Socio-political Discourse and Feminist Narratology: Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales*

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Abstract

Bessie Head's short stories in *The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana Village Tales* strategically preserve Southern African cultural beliefs and myths, which help her to expose gender imbalances, and advocate for gender equality and equity. In her narratives, Head explains her African feminist perspective and her political activism by writing fictional stories that mirror the issues of patriarchy and justice in her community. I, therefore, aim to explore the various ways Head uses feminist narratology to achieve this goal. In doing so, I will demonstrate that Head's narrators, who observe, judge, and offer vivid descriptions, help readers make informed judgements about the experiences of women living in precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial Botswana.

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In *The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana Village Tales,* Bessie Head's main objective is to give an African feminist critique of socio-political issues specifically in Botswana. Head's stories strategically preserve Southern African cultural beliefs and myths. Most importantly, her work exposes gender imbalances, and advocates for gender equity. This artistic strategy of shifting narrators allows readers to embark on an imaginative journey of Botswana, including the patriarchal beliefs and values within the society. Head consciously exposes her African feminist agenda and political activism by writing fictional stories that mirror the issues of equality, equity, and justice in her community. Southern African societies are male dominated, and Bessie Head understands that patriarchal foundations have long standing mythical and cultural sources. Thus, Head's narrative strategies, such as flash back, flash forward, and back story in the short stories, make it possible for the audience to understand the plight of women and the political situation in postcolonial Botswana. Maxine Sample asserts that Head's fictional selected short stories explore the relationship between the experience of space and female imagination by examining Head's political and social environment (Sample 311). Bessie Head's collection of stories combines various rhetorical and narrative strategies, not only for an African feminist agenda, but also to address socio-political issues. I aim to explore the various ways Head uses feminist narratology to assert her African feminist discourse. The narrators are given endless opportunities to observe, judge, and offer vivid descriptions to their readers with the goal of helping readers to make informed judgements about women's experiences. The narrative strategies suggest that Head is fighting for gender equality and the abolition of certain oppressive and exploitative ancient norms and beliefs. Head, therefore, provides an African feminist critique of patriarchy, and her stories advocate for socio-political changes.

Thus, this essay uses the theoretical framework of African feminism. Oyeronke Oyemuwi believes that Western feminism recreates "all women in the image of the Western woman, who found herself in a male-dominated society" (21). Feminism is broad, and, for the purposes of my analysis, Southern African feminism is based on

the gender dynamics and geographical location of Southern Africa, which is Bessie Head's immediate community. However, the fictional stories by Head here are written in context of women's socio-political status in Botswana. I share the same assertions with Mojuboulu Olufunke Okome about African feminism. She writes:

> one cannot correctly assert that even within one country, all ethnic groups observe given practices or even that all parts of the ethnic group do… Neither should scholars take whatever is observed in Africa as representative of tradition, as though its peoples have been frozen in time. (10)

Through a deep analysis, I also explore the importance of understanding the role played by Western colonialism in the exploitation and oppression of women based on other issues, such as race. Filomina Chioma Steady states that colonialism:

> produced the most profound changes in the lives of the African woman on the continent and disrupted the traditional system of production. It also reinforced existing systems of social inequality and introduced oppressive forms of social stratification, including racial segregation, through the machinery of the state. (5)

As seen in Head's characters, colonial stereotypes reinforced social inequality that mainly impacted the lives of Southern African women. Steady goes on to assert that, "African feminism is in short, humanistic feminism" (4). Steady's assertion is important in articulating the definition of African feminism which, I believe, is a movement that advocates for gender equality and gender equity. Head's stories explore the realities about the violent and negative effects of change in the standard of living caused by Western notions about African men and women. Therefore, as shown by Head through her women characters, the society pushes women to the margin. Scholars, such as Kimberle Crenshaw, believe there is an intersectionality between race and gender in the context of violence against women of color in various societies (Crenshaw 1245).

