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A Huge View of Life: Human Commitment in Bessie Head's Maru

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Abstract:- To be committed, or not to be; here is a question that writers consider at one time or another during their career; when modernity cries out for art for art's sake, and pushes the artist towards more and more subjectivity, moral and social concerns impose themselves because the artist cannot severe the ties that link him/her to his/her social environment. In the Western context, this aesthetic tendency is generally favoured over moral and social engagement, especially after the industrial revolution and the rise of individualism it engendered. In the African context, derided by colonialism, the writer feels the need for engagement, and is generally involved in the postcolonial movement that strives to re-build his/her society's culture and history. The Southern African context, especially with the oppressive apartheid system, exercises a particular pressure on writers who revolt and protest against this injustice in their writing, to the extent that commitment has become a fundamental literary convention. However, Bessie Head, with the particularity of her life, and hence of her writing, expresses a different kind of commitment, which led her work to be rejected by contemporary critics and writers. Head's mixed origins alienated her from her society; her life as an outcast allowed her to explore life from a different angle from other writers, and opened up broader horizons. The result was that her work did not specifically address an African audience; indeed, she herself declared that she did not like to be limited within socio-political boundaries, and preferred rather to work on broader, human platforms. Maru is a perfect example of this as it presents African characters that can be understood and identified with by people from different socio-historical circumstances; in fact, the novel operates harmoniously on two different spheres, the practical, as it tackles the daily issues faced by African individuals in postcolonial societies, and the universal, as it explores the human potential of these individuals. The novel clearly expresses Head's aim, which is to restore the lost sense of humanity of black people, lost through centuries of racism and exploitation.

INTRODUCTION

A writer is the product of his time and society: a fact that cannot be denied even by the most fervent aesthete. This implies that he/she inherits his society's culture, tradition, history, and the problems it might face at particular periods of time. However, what is open to debate is the role that writer decides to take in relation to the socio-historical circumstances that surround him. Some argue that there is no way to escape social responsibility, whereas others cry out for the freedom of the writer to deal with any matter he chooses. The latter stance has been adopted by Western writers and artists in general, as a result of the dramatic revolutionary changes in technology, science and religion, which impacted seriously on the Western modern society which lost the sense of collectivity and acquired instead a strong sense of individualism. This lost sense of collectivity favors the 'art for art's sake' stance, as it prevents the artist from feeling the duty and any sense of engagement towards society. As far as the African writer is concerned, it is a totally different case.

Postcolonial literature in general refers to the literature that appeared after the independence from the colonial powers; critics consider it as a loose term, and prefer to add a more precise definition: 'The literature that resulted from the conflict between the imperial culture and the indigenous culture and values' (Pathania, 2009, P6). In fact, the addition of this statement is significant, as it avoids to stress the fact of independence, and prefers to focus on this notion of conflict between a foreign culture and a native one, that might last even after independence. This point can best be clarified in the following quotation:

It is naïve to assume that independence can totally obliterate colonialism. Colonialism, which brings new values, new beliefs, new aspirations, cannot be just shed like the skin of a snake and then tossed away and forgotten. The vestiges of colonialism continue to haunt cultures and societies until long after the period of direct colonialist control. (Pathania, 2009, P7)

Postcolonial literature in general, and African literature in particular, is a result of this confrontation between the foreign and the native- it is an articulation of the postcolonial consciousness haunted by the sense of inferiority, oppression, revolt against the colonialists, and the more problematic concept of hybrid or crossed identity-people caught "in between". The African writer, being a product of his society, shares this injured and confused postcolonial consciousness; the question is, can he just deny it and choose to tackle other issues? Can he really discard his commitment to his society?

The notion of commitment seems to be a convention, even an imperative, in postcolonial writing. African writers and critics urge towards adopting a clear socio-political stance, and work to help solve the different problems issued from the encounter with the West. Some argue that the literature of commitment is a direct expression of the writers' reaction to the challenges of the postcolonial

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situation; Tanure Ojaide argues that 'the writer in Africa today has to take risks and be very courageous. There should be a stronger commitment, persistence, patience, and faith for a positive vision. […]. The older writers have to encourage the younger ones to keep on and expand the tradition'(Ojaide, 2007, P6). T. Ojaide urges the African writer to adopt a strong commitment towards his society, and that it should be transmitted from one generation to another. Among these committed writers we can cite: Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Alex La Guma, CamaraLaye, and many more others who take it to heart that the role of their writing must ensure the development of their societies. The Southern African context is more complex and challenging, especially at the time of the apartheid, and the inhuman laws it imposed to value the individuals according to their race.

