WOMEN WORKERS AND WARRIORS IN BESSIE HEAD'S SHORT FICTION

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Bessie Head, as well as being an extremely competent novelist, is also a writer of beautifully crafted stories, which Ursula A. Barnett qualifies as unified pieces of art.[1] Her main collection of short stories, published in 1977 under the title *The Collector of Treasures*, came out of the author's own experience of life as she herself stated: "I had lived and absorbed the life of the village and I'd lived together with people and thought together with people and all the stories are touched by daily village dramas."[2]

Though a South African by birth, the name of Bessie Head is inextricably linked with the country she writes, Botswana, and although her initial contact with the country and its peoples was as a virtual refugee and, ethnically, as a complete outsider -the Coloured racial group being an exclusively South African concept, that is to say, a racial division conceived within the apartheid system,- she has become through her writings as much a part of Botswana as the thornbush. Bessie Head's women characters both in her short fiction and in her novels, act out their daily lives in Serowe, the rural traditional village in Africa and capital of the Bamangwato country also called Khama's country, in 1964. Sewore, too, is the place where she died in 1986.

It should be stated at the outset that Bessie Head frequently had to refute the label of feminist, although she was well liked and respected among most of the feminist groups. She explained her position on many ocasions, arguing that:

> Writing is not a male/female occupation. My femaleness was never a problem to me, not now, not in our age. More than a century ago, a few pioneer women writers, writing fearfully under male pseudonyms, established that women writers were brilliant thinkers too, on a par with men. I do not have to be a feminist. The world of the intellect is impersonal, sexless.[3]

1.-Ursula A.Barnett, *A Vision of order,* Sinclair Browne, London, 1983, p.203.
2.-A.Peek,"Bessie Head in Australia", *New Literature Review* Nº14, Canberra, 1984, p.6.
3.-B. Head, "Writing Out of Southern Africa",*New Statesman,* 16 August 1985, p.22

Nevertheles, in spite of this rejection of a need for feminism, Bessie Head writes about women in Botswana with deep understanding and concern. Her own personal circumstances placed her in a unique position from which to gain deep insight into mind of African women. In this respect, if being a feminist means trying to understand and caring about the experiences and fates of women in society, then I would agree with Molara Ogundipe-Leslie when she says that Bessie Head's writings are feminist.[4] Indeed, her own example proves that sexual discrimination is not justifiable under any circumstances and that women are in no way inferior human beings. Her female characters are given the respect and praise they deserve; they are not presented as being either better or worse that their male counterparts, and yet they are shown clearly to continue to suffer from sexual discrimination. However, instead of focussing on the grievances of the women in Botswana, Bessie Head simply gives them the emphasis and central position which corresponds to them. She portrays women because they are key figures in the social fabric of the country. No more justification is required and that is why Bessie Head's characters have an international appeal; her perception of the role of women in society extends far beyond the borders of Botswana and even of the African continent, a characteristic which renders her works relevant and interesting to a world-wide, universalised readership.[5]

Agriculture is the principal form of production in Botswana and also in the continent of Africa. It is the women who produce most of the food throughout Africa.[6] For the Serowans, home means the huts in the village, those on the lands they cultivate and those at the cattle-posts. In *A Bewitched Crossroad,* a work in which the author reveals her fascination for history, Bessie Head refers to women's work at the time when the major nations of northern Bechuanaland were founded, when "(...) life seemed to go on in its timeless way with men breeding cattle and braying karosses and women tilling the fields and tending the household chores."[7] In sharp contrast with the system of land ownership in neighbouring South Africa, land in Botswana is communally owned and allocated to families by chiefs and their advisers. In terms of the divison of labour in Botswana, the traditional role of

4.-See M.Ogundipe-Leslie, "The Female Writer and Her Cammitment", E-D-Jones (Ed.)*Women in African literature Today*, Nº15, J.Currey, London, p.11.

5.-In A. Peek,*op.cit.*,B.Hiad said: "I like what a black American professor has said about me: It is difficult to know which audience she is addressing, and I like to leave it vague like that.(...) I just produce my books and I do not calculate on an audience, I'm not directing my work at black nationalism or the black skin".p, 11.

6.-See *Rural Development and Women in Africa,* International Labour Office, Genova, 1984, p. 75, "Agriculture accounts for 72 per cent of women's participation in the labour force, and that figure is rising."