The fictional stories in *The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana Village Tales* are written about women's experiences chronologically, across precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods. Sara Chetin believes, "the stories in *The Collector of Treasures*

should be read in a sequence, viewed not as separate tales of a fragmented universe but as tales with a definite ordered purpose encompassing a unified vision of a society undergoing change" (115). I believe the stories follow a similar pattern that not only pushes Head's feminist agenda; but, the stories also address ongoing socio-political issues in the Botswana community.

In the tale "The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration," the narrator creates a picture of the patriarchal foundations surrounding Southern African communities. The Preservation of Botswana's cultural identity is revealed through the narrator who states that, "if their chief's name was Monemapee, then they were all the people of Monamapee" (Head 1). The people in Monamapee are identified by the chief's name because according to Southern African Botswana culture norms, paternal names are valued and cherished more than maternal names. In fact, relations are usually traced from the father's side or male dynasty. Thus, Head had to lay out a foundation that details the nature and operation of patriarchy before her critique of it. Traditional leaders in Botswana had power and dominion over the people in their societies. Head indirectly shows how women are oppressed and exploited in the disguise of cultural preservation and cultural respect. The narrator says, "when the people brought home their crops, the chief called for the harvest. Then the women of the whole town carried their corn in flat baskets, to the chief's place" (Head 1-2). The chief had power and control invested in him, and the society forced women to perform rituals that uphold, respect, and preserve patriarchy. The narrator believes Sebembele's love for Rankwana is against the standard norm of exploiting women; thus, the statement, "in a world where women were of no account" (Head 3). The first-person narrator is telling the reader that women in her society were treated as inferior compared to their male counterparts. In this story, one man in the camp during a session says, "a man who is influenced by a woman is no ruler" (Head 3). This shows that culturally, in Southern African communities, women were not given the privilege to venture into politics. The political dynamics of patriarchal societies remained men's business.

Colonialism brought other changes; but, unfortunately, it reinforced patriarchal ideologies in Botswana and other African societies. The collection builds up in a sequence of one story after another, which orients the reader with an imagined view of the stages of progression that transpired in the Botswana nation. As stated by Sara Chetin, the eponymous story, "The Collector of Treasures," "ties

together many of the themes from the previous stories to create a very disturbing and painful portrait of a society since its political independence" (134). Power dynamics in African societies did not favor women during colonialism, and after colonialism, patriarchy remained operational. Filomina Chioma Steady also believes that economic structures of colonialism remained in place (4). Head's narrator points out that:

> 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 that befall an inferior form of human life. To this day, women still suffered from all the calamities that befall an inferior form of human life. The colonial era and the period of migratory mining labor to South Africa was a further affliction visited on this man. (Head 92)

Head's authorial voice is hidden behind the narrator to show that after colonialism, there has been movement in time; but, the space women are confined to remains marginalized. The narrator highlights that women are the most affected group when there are socio-economic and socio-political struggles affecting their communities. The narrator further echoes a stubborn fact, which reasserts that the way in which phallocentric societies are structured, always put women at the bottom as opposed to their male counterparts. Women's experiences during precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods have remained the same. Thus, Maxine Sample asserts that, "the repetition, the cyclical pattern of the traditional means of disseminating knowledge, of passing on the culture and its values from generation to generation suggests a continuity, both historical and cultural, that Head apparently found attractive in the routine of life in such Botswana villages" (Sample 311). Therefore, Head's shifting narrators stand as observers of the daily activities of the phallocentric society, a justification of her artistic technique of shifting male and female narrative voices who act as independent observers and analysts. They all serve different purposes depending on the scenario or situation Head is trying to present to her audience.