Indeed, the writer in South Africa is faced with the evil of apartheid, and we feel that he cannot avoid revolting and protesting against its terrible and tormenting effects on people's consciousness. In fact, the effects of this barbaric system are such that Southern African writers adopted one and only direction in their writing: engagement, and laid down standards to evaluate the works produced. In the following quotation, NjabuloNbedele explains this point:

In societies such as South Africa, where social, economic and political oppression is most stark, such conditions tend to enforce, almost with the power of natural law, overt tendentiousness in the artists' choice of subject-matter and handling of subject-matter. It is such tendentiousness which, because it can most easily be interpreted as "taking a position", earns a work of art displaying it, the title of "commitment" or "engagement". Clearly then, according to this attitude, artistic merit or relevance, is determined … by the work's displaying a high level of explicit political preoccupation. (Nbedele, cited by Lewis, 2007, P1-2).

NjabuloNbedele argues that the oppression exercised in the Southern African context drives the writers, almost instinctively, to adopt a position of revolt and protest, and thus inscribe their writings in the literature of commitment. Nbedele even concludes that the works should be evaluated according to the extent to which they display this commitment. We feel a huge burden on the shoulders of these writers who, born under oppression and exploitation, are forced to take a position and express it in their works in order to be accepted and valued. Yet, there were exceptions among these writers, and one of the most famous ones was Bessie Head.

It is quite certain that Bessie Head stands out with the particularity of her origins and the uniqueness of her writing. Indeed, Bessie Head's status of a "coloured", a racially mixed person, brought her more complex and challenging difficulties in a South Africa devastated by apartheid. Due to her mixed origins, from her early childhood, Head was torn between different adopting families and institutions, and as an adult, completely left South Africa to settle in Bostwana where she lived as a stateless person for years. Head lived with a consciousness dominated by feelings of solitude, rejection, and alienation, and went through several depressing cycles, which often led to hospitalization. So, Head suffered as a coloured in a racist context, and also as a woman in a patriarchal society. According to these circumstances, we cannot but expect her work to be anti-racist and feminist. Indeed, her work as a whole does treat the challenges that an African individual faces in a postcolonial context: poverty, the collapse of traditional society, and the oppression of women. Yet, the reception of her work by African critics and readers was not really favorable. Desiree Lewis argues that these critics even neglected her work because of 'her deviation from existing political standards' (Lewis, 2007, P1). In other words, her work, despite of its treatment of African postcolonial problems, does not express a clear socio-political stance, and more particularly, does not specifically address a black African audience. Head herself says in an interview; 'A lecturer in Nigeria said he found a coolness and detachment in my writing that was un-African', and adds: 'A Zimbabwe student said to me: 'We read Ngugi, Achebe, AyiKweiArmah, and we find things there that we can identify with. But with you we are disoriented and thrown into Western literature''(Mackenzie & Clayton, 1989, P12). The failure of Head's work to express a nationalist sentiment and to appeal to a specific black audience is at the heart of her uniqueness as a writer in the African context in general, because what she sought was a world audience. As S. K. Pathania puts it, Head 'refused to classify her work in terms of nation, race, colour or class as she had a desire to be accepted globally'(Pathania, 2009, P2). She rejects the standards to which a writer should comply in order to be accepted as limiting, and even calls for the African writer to transcend them: 'The African writer ought to look out beyond the small closed group of tribe and nation. The writer ought to look out over the world and see mankind' (Lewis, 2007, P22). Head refuses to adopt a clear socio-political stance; she goes beyond the kind of commitment celebrated by the other African writers towards universalism.

However, Head's universalism does not cancel the relevance of her work to the postcolonial society she belongs to; her work delineates the hardships of poverty, injustice, racism and all kinds of oppression. Yet, she treats them in a unique way that departs from the norms, that opens new possibilities, and inscribes her work at a broader universal scope. We might venture to say that there are two aspects in Head's work: commitment at an immediate level, and a detachment which situates it at a broader level. In fact, this reveals the influences that affected Head's writing: the two writers, Brecht and Lawrence, as she very well explains.

