru*, Head criticizes women for their moral degradation as they fall prey to power and wealth because Dikeledi and Margaret do not understand their sexual role to the extent that Maru and Moleka generated the power to the degree. Similarly, many other women become victims of Maru’s status as wealthy and powerful man. As Maru knows that no matter how physical appearance of women correspond with their inner qualities; their true nature is external beauty because they seek only, “the social gains that would accrue to them and it made their behaviour despicable to his all-seeing eye”. The victims who enjoyed love affair with Maru, display alarming symptoms such as the strongest fled away due to nameless terror where as the “weakest went insane, and walked about the village muttering to themselves”. This shudders Head’s vision of society with reasonable sexual relationship because of its pathetic result as it makes their behaviour despicable. The Power in Botswana is culturally equated in the hands of Chief, who rules over the community. In *Maru*, two kingdoms; of Maru and Moleka are ruled over Batswana and Basarwa communities. “They are kings of opposing kingdoms”: Moleka’s kingdom has

limited space as it belongs to power and to Maru, the kingdom of love that is dwelt everywhere. The aspect that distinguishes both is the humility and pride. Moleka equals with Maru in all the senses possessing a humility and lowliness that display power and aggression in him. So, Maru while walking towards home, cannot penetrate as he perceives that “was it a superior kind of love? Or was it a superior kind of power? reveals unresolved contradictions in the male which definitely leads to the predicament of women in Botswana in particular and Africa in general.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, Head's *Maru* provides ample illustrations of Botswana society in which women experience traditionally articulated oppressed position due to cultural practices. Racial displacement plays a vital role in framing image of women. Women are identified not on the basis of achievement but according to race. The image of woman in Botswana is distorted due to misrepresentation of womanhood. Women are marginalized on gender perspective. The prejudice that men are superior has led the women in Botswana to unpredictable condition. On the basis of gendered bias, women are tortured, treated cruelly and silenced their voice. Since the Botswana society is powered by male gender, space provided for female is limited. All these elements lead women to suffer psychologically. Head as a refugee resident has put her experiences to illustrate the prejudiced view of community that predict the unpredictable condition of women in Botswana.

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