In the eponymous story, "The Collector of Treasures," Head shows how colonialism plays a role in the continued exploitation and oppression of women, and

how the judicial system in Botswana is consciously inconsiderate about the traumatic experiences that push women to commit grievous crimes. Kebonye, one of the women in the prison, advocates for a fairer treatment for women. Kebonye says:

> Our men do not think that we need tenderness and care. You know, my husband used to kick me between the legs when he wanted that. I once aborted with a child, due to the treatment. I could see that there was no way to appeal to him I felt ill, so I once said to him that if he could keep some other woman as well because I couldn't manage to satisfy all his needs. (Head 89)

In this story, Head's feminist perspective, as shown through the narrator, is advocacy against domestic violence, an ongoing issue of concern in postcolonial African communities. The narrator plays the role of addressing the plight of other women in Head's society. Kebonye is a victim of domestic violence, and the law catches up to her. The circumstances leading to the reason why women are committing these crimes shows that patriarchy corrupts people's behaviors. Ironically, in the short story "Life," unlike Kebonye, Life's husband gets a lesser judgment for the same crime. The judge says, "this is a crime of passion… so I give him five years imprisonment" (Head 46).

Considering the intensity of Lesego's crime of killing Life, the law protected him because he is a male figure, as opposed to the females in "The Collector of Treasures," who do not get any sympathy but face the wrath of the law. Head uses various narrative strategies to show that colonialism reinforced patriarchy, and, raises yet another postcolonial concern about the legacy of flawed judicial systems, which use selective application of the law. Lesego represents the status quo in patriarchal communities: men abuse power and due to their status and money, they can walk scot-free. This is exposed by Kebonye, who narrates her husband's behavior:

> He was an education-officer and each year he used to suspend about seventeen male teachers for making school-girls pregnant, but he used to do the same. The last time it happened the parents of the girl were very angry and came to report the matter to me. I told them: You leave it to me I have seen enough. And so, l killed him. (Head 90)

I continue to reiterate that in patriarchal societies, promiscuity is normalized, as projected by Kebonye's husband. Kebonye gets tired and kills him as his status has managed to cover up his negative behavior in the past. In turn, it seems the society is reluctant to address the reasons that are making women kill their husbands since wife bashing was traditionally accepted.

I continue to reiterate, patriarchy in Botswana, and other postcolonial African societies, was reinforced by the colonial regime and implemented laws that nurtured patriarchal norms. The women narrators in "The Collector of Treasures" are pushed to the margin because ancient societal myths and beliefs normalized polygamy, which is no longer acceptable in postcolonial communities. Dikeledi mentions that her uncle, together with her family members, made the decision about her marriage to Garesego on her behalf. Her uncle says, "you'd better marry Garesego because you're just hanging here like a chain on my neck" (Head 95). As shown in this fictional story, Head created a plot that exposes the ongoing struggle of gender imbalances. Head also presents a female character, such as Dikeledi, who is identified as docile and useless, and the fact that only marriage can add value to her shows the realities of the objectification of African women. Consciously, Dikeledi is representing other women who are forced to marry against their will. The rhetorical strategy of shifting narrators in Head's fictional stories plays multiple roles of exposing negative effects of ancient cultural beliefs; the strategy, on the other hand, represents a feminist perspective. When Head's narrator uses the narration from Kebonye, we realize that Head uses flashback and flash forward as a strategy to help her readers understand that these women were in prison because the society is failing to address gender equality and gender equity issues. Their societies are conducive for men as opposed to women. In this case, Head stands not only as the author, but the chief observer, who sees issues from different perspectives; and her feminist voice becomes louder as the stories continue to build.

Head makes use of asterisks when changing narrators, thereby giving her narrators louder African feminist voices. The use of third person narrator contributes to the argument by giving the reader an opportunity to stray from judgmental analysis, but rather a view of the character/s in relation to the circumstances. As shown in the eponymous story, "The Collector of Treasures," I suggest that Head uses this symbol to show that now she is changing to a different male or female

narrator, and this helps to advance her feminist perspective. The symbols or breaks are positioned like the below.