There're two sorts of persons in me. There's a practical person: I love the everyday world and the things that people do with their hands. Then there's somebody attracted by the mystery and riddle of life- there's another person in me like that. The two writers who had the greatest influence on me in my youth were the German playwright Bertolt Brecht, and the English writer D. H. Lawrence. Bertolt Brecht in the sense that he insisted that the writer be practical. […] Brecht with his insistence on practicality, that the artist is a servant in a very real sense that the artist

concentrates on social problems influenced my writing. […] The other writer who had a huge influence on the type of person that I am- because there was a period when I wanted to read nothing else- was the British writer D. H. Lawrence. It was the things Lawrence explored, Lawrence's huge view of life.(Mackenzie & Clayton, 1989, P8-9)

Practicality, commitment to one's society's problems, and the search for immediate solutions were adopted from B. Brecht, whereas 'the huge view of life', the broad horizon that opens on humanity in general, was inspired by D. H. Lawrence. It is interesting to see how these two aspects merge and collaborate to create a unique effect- the effect that the Zimbabwe student spoke about: confusion and lack of identification. In fact, in Head's work, what seems to be Western to the African readers is simply human or universal.

In this paper, we are going to explore the mingling of these two aspects: the practical and the transcendent, so to speak, in Head's fascinating novel: *Maru*. We seek to investigate the extent to which the presence of these two sides gives a particular character to the novel, and contributes to give us insight into Head's writing mode and her conception of the role of the artist in society. As we shall see, Head departs from the norms set by the other writers as far as commitment is concerned; yet, this departure from the norms does not cancel commitment, but rather offers a new conception of it. We shall concentrate our study on the two main characters of the novel and its ending, considered unsatisfactory by many critics.

The characters of the novel were criticized for their lack of relevance to the black African reality. Maru emerges before us at the beginning of the novel as an imposing charismatic leader, yet different from the conventional portrait of a traditional village chief. Even if Maru benefits from the privileges of his high social position, he possesses a rich, complex subjective world. Indeed, from the beginning, we are made aware of a duality at work in his character, between his social status and practical demands, and his private, inner world: 'Who else was a born leader of men, yet at the same time acted out his own, strange inner perceptions, independent of the praise or the blame of men?'(Head, 1971, P221-222), (All references to this work are taken from the same reference). Head draws here a contradiction in Maru between his social role, a future leader who is, moreover, born with all the qualities to do so, and his inner being who aims at 'strange aspirations', and does not take public opinion into consideration. Head seems to draw Maru's character around the conventional dichotomy between the practical, social life, and the subjective world, nourished by dreams and fantasies. However, this impression does not last for long, as it is blurred by the following association of this subjective world with the ground.

There was so little to disturb his heart in his immediate environment. It was here where he could communicate really with all the magic and beauty inside him. There had never been a time in his life when he had not thought a thought and felt it immediately bound to the deep centre of the earth, then bound back to his heart again- with a reply. P223

Head establishes here an almost organic link between the immediate environment, the earth, and the abstract inner world of Maru; as Desiree Lewis puts it, 'part of Maru's duality is manifested in his vision of a new world which is both spiritual and earth-bound'(Lewis, 2007, P70). Maru is in fact an expression of Head's concerns, as she attempts to join the ideal with the practical- the universal and the immediate. This duality partly makes for the ambivalence of Maru and the contradictory impressions he leaves on the minds of the readers.

Another source of ambivalence in Maru is the manifestation of two seemingly contradictory aspects in him. On one hand, we have the portrayal of Maru the visionary- the sole individual who disdains the immediate, material privileges of his social position, and dreams about a new different world ruled by high standards: 'the standards of the soul'. On the other hand, there is a facet in Maru which is less admirable and idealistic: the shrewd trickster who does not hesitate to use the people he loves in order to realize his plans. However, as we shall see, these to aspects, instead of being presented in opposition, work together side by side in harmony. Indeed, Maru's superiority of thinking is shown in his decision to marry Margaret regardless of the public opinion that holds the Masar was as an under-human race. Marriage stands out as a symbol of a new social order based on racial equality. This is a courageous and admirable decision as it entails the abandonment of his social position and the beginning of a new life. However, the means he chooses to realize this marriage are questionable. For example, he has his men watch his friend and rival, Moleka, as well as his sister Dikeledi, and through tricks and manipulation, succeeds to get them married and secure Margaret for himself. As Shivalik Katoch Pathania put it, Maru 'is not really free from contradictions between his vision of social equality and his means of achieving it. His subordination of everybody's needs to realize his dreams smacks of authoritarianism'(Pathania, 2009, P70). However, with few glimpses into Maru's mind, we notice that he is aware that the means he chooses are wrong, but executes them because he knows they are the only ways possible.