7.-B.Head, *A Bewitched Crossroad*, As. Donker(Pty) Ltd, Craighall, 1984, p.41.

the women has always been to look after the crops, to plant, to weed, and to harvest, that is to say, they have always been the "agriculturists of tillers of the earth"[8] , whereas the men have looked after the cattle, sometimes helping with the ploughing. In "The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration", which, as the author explains, is the romanticized and fictionalized history of the Botalote tribe, the women's work is described when the chief gives orders regarding the ploughing, reaping and thanksgiving for the harvest.

> Then the women of the whole town carried their corn in flat baskets, to the chief place. Some of that corn was accepted on its arrival, but the rest was returned so that the women might soak it in their own yards. After a few days, the chief sent his special messenger to proclaim that the harvest thanksgiving corn was to be pounded. (...)
> After some days the special messenger came back and called out:
> 'The corn is to be fermented now!'
> A few days passed and then he callled out.
> `The corn is to be cooked now!'
> (...) the special messenger called out for the last time:
> `The beer is to be brought now!'
> On the day on which thanksgiving was to be held the women all followed one another in single file to the chief's place. Large vessels had been prepared at the chief's place, so that when the women came they poured the beer into them. Then there was a gathering of all the people to celebrate thanksgiving for the harvest time.[9]

These assertions regarding the arduous work involved in food production carried out by the Botswana women are borne out by the anthropologist, Isaac Schapera, who writes about the contribution made by Tswana women in former times, observing that:

> Women tilled the fields, built and repaired the walls of the huts, granaries and courtyards, thatched roofs with grass which they fetched themselves, prepared food and made beer, looked after the fowls, fetched water, wood and earth, collected wild edible plants and did the housework.[10]

According to Bessie Head's testimony, it would seem that even today in the rural enviroment women still undertake a similar workload. In "The

8.-B.Head,*When Rain Clouds Gather,* (1968), Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., London, 1981, p.22.
9.-B.Head *The Collector of Treasures,*1977), Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., London, 1983, pp,.1-2. B.Head explains these paragraphs are taken from the London Missionary Sodiety's '*Livingstone Tswana Readears',Padiso III.* Hereafter all page references in the text are to this edition (*C.T.*).
10.-I.Schapera, *The Tswana* (1953), Routeledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1984.

Wind and a Boy", for example, Friedman's grandmother, Sejosenye, in spite of her age, is still fully responsible for food production and gathering in her own homestead. She has even to plough for herself:

> Each season, in drough or hail or sun, she removed herself to their lands. She not only ploughed but nursed and brooded her crops. She was there all the time till the corn ripened and the birds had to be chased off the land, till harvesting and threshing were done; so that even in drought years with their scanty rain, she came home with some crops.(C.T., p. 71)

Apart from their agricultural responsibilities, the women have also to prepare the food for their families, a duty which involves fire-making and cooking. In "The Lovers", reference is made to the traditional chores carried out by women of fetching water and gathering fuel for the cooking fires. The love story between Tselane and Keaja starts during one of those rainy summers while Tselane is out in the bush collecting wood with a group of other young women. In order to escape the storm, she takes shelter in a cave where she meets Keaja. Later in the story, we are told that "(...) the far-western unpolluted end of the river where women draw water and the forest where they gathered firewood became Keaja's favourd hunting grounds."[11] Agin, in "the Village Saint", the time-consuming task of fetching water becomes a focus of attention when Mma-Monpani prohibits her daughter-in-law from obtaining water from the tap in her yard so that the young woman is forced to fetch her water from the village tap. The whole village could see the "(...) newly-wed Mary carrying a water bucket a mile away from her own home to the vilage water taps." *(C.T.*p.19) In former times, too, not only did the women have to collect fuel and water and cook the food, but they had also to manufacture the recipients and pots they used for these purposes from clay. Such pots were first substituted by the tree-legged iron pots which Bessie Head believed to gave been imported from Europe, and later by galvanised iron buckets and modern containers available from the shops.[12]

In spite of the heavy commitments on which depends the survival of themselves and their families, however, it is the women who instil life and vigour into the village community. In accordance with the communal way of life in Southern African societies, which is based according to Ellen Kuzwayo on the saying 'No man is an island'- *"Motho ke motho ka motho yo mongoe"*-[13] when constructing or repairing huts, it is the women who are