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The above are all over Head's collection and for some stories, Head is taking a break from the conversations in the story and giving the narrator a voice to analyze. At the same time, she is giving the readers an opportunity to make their own judgements. The narrator, who represents her own personal artistic voice, takes over to give further details. For example, in the story, "Jacob: The Story of a Faith-Healing Priest," the break or symbols are used when the narrator is describing or explaining that Johannah is a female character who is a victim of circumstances. It reads, " * * * Johannah was a tall, striking handsome woman with a beautifully carved… * * * A month went by and one Sunday morning Johannah arrived once again" (Head 29). Both examples make Johannah the subject of the main stories and, in both cases, Head is pushing her feminist perspective through Johannah. She is a single mother, a victim of men's malicious behavior, yet strong and courageous. As presented by the narrator, despite her struggles, Johannah is beautiful and deserves appreciation.

Head plays around with the narration itself as she gives the reader detailed information. Head manages to question gender imbalances in patriarchal societies through feminist criticism. Head combines gender and narratology, which gives her work a sense of African feminist narrative. Susan Lanser states, "virtually no work in the field of narratology has taken gender into account either in designating a canon or in formulating questions and hypotheses" (38). Head is one of the African feminists who managed to combine narratology and African feminism; thus, her work stands out. The shifting narrators in Head's short stories play a significant role in feminist narratology; in some instances, male narrators appear harsher and more judgmental, which gives the reader the opportunity to get a clearer picture of the complexity of gender imbalances in postcolonial communities. In "Kgotla" Kelapile – a male figure says, "women are always poking at each other…" (Head 62). The male narrator is judgmental. Elderly women in the community must be given roles to deal with women's issues whilst men focus on their issues. The narrator shifts the blame

on women, which gives room for more research about the status quo in a phallocentric society. Head is aware that women are also perpetrators of their own fate through her artistic rhetoric strategies. In the quest to preserve culture, women end up upholding patriarchy. In formulating feminist criticism and feminist narratology, Head presents women who are victims of deception and manipulation.

In the last story, "Hunting," Thato is a victim as she becomes pregnant out of wedlock. The narrator says, "it was such a common experience for most women these days" (Head 105). Through the narrator's analysis, the society has normalized adultery and, unfortunately, men continue to find women who become victims of their deception. These women are not protected by the society they live in, and neither do they get empathy for their situations. The narrator says, "most men insisted that some sort of sexual relationship led to marriage. This trick seemed to be the only way they could get their sex for free" (Head 106). The fictional stories shows that men take advantage of the power availed to them in patriarchal societies, and they continue to get away with everything.

Head uses the conversations in the stories to create multiple observing narrators within her stories; there are also unlimited community social dynamics explored in the stories. Unnamed participating characters in the short stories is a rhetoric strategy that makes her voice powerful and authentic from diverse viewpoints. Patriarchy has normalized subjugation of women. According to Head, "all the men want to marry educated women, and still, they treat them badly" (106). Nothing works as an advantage to the girl child; they are always under dominion and control. In this conversation, we are further told that, "those women work for them and support them and get no happiness out of marriage" (Head 106). Head uses her fictional stories to address and expose gender inequality in phallocentric societies. African cultures respect the institution of marriage, but Head's feminist perspective seeks to address the emotional and physical abuse married women encounter.

Head's African feminist agenda is achieved through her female characters who are always presented as victims of oppression and exploitation. In "Jacob: The story of a Faith-Healing Priest," Prophet Jacob, the male protagonist, is presented as well-mannered and kindhearted, and Johannah is presented as a victim of circumstances, although she fails to protect herself from the men who take advantage of her. Marianne Cave believes that Bakhtin's chronotype of character, involved in

an historical analysis of genre, links time and space to the analysis of a character (120). In this short story, through flash back and flash forward, we notice changes in Johannah's character; she is given time and space to transform and progress as a woman character. Before Jacob meets Johannah, his life takes another turn. He must become compatible with Johannah (Head 21). Through Johannah, Head's literary strategy helps her achieve her African feminist point by giving Johannah a second chance. A single mother of four children, who had been written off by society, she later manages to sustain a successful and happy marriage with Jacob in the end.

