

## Quest for Identity in Bessie Head's Novel *Maru*

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### Abstract

Literature is a reflection of society. It reflects the life of the people who live in the society and also the problems they face while living. Through literature, the writer attempts to deal with the experiences, aspirations, views, crisis, relationships of the people with each other in the society. The feeling of inferiority and uncertainty leads black population into the gradual loss of their own thoughts, loss of confidence, loss of their own culture and traditions resulting into the loss of identity. Identity is the individual's personality having certain characteristics. The behaviour of the person, social relations, roles and social group memberships in the society paves the way to define who one is. People have self-images and self- feelings as well as images drawn from the other selves. While living in the society one of the most important questions that we face is "who are you?" We can face it as individuals and as members of social groups or categories. The rise of this question begets quest for identity. Bessie Head, one of the most brilliant writers in South Africa was born in 1937. Her works include novels and short story collections. Her famous novels are *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), *Maru* (1971), *A Question of Power* (1974). Her speciality was to investigate into the lives of the characters in her novels, so she brings fresh portraits of complex and convincing people. The work of Bessie Head signifies her own quest for individual identity. The novel *Maru* deals with various themes like racial conflict, discrimination, male and female relationship, rivalry, jealousy, spirituality, love and confusion, quest for identity. Education is the foundation from which an individual's quest for identity is forced. Her personality forces the villagers to revise their opinion about the Masarwas. Margaret changes the identity of her people through education.

**Key Words:** South Africa, Racial Discrimination, Quest for Identity, Margaret, *Maru*, Marginalized, Upbringing etc.

Literature is a reflection of society. It reflects the life of the people who live in the society and also the problems they face while living. Through literature, the writer attempts to deal with the experiences, aspirations, views, crisis, relationships of the people with each other in the society. The modern African writer is a carrier of the tradition established by his

predecessor: the oral performer, the village crier, the town orator, the community spokesman and the historian. African literature is a very serious intellectual and cultural activity. It is used always as a mouthpiece to inculcate social awareness, to create national consciousness. And also, to project the African reactions to the inhumanity and injustice by the terrifying

forces of Slave Trade, Colonialism; alien forces who obtained the African land and typography, distorted African values and stopped African human and technological developments.

African novels are the novels about Africa which seek to tell the African story from the African point of view. The novel dramatizes not only the peculiarities of the African human conditions and environment but also draw attention to the inhumanities and absurdities enforced on the black race in South Africa where the worst forms of racism and dehumanization are practiced. As Ghorpade Pradnya observes,

The African novel has its own distinctive characteristics which distinguish it from novels from other areas of the world written in the same language. Before the growth of nationalism it was much more difficult for an African writer to choose a standpoint from which to interpret his experience. The nationalist stance has provided a facility for the modern African writer to assess and comment upon his contemporary experience (18-19).

The non-white population of South Africa was adversely affected by apartheid policy and racial discrimination. Its object was to monopolize black people and keep them away from an opportunity for self-expression.

The feeling of inferiority and uncertainty leads black population into the gradual loss of their own thoughts, loss of confidence, loss of their own culture and traditions resulting into the loss of identity. Identity is the individual's personality having certain characteristics. The behaviour of the person, social relations,

roles and social group memberships in the society paves the way to define who one is. Individual's identity is deeply rooted in the socio-cultural ethos where he or she is born and brought up. The word 'identity' is derived from the Latin word 'idem' meaning 'sameness' and 'continuity'. In *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* Hornby defines identity as, "who or what sb/sth is" (770). People have self-images and self- feelings as well as images drawn from the other selves. While living in the society one of the most important questions that we face is "who are you?". We can face it as individuals and as members of social groups or categories. The rise of this question begets quest for identity. Stuart Hall takes identity as a 'production', "which is never complete, always in process and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (222). Due to oppression by colonial powers, African people were forced to quest their identity. They had to suffer because of their colour, race and physis. The experiences of these people were painful and full of tragedy. These painful and tragic experiences of the Africans forced them to struggle for independence and quest for their own identity. This process of quest also remained ongoing in postcolonial era, as the crisis still exists in postcolonial community. Therefore, the writers preferred to deal with the problematic conditions faced by newly freed nations and the countries in their quest and formation of self-identity in postcolonial society.

Bessie Head, one of the most brilliant writers in South Africa was born in 1937. Her works include novels and short story collections. Her famous novels are *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), *Maru* (1971), *A Question of Power* (1974). Her

speciality was to investigate into the lives of the characters in her novels, so she brings fresh portraits of complex and convincing people. The work of Bessie Head signifies her own quest for individual identity. Born as a coloured, her own experiences make her understand what the question of identity is? Her childhood experiences played a very crucial part for the development of her personality. She was born in Asylum. She has no relatives; she remained an isolated individual throughout her early years. It was possibly this lack of roots, history and identity. Throughout her life, she has not only faced the racial oppression that come out of being born an illegitimate South African, but also the added disadvantage of being a coloured and therefore not fitting in with either the whites or the blacks. In her writings, Bessie Head deals with tribal, rural and semi-urban life and her protagonists in the novel are usually an 'outsider', alienated from the mainstream in the society. They generally come to new land and try to settle their life in the new place. Her characters portray various aspects of injustice and inequality, while trying to retain their own individual identity. The novel, *Maru* deals with various themes like racial conflict, discrimination, male and female relationship, rivalry, jealousy, spirituality, love and confusion, quest for identity etc.