11.-B.Head. "The Lovers", D.Adeyk (Ed.), *Under the Southern Cross*, Ad. Donker (Pyt) Ltd., Johannesburg, 1982, p.277.
12.-See B.Head, "The Old Iron Cooking Pot or Europe", S.Brown *et alia*,(Eds.), *Lip from Southern African Women*, Ravan Press (Pty) Ltd., Johannesvurg, 1983, pp. 5-7.
13.-E.Kuzwayo, *Call Me Woman*, The Women's Press Limited, London, 1985, p.16

responsible for building the walls, *polwane*, while the men generally do the thatching, *nto*.[14] When the protagonist in "Life", for instance, goes back to Botswana, she finds that, although seventeen years have passed since she left the village at the age of 10, the huts in her family yard are still standing. This goes to show that the construction of the walls of the dwellings, the responsibility of the women of the community, had been carefully and expertly carried out, thereby making the swellings extremely durable. When Life arrives at the village, everybody is ready to help, and her future neighbours, a group of women, quickly get together to help her refurbish her new home. Bessie Head writes that the women:

> (..)briskly entered her yard with hoes to snatch out the weeeds and grass, baskets of earth and buckets of water to re-smear the mud walls, and they had found two idle men to rectify the precarous tilt of the wooden poles of the mud hut. These were the sort of gestures people always offered.(c.T.,p.38)

Moreover, though thatching is basically a man's task whose most importamt requirement is that it does not leak, some women can thatch too. Dikeledi Mokope in "The Collector of Treasures" is well-known as the woman whose thatching does not leak. When she offers her help to the new neighbours, Paul Thebolo and his family, she says:

> If work always starts early in the morning and there are about six of us, we can get both walls erected in a week. If you want one of the huts done in woman's thatch, all my friends know that I am the woman whose thatch does not leak.(C.T., p.93)

The chores of the African women are in fact only touched on in Bessie Head's short stories. Yet her tone and attitude are the same as those in her works of long fiction. Though the burden of the women's work is tiring, her female characters are strong enough, both physically and emotionally to enjoy it; they are full of enthusiasm and excitement as they fulfil the tasks that tradition has allocated to them. Bessie Head blames history for the position women have in society:

> 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 regarded, in a congenital sense, as being an inferior form of human life (C.T., p.92).

14.-See B.Head, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., London, 1981, pp 50-51.

However, she does not place the blame exclusively on men for not changing male attitudes towards women; she finds those women who submit to, accept and believe in a role for themselves as inferior human beings also responsible for the men's attitude. That is why her principal characters are those women who fight to establish a kind of equality with men, as for example, Maria, Paulina and the prostitutes in *When Rain Clouds Gather,* Margaret and Dikeledi in *Maru*, Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* and, in her short stories, Life and Dikeledi.

On her return to the village after a period spent in an urban situation, Life astonishes all the women and men around her by obtaining money by selling her body. Most of the village women have lovers to ward off their loneliness. Affairs very often end tragically for the woman, however, with pregnancies and fatherless children. Life, on the other hand, whose motto is: "live fast, die young and have a good-looking corpse" *(C.T.*, p. 40) makes men pay to go with her:

> (..) Life was the first and the only woman in the village to make a bussiness out of selling herself. The men were paying her services.(...)
>
> (..) They could get all the sex they needed for the free in the village, but it seemed to fascinate them that they should pay for it for the first time. (C.T.,pp 39 & 40)

Not unexpectedly, then, Life is unable to accept the monotony and daily routine of her new life as a married woman. Neither can she accept the fact that a man owns her. Because of this, even though she is aware that a return to her former livelihood will cost her her life, she escapes back to the world of men, music, drink, beer, women, and prostitution and her husband kills her. She had broken all the taboos in village life but lives according to her motto, enjoying life to the full and showing other women that they were worth something to men.

Life's husbands's sentence for killing his wife is five years imprisonment. On the other hand, Dikeledi in "The Collector of Treasures" has a sentence for life for killing her husband, another clear example of sexist discrimination. Dikeledi, her name means "tears", is an extremely kind and good-hearted person, receiving affection and extending her love to all around her. But her husband makes her life unhappy and miserable to the extent that, in the full knowledge of the punishment she will receive for her action, she decides to kill him so as to stop his sexual abuse of her and of other women in the village. In this way, she destroys the kind of man who creates misery and chaos because they imitate the errors of their ancestors. Not all the male characters depicted by Bessie Head are like Dikeledi's husband, however; in the same short story, for example, the male chauvinism of Garesego Mokopi

is balanced by the gentleness and constancy of Paul Thebolo: "(...) with the power to create himself anew. He turned all his resources, both emotional and material, towards his family life and he went on and on with his own quiet rhythm, like a river. He was a poem of tenderness" (*C.T.*, p.93)