This awareness appears in the following passage: 'He could bring this home forcefully to her but the truth would destroy her and he needed her alive and stupid for his future plans. He hesitated, with pain in his eyes. Always, at a push, he told a half truth, or an outright lie' (p276). Maru here feels the need to tell his sister the truth about everything, precisely about Moleka's love for Margaret, yet he chooses to lie, with 'pain', and gives priority to his future plans, which is laying down the grounds for a new better world of justice and equality through marrying Margaret. Head herself comments on the character of Maru and the ambivalent reactions he raises in the readers.

Maru's style is: I want a new attitude towards racialism and so I create a highly vivid and original character. You have no alternative but to come up to his level. Now two things occur: Maru irritates people, and then

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they attack me. They say, "It's deceitful, the things he does". They attack the small things. He *boldly* acknowledges his deceit. He says, "I'm *sorry*, I'm stealing somebody else's girl, but I'm *sorry*". He knows that he is doing something bad. So he uses people- like Dikeledi- and tells her, "I'm sorry", but she doesn't understand what he is sorry for. […] At least he is going to give you some new insights into racial prejudice and how *he* solves it with his gods in his heart. Now people don't like to be swept away like this in the story. They stay down there and they say irritating things like: "But the dialogue's dull", "We don't like him", "Isn't he deceitful". They try to find some way to get rid of the story. But the story is intended to linger with its lessons and reflections.(Mackenzie & Clayton, 1989, P22-23).

Head here builds up a strong defense for Maru against the people who dislike him, because she thinks that they just misunderstand. She draws an important point when she points out the fact that Maru, as we have seen, is aware that he is using the wrong means to achieve his aims, but keeps his mind concentrated on the results, which is the struggle against racism. She presents his tricks only as 'small things', and urges us to concentrate on what Maru teaches us about racial prejudice- the lessons and 'reflections' that 'linger' in the minds of the readers.

We understand that Maru cannot just dream about this ideal world, but must act to realize it. Through him, Head draws the portrait of an unconventional Romantic hero who has got to accept the reality where he lives, and use it in preparation for an ideal, beautiful world. Maru's use of tricks and manipulations to marry Margaret shows that he is not the dreamy idealistic hero, but someone touching the ground. In fact we can relate this to Head's own conception of the nature of writing.

Eventually writing begins to seem like any other everyday chore. There is this strongly practical side to me, so that the things of the everyday world have high priority in all my works. […] I remember very well saying, because that was one of my attitudes, "Not the special 'lily-white' artist, but somebody who touches the earth".(Macke,zie& Clayton, 1989, P24).

Maru is not the 'lily-white' dreamer, but somebody who adapts to his situation and uses the means available to him to realize his aims. Indeed, Maru's idealism and visionary qualities do not cancel his sense of reality. He is, as we have seen, an articulation of Head' view of the artist as someone who must have ideals and a sense of practicality: someone who must be aware of what is going on in immediate environment and at the same time thoughtful about the ways to achieve a better future, not only for the society he lives in, but for the humanity in general. This is what makes Head's writing unique, because she offers a different conception of commitment- not the one adopted by the majority of African writers, which she considers limiting, being valid only in specific socio-historical circumstances. The commitment she calls for inscribes at the immediate level as well as at a universal, human level; she presents the African character and the challenges he may encounter in his immediate environment, but at the same time places him at a universal level so that anyone can identify with, regardless of his or her social context.