Education is the foundation from which an individual's quest for identity is forced. The protagonist of the novel, Margaret Cadmore rises from inferiority to superiority through education and self-actualization. She is depicted as marginalized. She is the 'other', an outcast in the society by virtue of her Masarwa identity. Masarwa is one of the most hated and discriminated tribes in Botswana.

There are two Margaret in the novel-mother and daughter, who have the same name but belong to different races. The novel deals with the familiar situations that Bessie Head had previously faced. Margaret Cadmore was brought up by a missionary woman / her mother to believe that, "environment everything; heredity nothing" (9). Her mother gives her own name to her, to protect her from the harshness of racial prejudice that her racial identity would otherwise have generated. Being brought up by a missionary woman, alienates Margaret of her cultural heritage and leaves her only the physical trappings of Bushman. Margaret thus has been brought with no real notion of the cultural significance and being a 'Masarwa'. It is only when she comes to Dilepe village that she has to contend with the real question of her identity for the first time.

Margaret, the outsider in Dilepe village, is the primary narrator of the tale. Margaret is not afraid of asserting her Masarwa identity. She states - "I am not ashamed of being a Masarwa" (17). There is a clear distinction between Margaret's appearance, which is that of Masarwa and her upbringing and culture which is very different from her own race. This causes conflicts in Margaret's mind despite her assertion about identity. Margaret does not fit either with the members of her tribe nor with the other communities. The novel *Maru*, is therefore also in a way, a quest for Margaret, to quest for and achieve her own identity. Feminists have posited that the woman writer has two major responsibilities; first to tell about being a woman; secondly to describe the reality from the woman's point of view. While focusing on Elaine Showalter's three phases, Ghorpade Pradnya observes: "The Feminist Phase, from about 1880 to 1920

is defined as, the phase of protest against the existing standards and values which undermine the autonomy of women and the Female phase, ongoing since 1920 is, the phase of self-discovery or a search of identity” (131).

In the novel, Bessie Head attempts to destroy stereotypical images of women as depicted in her portrayal of mother Margaret Cadmore. She is above petty prejudices. Her good sense of organization is revealed through her habit of doing things simultaneously so as to speed up end result. Head describes, ‘It made her timeless, as though she could belong to any age or time, but always on the progressive side’ (7). But this portrayal does not make her impeccable, on the contrary, it makes her ‘abusive the rest of mankind’ (8). In Head’s description, her ‘high-strung, nervous, energetic, that made her live at the speed of a boat shooting over the rapids,... had sometimes led her into situations where she was in danger of being assaulted’ (8). Though this reveals her as a well-rounded character with faults and strengths, it could also be understood as Head’s way of acknowledging Cadmore as the oppressor. As a woman, she is painted as responsible, organized and self driven, but as a white woman she is dominant and contemptuous towards the black race. Sometimes she is presented as impatient and insensitive. This gives her a sort of ambivalence. Though white, she is the only one who is willing to bury the dead Masarwa who had been shunned by others of her own race. Her caring nature is seen when she adopts the child of the Masarwa woman.

On one hand Margaret’s adopting baby brings the race in equation and on the other she is as Bessie Head describes ‘...a real

living object for her experiment’ (9). In her nurturing of the baby, she still remains the colonizer. She gives the child her own name Margaret Cadmore, to a kind of upbringing that alienates her from her roots. Her relationship with the child is never like mother and child. ‘It is like she is the semi-servant in the house, at the same time she is treated as an equal, by being given things servants don’t usually get, kisses on the cheeks and toes at the bed time, a bedtime story, long walks into the bush to observe the behavior through binoculars of birds, and lots of reading material’(10).

Margaret Cadmore marries Maru not of her own free will but as a result of his skillful manipulation of the situation. Maru thus controls her every move emotion. Her happiness is dependent on his mood, so that whenever he was in a bad mood, his foul mood denied her happiness and he would use very harsh words that reminded her of the sad past she had experienced. As Head observes, ‘...quite often Margaret was overwhelmed with happiness and would walk around for a whole day with an aesthetic smile on her face. The reason for this consistent happiness was that ‘the days of unhappiness were few and far over balanced by the days of torrential experiences of love’ (3). Margaret’s present happy state is contrasted with the continuous unhappy encounters she had prior to this marriage. The man Maru becomes her source of joy. Her inability to remember her previous suffering depicts her total acceptance of her present situation and her inability to change her destiny. Moleka, who from the beginning had been the object of her adoration is now transmitted to the realm of dreams. However, on waking up she has no mental impression of her dreams except those of



the room in which she loved Maru. Her dreams are manifestation of suppressed feelings and thoughts.

