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The Female Revenge: A Study of Bessie Head's The Collector of Treasure

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Abstract:

Colonialism has been a destructive force of nature that has affected colonized peoples at different level and literature has been a reflection of this dark part of human history, among which short stories reveal almost exactly what larger literary genres maintain in terms of ideology and culture. Bessie Head's "The Collector of Treasure" speaks of the gracious, merciful women (house wives) who seem to be searching for scrapes of happiness and their earnest desire to live a peaceful life in a damned, insufferable male dominated world where most of the people became desperate and libertine after independence due to the effect of colonialism. Almost all the female characters in the story "The Collector of Treasure", Dikeledi, Kebonye, Otsetwe, Monwana and Galeboe except Kenalepe protest against the discriminative patriarchal society which has been treating them as inferior to man. This essay attempts to shed light on how the simple amiable affectionate tolerable women (like Dikeledi) become so violent, terrible and revengeful and the murderers of mariticide by estranging the genitals of their husbands. This was an attempt by the oppressed women who were shackled by their own negative image, by centuries of interrogation of ideologies of patriarchy and gender hierarchy. The revolt of the female against the male by cutting of the genitals of their voluptuous husbands by the female characters is seen as a de (con)struction of phallocratic society.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Revenge, Conflict, Womanhood, Sex, Violence, Castration, colonialism.

Introduction: Bessie Amelia Emery Head was born on 6th July, 1937 in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. She was the child of a 'white' woman and 'nonwhite' man and at that time interracial marriage was considered as illegal in South Africa. She moved to Botswana in 1964. She was considered Botswana's most influential writer. Many of her works are set in Serowe, an urban village in Botswana's Central District because it has played an important role in Botswana's history. Few of her well known works are: When Rain Clouds Gather (1968), Maru (1971), A Question of Power (1973), The Collector of Treasure (1977) and A Bewitched Crossroad (1984).

Literature of Africa in the postcolonial era emerges as a mirror of the colonial power, subjugation, violence, and the resistance. Most of the literary pieces of that period deal with the theme of cruel experience, inhuman treatment and endless exploitation of the native population by the mechanism power and politics of the white Europeans in the name of colonialism. But Bessie Head's story *The Collector of Treasures* tells a different story. There is no conflict or struggle between the powers of the colonizers and the native people and no picture of torture and exploitation by the British People in the story but the picture of inhuman torture and treatment upon their native wives by their native husbands of post independent Botswana. Here almost all the female characters rebel against their husbands and their authority and power which they enjoyed in male dominated society and murdered them by cutting the 'special parts' of their against their inhuman bestial torture and preferred to live in jail peacefully not to "feel any sorrow about the crime"

Aims and Objectives: The chief aim of this study is to explore the psychological as well as physical disruption occurred in the lives of the female characters in Botswana before and after the colonization in patriarchal society and why they revolt against patriarchy run by the men like Geresago who treats woman nothing but a sex object denying their "tenderness and care" in the story "The Collector of Treasure."

Research Question: Many important questions arise in the process of investigation of this story *The Collector of Treasure* by Bessie Head.

1. What were the conditions of woman before and after the colonization in Botswana?
2. How were they treated by the patriarchal society?
3. What happened to the men before and after the colonization?
4. Was the attitude of man towards woman changed after colonization?
5. Why did the woman like Dikeledi and Kebonye start the mariticide?

Research Methodology: Qualitative and historical method has been used in the study. The recent development of theories related to feminism has been incorporated in the study for the purpose of analysis.

Review of Literature: In the process of current analysis of *The Collector of Treasure* by Head, many reviews over the oeuvre of the author by many critics have been allured to lay down their opinions and analysis in the field of story of Bessie Head's literary world. The story mainly deals with the life of life of Dikeledi Mokopi and her estranged husband Garesego Mokopi and another four women who killed their husbands in same way. He has left her and their three children and she has to take care of them, while he has set off in his pursuit of sexual gratification with other women. Dikeledi gets on very well with her neighbours Paul and Kenalepe Thobolo. Garesego, however, is jealous of the relationship between Paul and Dikeledi. When Dikeledi is in need of money to pay for their eldest child's school fees, she invites Garesego over to her house to discuss it. He is under the impression that she wants to have sexual intercourse. In him there were no sign of tenderness, love and affection for his children. He came to home only to have sex with Dikeledi. She however, takes a kitchen knife and cuts off his genitals. For this deed she is

imprisoned for life. In jail she befriends four other women who have committed the same offence. In her discussion of the collector of treasures Susan Gardner alludes that this collection “has a discernible feminist content” because it focuses on “the insistence that women have suffered systematic social injustice because of their sex”.