Due to ancient Southern African cultural norms, Head receives criticism for her African feminist values because women are second class citizens. Head pushes back on this criticism through her female protagonist, Life, in the story "Life." The protagonist is judged harshly by her fellow women who are vibrant upholders of patriarchy. Life's name is ironic as Head strategically uses the name Life for her female protagonist, who dies prematurely, as a male figure takes away her life. Women, again, are perpetrators of their own fate, and in phallocentric societies, women have normalized certain patriarchal expectations, standards, and norms which makes their male counterparts resistant to change. The narrator's description of the first wave of women that Life attracted is based on colonial and cultural stereotypes that placed women on the margin of society. The narrator says:

> The first wave of women Life attracted to herself were the farmers and housewives. They were the intensely conservative hard-core center of village life. It did not take long to shun her completely because men started turning up in an unending stream. What caused the stir of amazement was that Life was the first and the only woman in the village to make a business out of selling herself. The men were paying her for the services. (Head 39)

Through the narrator, we begin to understand that patriarchal norms and beliefs in Botswana are endorsed by both men and women.

In "Towards a Feminist Narratology," Susan Lanser uses various examples to show that even though feminist and queer narrative theory try to avoid "narratology," it is important to note that it is helpful not only in mapping the text, but its social contexts (38). Head's use of shifting narrators plays important roles in helping the readers understand the historical context in which a patriarchal society

is shaped. Patriarchy continued during colonialism because the white owners reinforced patriarchy, even through the new laws. After Lesego killed Life, "the judge who was a white man, and therefore not involved in Tswana custom and debates, was as much impressed by Lesego's manner as all the village men had been" (Head 46). The narrator helps the reader understand the complexity of patriarchy.

Southern African culture is surrounded by mythical beliefs and Head, as a folklorist, incorporates mythology in her collection. In, "Witchcraft," Mma-Mabele's standard of living had been affected by the mythical expectations set for her from birth. The narrator states that Mma-Mabele had been born when people had reaped a particular harvest and named the Mma-Mabele, which means the corn mother (Head 49). Mma-Mabele's condition made her suffer by virtue of being a woman; and through the narrator, Head exposes the exploitation that women, like Mma-Mabele, suffer from their male counterparts. The narrator says, "the only value women were given in the society was their ability to have sex; there was nothing beyond that" (Head 49). The first-person narrator, who is an observer at the village meeting, lays it all for the reader: women are sexual objects and thus, they become victims of sexual harassment. Patriarchy, therefore, stands as a mythical expectation.

Head also shows that mythical beliefs play a role in the oppression and exploitation of women in the story, "Looking for a Rain God." She successfully uses a double-edged sword of preserving Southern African cultural benefits while developing African feminist values. In the short story, through the narrator, we get a clear picture of the social context of ancient African societies. The narrator says, "there was only a certain rain god who accepted only the sacrifice of the bodies of children" (Head 59). The narrator, who is also the main observer, relays the message to the reader whilst questioning the basis of this mythical belief. The mythical rituals were mainly performed by women, and the narrator clearly points out that women sacrificed the two girls for the rain making (Head 59). Indeed, rain making ceremonies were part of the mythical rituals in precolonial Botswana community. As shown by Head, the girl child was a victim of rituals that never produced the anticipated positive results. The reader will later notice in the story that, "after it was all over the bodies of the two girls had been spread across the land, the rain did not fall. Instead, there was a deathly silence at night and devouring heat of the sun by day" (Head 59). In this case, Head consciously undermines the mythology surrounding the rainmaking ceremony because of the negative outcome: the rain did

not fall. In the end, the women ritual performers were sentenced to life in jail for ritual murder (Head 60). Sarcastically, the narrator calls it ritual murder, not just murder, to help show the negative effect of the mythical ritual – which is a rainmaking ceremony. Sara Chetin believes Head is questioning the lack of humanity men have for women, and how myths that have shaped their identity (118).