In general, Bessie Head's women characters, unless they have decided otherwise, do not like going from one man to another, although sometimes they do so to fight the loneliness and the inner anguish produced by a cultural system which accepts polygamy. As in the case of Ramatoulaye in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* , Bessie Head's women suffer emotionally when their husbands have sexual relationships with other women. Gaenametse in "The Special One", for example, looks for tenderness, care and love from a man without having to share it with somebody else. After her divorce, which follows a very unhappy marriage to a man she adores but who was constantly leaving her, she meets the priest of her church whom she goes to for spiritual help and finds love. She tells her friend : "`I have all I need now,'(...). `I have a good man. I am his mosadi-rra.'(...) `It means I am the special one,'(...). (*C.T.*,p. 86) Bessie Head concludes "The Special One" with the observation that, although " (...) the old days of polygamy are gone and done with,(...) the men haven't yet accepted that the women want them to be monogamists." (*C.T.*, p. 86)

And so, women will fight the evils inherent in their culture to obtain the kind of society they really want. They refuse to bow down to "(...) a world where women (are) of no account". (*C.T.*, p.3) and a society in which women "(...) are just dogs(...)" (*C.T.*, p.81). They not only fight for love, stability with their male counterparts and the balance of relationships in their family life but also for complete emotional equlibrium, avoiding all that represents pitfals and superstition. In Botswana rural society, witchcraft, for example, represents a powerful danger. In her short story, "Witchcraft", Bessie Head tells how Mma-Mabele recovers suddenly from a strange illness when everybody thought she was going to die, an echo of Elizabeth's sudden recovery from *her* mental illness in *A Question of Power*. Bessie Head shows that it is the inner strength of each individual which is an essential weapon in the defence against the assaults of withcraft. Mma-Mabele's determination to live saves her from the *baloi* or witchdoctors, invisible forces of evil.(*C.T.*, p.48) When inquires are made about her dramatic recovery and the possibility of a Tswana doctor having cured her, Mma-Mabele admits to the formidable power of her illness - "There is no one to help the people, not even God"(*C.T.*, p.59), but goes on to reveal inmediately that her deeply-felt responsibility as a mother of young children was the weapon that saved her from succumbing to its overwhelming effects: "I could not sit down because I am too poor and there is no one else to feed my children" (*C.T.*, p. 59)

Bessie Head asserted on repeated occasions, "I have a kind of horror of belonging to camps but not a horror about caring for my fellow man".[15], that is to say, she had avoided the strictures of political and other ideologies in order to leave herself free and independent. She said: "I needed this freedom and independence, in order that my sympathies remain fluent and responsible to any given situation in life".[16] In the political sense, she has often been blamed for not taking clear sides. However, perhaps it is Bessie Head more than any other South African writer who reveals, often unconsciously, what it is like to be non-White in apartheid society and she is not afraid to take the reader on the journey into hell endured by large numbers of individuals in South Africa. She does not speak of the injustices and the absurdities intrinsic in apartheid society or of the police brutality in South Africa. She simply causes the reader to empathise with the trauma induced in the individual mind by racial hatred and sexist discrimination. Yet, at the same time she conveys all the hope and optimism for a positive change in that nightmarish situation. In the same way, while she herself denies being a feminist writer, Bessie Head is nevertheless a committed writer, condemning the exploitation of women and championing equality between women and men, with a deeply-felt faith that the goodwill of both women and men can change the quality of life on the continent of Africa. For her, human love and goodwill are the motivating forces for an harmonious and peaceful existence. She does not only fight and cry out for women's rights but she does depict her main female characters as the workers and warriors in a society in which they labour and fight to improve. She also portrays the sort of men who have similar aims and who strongly rebel against those other kinds of women and men who would destroy social harmony. To achieve her ideals, Besie Head unconscioulsy set herself up as an example. As a woman writer, she made a significant contribution to the transformation of social attitudes in Africa, thereby proving her own contention that the women of Africa are well-suited temperamentally and spiritually to lead the Continent though its development stage that, as members of a huge workforce, they are in the best position to strive for this end. Bessie Head's works used to express Maru's interpretation of Margaret's picture sum up her own contribution as a writer and her own thoughts on how progress in Africa might be achieved:

> She chose her themes from ordinary, common happenings in the village as though those themes were the best expression of her own vitality. The women carried water buckets up and down the hill but the eye was thrown, almost by force, towards the powerful curve of a leg muscle, resilience in the back and neck, and the animated expression and gestures of the water-carriers as they

15.-A.Peek, *op.cit*, p.9.
16.-B.Head, "Writing out ot Southern Africa" in *op. cit.*,p.22.

stopped to gossip. They carried a message to his own heart: Look! Don't you see! We are the people who have the strength to build a new world![17]

17.-B.Head, *Maru, (1971),* Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., London, 1980, pp. 107-108.