Taiwo summarises the essence of the collector of treasures as follows: (1) a woman plays the leading role in each of the stories, (2) it focuses on the status of women in a modern African society and (3) the village becomes a microcosm of traditional Africa at large. Femi Ojo-Ade examines the collection and concludes that the male-female relationship is primary in the text because “the community cherishes life and the continuity of the race ...” Bessie Head takes sides with the woman, the silent partner whose story must be told”. Concomitant to that Craig MacKenzie describes “the hardship women of the village experience” as the main focus of the stories. A central metaphor within psychoanalytic and feminist literary criticism is the phallus and concomitant to that are words such as “phallic”, “phalocratic” and “phallogocentric”. Toril Moi explains phallogocentrism as “a system that privileges the phallus as the symbol or source of power”. Following Lacan one should always realise that “phallus” does not merely refer to the penis itself but it is also a symbolic construct signifying male dominance in society. Jones points out that since women lack the phallus, which she regards as “the positive symbol of gender, self-possession and worldly authority”; they not only occupy a negative position in society but also within man-made language.

The following these inform my reading of the title story from Bessie Head's the collection of treasures: -

1. Garesego Mokopi represents the phallogocentric misogynist.
2. Dikeledi Mokopi deconstructs African phallogocentrism by dismembering her husband.
3. Paul Thebolo signifies the other, the liberated man.

Other aspects of the text will also come under scrutiny but these are the three main theses under discussion. Central to the contemporary reading process is the notion of multiple readings and therefore this analysis ought to be regarded as one possible reading of the text which definitely does not aim to be the final reading of it. My interpretation is open to new readings of the text.

In the story, the five female characters –Dikeledi Mokopi, Keybonye, Oseetswe, Galeboe and Monwana are the representative of the oppressed women of Botswana after the independence after the colonization. This does not mean that oppression was not done before independence. The story is narrated from feminist viewpoints. The extreme form of feminism is seen while the female characters cut the genitals of their husbands due to their bestial torture upon their wives. The narrator mentions “three time spans”-first the ancestral period before colonization, second the colonization period and third the independent period after colonization. The attitude of ancestral patriarchal society towards woman was deeply criticised by Bessie Head and her attitude towards ancestors is “The ancestors made so many errors and one of the most bitter-making things was that they relegated to men a

superior position in the tribe, while women were regarded, in a congenital sense, as being an inferior form of human life. To this day, women still suffered from all the calamities that befall an inferior form of human life.” For Mackenzie, a woman is regarded as sacred only if she knows her place, which is in her yard with her mother-in-law and children. Women in Botswana were oppressed by this tradition. They were supposed to think and work in accordance with patriarchal rule and authority. This implies that they were restricted by their culture.

Colonialism: is a practice or policy of control by one people or power over other people or areas, often by establishing colonies and generally with the aim of economic dominance.^[1] In the process of colonisation, colonisers may impose their religion, language, economics, and other cultural practices. The foreign administrators rule the territory in pursuit of their interests, seeking to benefit from the colonised region's people and resources. Under the colonial rule people in Botswana are subjugated, oppressed, tortured by the colonialism and “it broke hold of the ancestors” and scarcely enriched life and they become “the boy of the while man”. This period changed everything and men often had to perform domestic chores in the colonial homes - tasks that were usually that of the women. Within contemporary white society black women often play the role of substitute mother and within their own communities the sons who are supposed to fend for the household have either been killed in detention or are in exile.

In post-colonial Botswana, the setting of the Head's short story, men are confused (with are unfamiliar the sudden changes like dramatically changed pattern of colonial subversion, availability of more jobs under the new government's localization and high rocketed salaries) because they are unfamiliar with the changes and responsibilities they have to adhere to. “It provided the first occasion for family life of a new order, above the childlike discipline of custom, the degradation of colonialism. Men and women, in order to survive, had to turn inwards to their own resources”. The change in society and its structure has also brought about a false sense of liberation to men. The new signs of masculine pride such as jobs in the administration, money and power have resulted in fickle anarchy. They become more desperate, lascivious and alcoholic and negligent fathers and husbands. Years of colonial repression now results in sexist bestiality. The situation of the woman who were traditionally and forcefully made dependent upon man becomes miserable and intolerable by the persons like Garesago, Dikeledi's husband and by the husbands of Kebonye, Otsetswe, Galeboe and Monwana. The women suffer even more than men in this new post-colonial society. This is why Ngugi wa describes post-colonial societies as perfect replicas of colonial practices. The new government is not used to a democratic culture and therefore only allows one viewpoint, that of “the ruling regime”.

In the story, an account of two mariticides is narrated –the murder of Dikeledi's husband Garesago and the husband of Kebonye and the murder of the other three women's husbands is not narrated. From the story it is known that the three women have been suffering imprisonment for their same crime of matricide by cutting their husbands phallus. Husbands of Dikeledi and Kebonye are the government employee and they should

have responsibility for the society and for their wives and children to lead a “family life of new order” above the custom and culture of colonialism imposed upon them. They turned into “...a broken wreck with no inner resources at all...spun away from himself in a dizzy kind of dance of wild destruction and dissipation”.