Margaret is also a character built on contrasts and contradictions. We can see her complexity in the fact that she represents the African character in general, and the African woman in particular, in a corrupt, racist and postcolonial society. Yet, at the same time, she transcends these spatial and temporal barriers to reach a more universal, human dimension. Indeed, through Margaret, Head discusses racism and its terrible consequences on the individual's inner being. Margaret is born a Masar was, a 'bushman', considered 'a low, filthy nation' (p227) by the people of Bostwana, doomed to a miserable life of slavery and oppression. Masarwasare oppressed and dehumanized even by those supposed to represent knowledge and enlightenment: the scientists, who present them as a human oddity. They led people to believe that you can do anything to a Masarwa, any kind of atrocity, because they are not supposed to mind at all, being half-human and half-animal. Head pictures for us the terrible, inhuman treatment of the Masarwas before the portrayal of Margaret to overshadow the kind of challenge that waits for her. Rescued by a missionary's wife, Margaret has the opportunity to leave that low social status through education and work. Yet, she is derived from love or any kind of emotional consideration by her adoptive mother, as the latter considers her 'a scientific experiment', for 'who knew what wonder would be created?' (p230).

In Margaret, we clearly see the way Head succeeds to work on and combine the two levels: the immediate and the universal. Through her, she pictures the various difficulties an individual faces in a racist environment, and presents a harsh criticism of the traditional African society where racism existed even before the arrival of the white man.

While treating the theme of racialism and the idea of power struggle, Head emphasizes that oppression did not come with the arrival of the white man alone, but forms of it were already existing in the traditional African society.(Pathania, 2009, P56).

Margaret is a victim of double racism from the blacks as well as the whites, denouncing the evil of the traditional society. Yet, Head does not limit Margaret to this level of representation, as she insists on her universal dimension.

Her mind and heart were composed of a little bit of everything she has absorbed from Margaret Cadmore. It was hardly African or anything but something new and universal, a type of personality that would be unable to fit into a definition of something as narrow as tribe or race or nation. P230-231.

Here, Head portrays Margaret not as a typically African character, but as a person who transcends the boundaries of tribe, race and nation- a new and universal type of personality. This is what creates confusion in the African readers. In a conventional postcolonial novel, the writer, creating a character who emerges from such circumstances, would make him/her the epitome of

commitment, striving to change the situation of his/her people through education and the opportunities of work. On the contrary, Margaret is completely alienated from her people about whom she never seems to think at all. A sense of purpose is briefly mentioned in the beginning of the novel.

There was nothing she could ask for, only take what was given, aware that she was there for a special purpose because now and then the woman would say: 'One day, you will help your people'. It was never said as though it were a big issue, but at the same time it created a purpose and burden in the child's mind. P231

Cadmore attempted, in her cold remote manner, to inculcate in the younger Margaret a sense of purpose, a commitment towards her people. Yet, in the grown up Margaret this sense of purpose is not really put forward, causing the dislike of those who would have preferred an active, revolutionary protagonist. On the contrary, Head creates a seemingly quiet and passive character who, having brilliantly succeeded in her education, is assigned to a teaching post:

Margaret Cadmore had produced a brilliant student, whose name, identical to hers, was always at the top of the list of passes. That the brilliance was based entirely on social isolation and lack of communication with others, except through books, was too painful for the younger Margaret ever to mention. P233

Social isolation contributed, in fact, to drive Margaret inward, as she was left free 'to gain control over the only part in life that would be hers, her mind and soul' (p231). This emphasis on the inner subjective world, rather than on the practical things she can do in society, drives us to see her more as a universal human being rather than an African woman living in a racist society: 'The pain, the agony and the tension Head portrays is common to every man irrespective of nation, class, colour or creed'(Pathania, 2009, P56).

The ending of the novel was the subject of criticism because of the ambivalence of the messages it expresses. We come to see Margaret as a victim, a manipulated puppet who loses the prospect of happiness with Moleka, and is forced to marry Maru and leaves the village. Maru appears to be the winner at the end, and Margaret does nothing to change the situation. S. K. Pathania tackles this point as following.

Her status in her marriage to Maru is analogous to that of a fairy tale princess who is fiercely guarded by a monster keeping her all to himself. Marriage does not change her position in society as she continues to live within marginalized discourses, first as a Masarwa and then as a wife.(Pathania, 2009, P75).

However, there are other elements that help balance this: the power of her artistic production stands up to her external passivity; in her paintings, Margaret succeeds to express her true inner being and achieves victory over Maru. As we have mentioned, the lack of communication with the external world created in Margaret a rich and complex inner 'kingdom' which she expresses in her paintings. In the last part of the novel, Margaret is presented as the typically marginalized and misunderstood artistic figure at odds with society. Margaret paints scenes from the everyday life of the village, yet it is far from being clear and straightforward; in fact, as Desiree Lewis puts it, 'Margaret's creativity is also as hybrid and ambiguous as Head's own'(Lewis, 2007, P183), as she shows concern for the direct environment, and at the same time she is able to transcend it and deal with broader issues. This 'quiet, insignificant' person has a power of creativity that is even stronger than her: 'She could not discipline and control the power machine of production' (p308).