Maru desires to marry a woman hated by everyone and his desire is fulfilled by his marriage with Margaret. As a woman no regard is given to Margaret's feelings, in fact her reason for accepting this marriage is the fact that she has no alternative. Through this marriage the Masarwa people regain their lost identity and rise from slavery to royalty. Maru for her is a godsend appearing to save her from despair and broken heart. In this regard Maru reveals, until the time he married Margaret, 'she had lived like the mad dog of the village, with tin cans tied to her tail' (5).

Margaret's having caught the attention of both Maru and Moleka, both of whom are royalties however, reveals her as good enough, that is, as deserving of male attention. It is also a challenge to racial superiority. The change that comes over Moleka upon his first encounter with Margaret may be viewed as Head's attempt to ridicule prejudice against women and individuals in general. This is revealed in the fact that Margaret, being Masarwa, is regarded as a low breed in the society, yet here are two men of royal status rivaling for her attention. Margaret thus becomes a model for change in Dilepe village, her personality forces the villagers to revise their opinion about the Masarwas. Maru and Margaret's marriage is therefore a symbolic union as it suggests the diminishing of racial hatred, it also provides hope for a more harmonious and better future.

The other female character, Dikeledi, is quite independent. She was the daughter of the paramount chief and the first lady in

the novel who uses her good education for useful purpose. Unlike the rest of her social class who merely used their education to adorn their social status. Dikeledi has a more practical view of the world. This is evident from the fact that she had no need of employment but unlike others who made wealth identical with idleness, wealth gave her the freedom to specialize in what interested her most. She thus does not let her Diploma in early Childhood Education go to waste but takes up a position as a primary teacher at Leseding School. Despite her privileged background, she is humble and accommodative. She is aware that Masarwa are the underprivileged of the society but still remains cordial to Margaret. At the first meeting when Dikeledi came to know about Margaret's identity as Masarwa she has a protective gesture towards her as she tells her, "Don't mention this to anyone else"... (16). Between her and Margaret there was no tension, restraint or false barriers characteristic of most human relationships particularly when individuals believe that they are of a higher social status than their counterparts. This respectful attitude towards Margaret further elevates the position of Dikeledi. She is strictly concerned with the individual worth of a person as a human being. She treats her slaves as human beings, she pays them regularly, the dresses well, eat well, even they walk in the village in dignity.

Male contempt towards women is also portrayed through Pete, the Principal of Leseding. To him, Margaret being a woman is an easy target to handle. He says to Seth, "She can be shoved...It's easy. She's a woman" (31). The woman is thus equated to weakness. She is a weak spot that poses no threat to the male ego thus

would not be a hindrance in any way since she is easy to shove out. This implies the patriarchal nature of the society.

The fourteen years old boy was forced to ask ‘the humiliating question, “Since when is a Bushy teacher” the rest of the class was to join in the chant. “you are a Bushman”’ (41) Pete was to use this evidence of Margaret’s ineffectiveness as a teacher and thus have sent her out of the school. His calculations had unfortunately excluded Dikeledi who streaks ahead of him into the class and restores calm. Dikeledi is depicted as mature and above petty prejudices, an individual who recognizes the inner value of people. Pete, on the contrary, is a malicious man. Dikeledi is shown as superior to Pete, the principal. In this way, the writer paints the positive picture of a woman. Dikeledi emerges as assertive and independent. She is not intimidated by Pete. When he warns her not to be running around school during school hours as a way of trying to cover up his embarrassment, she does not hesitate to tell him off.

Through Dikeledi and Moleka’s relationship, Bessie Head explores the complex emotions of love. The quarrel between the two lies where Moleka has actually hidden his heart. In Moleka’s view, Dikeledi’s mode of dressing is an open invitation towards intimacy with the opposite sex objects. He treats women as sex objects. His assessment finds similarity with the view ‘the male gaze’ as explained by Schehr who asserts,

It is the gaze, the defining mode of operation of masculinist discourse, that constructs the ‘woman ‘as textual object, prevents the woman from being herself...from ‘being’, from ‘Being’, from

having a ‘self’ separate from or prior to the socio-visual construct imposed by the male gaze and its/his discourse(82-83).

Head’s works deal with issues of discrimination, refugees, racialism, African history, poverty, and interpersonal relations. Autobiographical element is present in much of Head’s writing, which often deals with poor and emotionally abused black women dealing with both racist and sexist discrimination and quest for identity. Head’s variety of characters are both young and old, male and female, this variety allows her to approach the same themes from different perspectives, but the focus is always on the struggles and hardships of life in postcolonial Africa and also quest for identity. In this way, Head despises human practice of inequality by the marriage between Margaret, who originally belongs to Masarwa people and Maru, a Chief of the village. She achieves her quest for positive identity for her people. And this freedom of Margaret is thus freedom of South Africans from Apartheid in particular and emancipation of African people from Colonialism in general.

In the novel, Margaret, being Masarwa, acquires the position through education and thus becomes a model for change in Dilepe village. She is not scared by Masarwa identity. Her personality forces the villagers to revise their opinion about the Masarwas. Margaret changes the identity of her people through education. Education uplifts her from a low status, creates awareness. Education liberates Margaret from poverty, ignorance, rivalry, exploitation, oppression, subjugation and discrimination and asserts positive identity.

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