Dikeledi's husband Garesago Mokopi and Kebonye's husband, an education officer are the representatives of the phallogocentric supremacy of men in the society. They present the phallogocentric misogynist. They are libertine, lascivious and inhuman in nature. In the opinion of Kebonye “Our men do not think that we need tenderness and care”. Sex is the main object of their life. They do not know the mutual love and relationship between husband and wife. Kebonye's husband demands sex whenever he wishes whether she feels ill or not and it does not care for her husband and there is no relief from her husband's demands “to satisfy all his needs”. The inhuman torture of Kebonye's husband is known from the words of Kebonye “...my husband used to kick me between the legs when she wanted that. I once aborted with a child, due to his treatment”. Sexual torture by her husband was unbearable to her and for this reason said to her husband “if he liked he could keep some other woman as well as because I couldn't manage to satisfy all his needs.” This is not only a physical torture but also a mental torture because a husband is the most precious object to a wife who prefers to die than to share her husband to another woman. Such types of physical and mental torture the woman has to undergo. The situation becomes unbearable to Keboyne Whenever accusation comes from angry parents for impregnating a school girl, she kills him by cutting the genitals of her husband “with a razor”

Garesago Mokopi is a negligent alcoholic father and husband He is also one of the men described by the narrator as “evil” who “creates “misery and chaos” and similar to a “dog” who “imagined he was the only penis in the world and that there had to be scramble for it”. Femi Ojo-Ade describes these men as the worst in Head's stories because they “make babies like machines and turn their backs upon the poor women”. Ojo-Ade regards Garesago as someone who has “all the essentials to feed his hunger for sex and alcohol”. As a man husband, Garesago neglects his duty and he has never taken care his wife Dikeledi how she was leading her life with the children whom he abandoned after begetting them. He only chased after women and led a voluptuous, alcoholic and carefree life, neglecting all his duties. Dikeledi with her hard labour managed to feed her children happily. While Dikeledi badly needed some money as admission fees for her eldest son Bathabone, she went to Garesago for help .But he doubts about Dikeledi's fidelity and denied to help and tells her to take money from Paul Thebolo who is suspected as the lover of Dikeledi.

Garesago's object of return to home is only to do sexual intercourse with Dikeledi. That explains the reason for his letter “Dear Mother, I am coming home again so that we may settle our differences. Will you prepare a meal for me and some hot water that I might take a bath? Gare.” He was a shrewd and cunning person. Not only does he try to be affectionate (he calls himself “Gare”) but he plays on her emotions by calling her “Mother”. This is his technique he uses to manipulate Dikeledi. But Dikeledi interprets the letter as an expression of his sexual desires, namely that he is “coming home for some sex”. In contrast to his

“Mother” she opts for “Sir” when she answers his letter: “Sir, I shall prepare everything as you have said. Dikeledi”. From her letter it seems as if Dikeledi accepts his demand without questioning it. She is, however, aware of the real intention behind the words. “(P)repare” is an ironic choice of words in this case, because she also plans her final act. The patriarchal association of women with the preparers of food in the kitchen is thus undermined. The castration of Garesego Mokopi was thus a premeditated deed of vengeance. Kenalepe had seen Dikeledi sharpen the knife on the afternoon prior to Garesego’s arrival and she detected “a final and tragic expression on the upturned face of her friend”.

Once he has entered Dikeledi’s yard Garesego reaffirms his position as phallocratic man and he scans the environment for the presence of his rival, Paul Thebolo. There is no challenge of his phallic supremacy because Paul Thebolo is in his own yard. Garesego, however, feels that he could reaffirm his erstwhile position as the patriarch of the family when he enters his own yard. In him Dikeledi did see only the thirst for sexuality and notice any sign of tenderness for the children that “might have broken her and swerved her mind away from the deed she had carefully planned all that afternoon”. After his sexual gratification, while Garesego was sleeping she cut his genitals and gives him a violent death and completed her revenge.

It may be said from the above discussion that the rest three women’s husbands were in good position in the society and they were murdered due to their inhuman treatment like Garesego and Keboyne’s husband who dominate in the patriarchal society and made the woman’s life miserable and unbearable which led them to revolt and revenge against patriarchy.

On the otherhand Paul Thebolo is a direct contrast to Garesego. Paul is a mythical and liberated and innovative man of the so called new Africa. He loves his wife and children

Results and Research Findings: Through this study, it has been made possible to have a glimpse on the myriad forms or issues of feminism in the post-colonial period pervaded in in the text *The Collector of Treasure*. The current study helps to bring about the relationship between man and woman and man’s attitude towards woman in Botswana. It is the microcosm of female revolt against patriarchy run by the people like Garesego.

Conclusion: To conclude this study, it can be said that the story, the collector of treasure by Bessie Head leaves immense space for the readers and the critics to cast their critical glance to open up new windows of knowledge. As a postcolonial writer, Bessie Head does not only saturate her this story with multiple issues related to colonialism but also provides a deeper insight into the reality of Botswana during its pre independence and post- independence period .The extreme form of feminism is seen against patriarchy for the sake of liberty from the grip and tortures of the male dominated society but at the all the rebel women becomes the victims of oppression in prison house which silenced their revolutionary deeds. The problem remains unsolved at the end.

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