Her most important paintings are expressions of dreams she had about Maru and Moleka and, at the same time, an affirmation of her desires. The dream she has about Maru: the house, the yellow daisies, the black clouds and the embracing couple, are a projection of Maru's dream, expressing his plan to marry Margaret and live in a remote house outside the village. The scenery reminds us of the beginning of the novel where we see Maru work on the fields surrounding the house where Margaret is his wife. This suggests the visionary character of Margaret- her ability to transcend time and space and reach out for another, better world. In addition, Margaret decides to separate the scene into three: 'The house stood alone with its glowing windows; the field of daisies and the lowering sky made their own statement; and, on their own, two dark forms embraced in a blaze of light' (p310). When Maru sees the paintings, he immediately identifies with them: the house and the embracing couple being an expression of their marriage and partnership, and the daisies 'a symbolic reflection of their fulfillment'(Lewis, 2007, P180). However, the fact that Margaret separates the scene into three is significant: by doing this, she divides the dream of Maru, and thus disrupts its harmony and unity. Maru, the charismatic character who thinks that he has got everything under control through furnishing Margaret with the necessary materials and with specific instructions, completely misunderstands the paintings. In fact, Margaret expresses her independence from him: she is an interpreter of his dream, rather than a passive participant (Lewis, 2007, P181). We can see Margaret's detachment from Maru's dream in her impressions: 'The pitch black clouds' and the strong wind are significant: the black clouds register an impression of darkness and danger, which goes in contradiction with Maru's idyllic vision of their union; and the strong wind is, in the words of D. Lewis, 'a disturbance in nature'(Lewis, 2007, P181) which disrupts the harmony that Maru expects. In addition, Margaret does not feel happy, but rather 'ashamed' and 'terrified' at the sight of the couple- an impression which again subverts the idyllic and harmonious vision of Maru's dream and consequently of their marriage at the end of the novel.

The other important painting she makes is dedicated to her first and true love: Moleka. The scene is set in a tranquil village, at sunset, with Moleka in 'an arrested, humble pose' and herself 'quietly leaning on his shoulder' (p319). We notice a strong sense of peace and harmony, which stands in contrast with the paintings dedicated to Maru. The couple lives a 'static, endless hour' which is envied by Dikeledi

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'who alternated happiness with misery' (p321). Maru's reaction to the paintings is that of dislike and rejection: 'It's not for me', as he discerns her love for Moleka and heightens the rivalry with him. On the other hand, Moleka looked at the picture with 'adoration and attention', and 'It was to seem as though he came home each night specially to look at it, then wash and eat. It was to become an immovable part of their life together' (p322), together with Dikeledi. Moleka likes the picture because he recognizes himself and Margaret, and the idyllic love that unites them forever in that endless hour. It even became a daily ritual for him to contemplate it and enjoy the peace and serenity it expresses, even after his marriage with Dikeledi. Once again, Margaret achieves victory over Maru as she lives with the person she loves in an 'endless' hour in the painting. So, through these paintings, we clearly see that Margaret is not as passive as she seems to be, since she is able to freely express herself, her 'mind and soul', through her art.

Moreover, Maru is presented more as a victim than a winner in the beginning of the novel where his happiness is said to be disrupted by his awareness of the existence of two rooms in his house: one where Margaret completely loves him, and another where she completely loves Moleka. His final victory is not complete, or rather is just 'surface-victory', because he does not succeed to obtain Margaret's heart completely for himself, and feels helpless about it. We are left with the impression that Margaret achieves victory on a broader and eternal scale, using the transcending quality of art, because what is important, as we understand from the novel, is the inner kingdom of the individual.

An interesting reflection on the role of art in society as conceived by Head is offered when Margaret, trying to account for her power of production, says to Dikeledi: 'I first see something as it looks, but it looks better when it reappears again as a picture in my mind' (p311). This passage tells a lot about the process of artistic production which is mainly linked here to the special relationship between the artist and the reality. What is suggested here is the faculty of transcendence: Margaret does not produce that reality as it really looks, but changes it, and makes it look better when it 'reappears', which implies that she endows it with other meanings. Desiree Lewis observes:

"How things look" suggests their meaning from the perspective of the dominant codes and discourses associated with other characters. Margaret has the ability to make them "reappear", so that they acquire different, and it is implied, visionary meanings.(Lewis, 2007, P185).