Head's personal African feminist voice is shown through the shifting narrators in the short stories, and through her position change. Sometimes, she masquerades as a male narrator and sometimes, as a female narrator. In all these literary strategies, Head cuts across various issues of women subjugation. Head manages to give a historical background of Botswana cultural norms, and consciously advocates for change. In "Kgotla," the female narrator shows that some cultural norms acted as catalysts to the oppression and exploitation of women. The narrator says, "I returned to my people, but this did not please them because when we married, as in our custom, Gobosamang had offered my people cattle" (Head 63). Her family expected Gobosamang's wife to endure the abusive marriage because Gobosamang had offered cattle, and they respected the material gifts rather than her freedom and sanity. I share the same sentiments with Maxine Sample, "Head creates metaphoric spaces that suggest possibilities for change that will enable women to exercise control over their own lives" (311). The narrator leaves her husband anticipating change, but only to come back and find another woman in her husband's yard (Head 68).

As mentioned earlier, Head's narrative strategies are meant to expose and explore various social issues such as community gossip, adultery, and deception. The narrator in "The Wind and a Boy," stands as a spectator who offers an analysis of the effects of the colonial models to the Botswana community. Colonialism brought Western ideals; but, due to patriarchy within the Bostwana community already present, women remained on the periphery of the colonial and postcolonial changes. The narrator makes a claim that, "girls didn't need an education in those days when ploughing and marriage made up their whole world" (Head 72). The narrator is given another opportunity to observe and state the social dynamics a patriarchal society operates. During the precolonial era, women were second class citizens, and through the observer-narrator, we realize the same view of women continued during the colonial era and postcolonial era. Head's use of a back story, shows that postcolonial Botswana made life more complicated for women since opportunities for women remained limited.

Conclusion

The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana tales preserves Southern African culture, beliefs, and norms; but, interrogates social imbalances. Feminist narratology shows the impact of gender imbalances in postcolonial Botswana. Sara Chetin believes that Head remains the main independent observer (134). Head's own voice remains hidden behind her shifting narrators and that helps unpack her African feminist interpretation. Ironically, the bridegroom's relative in "Snapshots of a Wedding" says, "this is going to be a modern wedding. He meant that a lot of the traditional courtesies had been left out of the planning for the wedding day" (Head 76). After reading further, it seems most traditional courtesies that are part of the marriage usually expect the African bride to be kind, submissive, and docile. In the narratives, Head is addressing gender imbalances; both parties involved in the marriage must put forth the same effort for the marriage to work. But, due to patriarchal norms, women should, again, adhere to traditional expectations for married women.

In the narrative, for instance, Kagoletile's maternal aunts counseled their daughter by telling her, "Daughter, you must carry water for your husband. Beware that always, he is the owner of the house and must be obeyed. Do not mind if he stops now and then and talks to other ladies. Let him feel free to come and go as he likes" (Head 79). The cultural norm of submission has normalized and nurtured wayward behavior of men who have grown up in patriarchal societies. In the end, Kegoletile's relatives reinforce their cultural beliefs and force their expectations on the bride. Kegotile's aunts say, "be a good wife! Be a good wife! (Head 80). The repeated claim gives a negative image about the same culture Head is trying to preserve. Therefore, using an African feminist lens, Head exposes the negative effects of patriarchy in Southern African cultural heritage. Strategically, Head's voice is a double-edged sword that cuts across culture, myth, and African feminism.

Head's women narrators often appear bitter. The reader might attribute this hostility to Head's own personal life experiences, and one might suggest that she utilizes her fictional stories to examine these experiences. We see this, for instance, in "The Special One" where Mrs. Maleboge is bitter about the treatment women face in her community. Head, again, uses both flash back and back story to tell the narrative through a woman narrator. The narrator says Mrs. Maleboge "could stand for about an hour and outline details of a court case she had had with her brothers-in-law, and then stare quietly into the distance and comment: I lost it because women

are just dogs in this society" (Head 81). The narrator, therefore, stands as the mouthpiece for the women in her respective community. Sara Chetin suggests the phrase, "women are just dogs in this society," are Head's own words (134). I share the same sentiments with Sara Chetin: Head strategically uses the narrators to articulate her personal values and views and to address socio-political issues. Her story-telling technique questions outdated societal beliefs, and the African feminist socio-political discourse in her stories push for gender equality and gender equity not only in Botwana, but in Africa.

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