The artist, according to Head, has the ability not only to represent the reality, but to modify it and to offer alternative meanings that are broader than the immediate environment. This explains the ambiguity of her work and the confusion it raises in the African audience. Head, even if she is concerned with the immediate environment, which she considers an inevitable part of departure, aims at the broader perspective, the broader horizon inspired by Lawrence: the human dimension.

Another element of the ending of the novel is also a good example that shows clearly Head's double-edged commitment: the liberation of the Masarwa people is depicted on the very last page of the novel, and is intended to leave a very strong impression on the readers.

When people of the Masarwa tribe heard about Maru's marriage to one of their own, a door silently opened on the small, dark airless room in which their souls had been shut for a long time. A wind of freedom which was blowing throughout the world for all people, turned and flowed into the room. As they breathed in the fresh, clear air their humanity awakened. They examined their condition. There was the foetid air, the excreta and the horror of being an oddity of the human race, with half the head of a man and half the body of a donkey. They laughed in an embarrassed way, scratching their heads. How had they fallen into this condition when, indeed, they were as human as everyone else? They started to run out into the sunlight, then they turned and looked at the dark, small room. They said: 'We are not going back there.' P331

The marriage between Margaret, a Masarwa, and Maru, the future chief of the village, has had a great impact on this oppressed and exploited tribe. Yet, albeit for the names used, Masarwa and Bostwana, this passage can be set in any socio-historical circumstances, because it depicts the inner change that occurred in these people, rather than external particularities. The ending would have been very well received if it showed a revolution of the Masarwas facing their persecutors and crying out their rights. Instead, Head prefers to focus on their changing 'inner kingdoms', as she would say, in their enlightening recognition of their own humanity. The short and very telling sentence: 'They examined their condition' suggests the birth of a new awareness and ability of reflecting and questioning, which makes the fall back into slavery impossible. Moreover, there is a focus on the word 'human' in this passage, rather than on 'black' or 'African', which confirms Head's interest in the human dimension of this oppressed tribe: the broader perspective.

Throughout our study, we have seen that Head constantly works on two binary dimensions, as she underlines the external events with the presence of inner kingdoms which are, in fact, more powerfully depicted. Maru, a future paramount chief is dominated by inner voices who whisper to him strange things; Margaret, a Masarwa and hence a victim of racial hatred, possesses a very rich and complex inner world glimpsed at in her paintings; and the Masarwa people get rid of their status of slaves and acquire an unquestionable sense of their humanity. It is this mingling of the practical and the ideal that makes the uniqueness of Head's work: showing concern for the immediate issues in the social environment and expressing the importance of situating it at a broader perspective. The following lines by Head help explain her concern.

There was one thing that was significant for me because later it came to the fore when I closely studied the history: I sensed continuity. I was unconsciously using this as a prop or a background and I felt that black people had

lost this sense of continuity and roots in South Africa. There are whole breaks where you don't understand the history. It is too garish and harsh; it's gold and diamonds, it's human greed. In the end it is so repellent. You have this background and you reject it.

Then you have things starting with such a beautiful pattern: a history that you begin to associate with all mankind's history, where life starts so starkly simple with a sparsely furnished hut, and the cows and the animals. But this has been so much mankind's history, among other things (sometimes violent things too). You start history here as you started almost everywhere else in the world. I have travelled in Denmark and I was taken to the Museum of Pre-history with the simple hut with little bits of things in it- like you would start here. (Mackenzie & Clayton, 1989, P11).

Black people lost this sense of continuity, of being part and parcel of the human history, because of the racial hatred directed towards them. Hence, Head feels the need to highlight this human dimension in her work in order to restore the break. This perspective makes her work different from the other African writers who call for a clear and direct socio-political commitment. As S. K. Pathania puts it, Head's 'perspective is different in the sense that she does not idealize the past nor does she adhere to any political ideology''(Pathania, 2009, P55). Her aim is not to advocate a national identity, not to get involved in politics, but to restore in the black people their sense of humanity and belonging to a broad human family, lost through centuries of racism.

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