THE PLACE OF IDENTITY AND HYBRIDITY ON LITERARY COMMITMENT IN BESSIE HEAD'S *MARU*

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the influence of identity on literary commitment of Bessie Head – a multicultural writer. In particular, the study was interested in the hybrid syncretic crossings reflected in her work and which defined her as a writer in the Third Space- the contact zone within which different cultures encounter. The objective of the study was to analyze how the writer's identity influences her commitment in the text *Maru.* The study adopted the analytical research design. The data collected through content analysis was coded according to thematic concerns, the mode of characterization and vision of the author. The postcolonial theory was instrumental in the reading, analysis and interpretation of the selected text. The findings reveal that the writer's identity influences her commitment as reflected in her choice of characters that like her are cast in the in-between space. These characters shuttle between points of inclusion and exclusion. The quest for a universal identity that defies definitions of race or tribe is shrouded in shackles of prejudice enshrined in the traditional outlook which must be dismantled in order to attain total liberty. The writer's desire for a race free society in which everybody projects a global identity is projected through the creation of Margaret, a borderline character that was hardly African 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. However, this dream is encumbered with a lot of challenges thus reflecting the difficulty of erasing cultural differences. The text thus offers hybridity as a bridge which bonds though it does not obliterate cultural differences. It implies an unsettling of identities so that the characters consistently grapple with issues of being and becoming in their quest to redefine their identity.

Keywords: Identity, Hybridity, Literary commitment, Bessie Head.

INTRODUCTION:

In Africa, the greatest challenge facing the African novelist is primarily one of domesticating an alien form striving to make it his own, seeking to mould it into an instrument of investigating historical and social issues that are peculiarly African, always hoping to create an authentic voice (Gikandi, 1984). The alien form in this context refers to the novel as a genre borrowed from the West. Gikandi in this case acknowledges the novel as a genre of dual tradition and recognizes the novelist's ability to chart his or her own unique path towards commitment irrespective of its duality.

Grobman (2007) argues that texts by writers of color are multiply inflected hybrids that blur but do not erase cultural difference, thereby allowing for multiple crossings or intersections of meaning (sic). Hybridity commonly refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zones produced by colonization (Larangy, 2008). Hybridisation takes many forms including cultural, political and linguistic. In line with Grobman's view, the commitment of such writers may reflect hybrid syncretic crossing that constitute their subject matter. The multicultural text thus offers a model enabling us to refigure our understanding of difference and in the African context, to re see all African literature as interconnected nexus.

The current study examined the influence of identity on the literary commitment of Bessie Head, a colored, born in an asylum's hospital in South Africa, to a white woman who was considered mad; her father was black. Head was taken from her mother at birth and raised in a foster home until the age of thirteen. She attended missionary school and eventually became a teacher. Abandoning teaching after only a few years, she began to write for the Golden City Post. As the political crisis deepened in South Africa in the 1960s, Bessie went to exile in rural Botswana where she remained in refugee status for fifteen years before gaining citizenship. It is in Botswana that her literary career blossomed. Her writings cover many aspects of her personal experiences as a racially mixed person, growing up without a family in South Africa (Bissell, 1996).

According to Genetsch (2003), one of the most pressing problems for those forsaking their homes for a new country is the construction of new identity. In more accessible terms, the central concern for many who feel themselves uprooted is how to make life in the diaspora 'livable'.

'Livable' in this case can refer to an attempt to reproduce the old country in the new. However, it might also imply in some cases that the country of origin is happily discarded in favor of the country of adoption. In Genetsch's view, the implications of what 'livable' entails are negotiated along a spectrum of possibilities ranging from assimilation into a new culture to the retention of the old, or, put differently, along a continuum from sameness to difference. Borrowing from Genetsch's view, the study also probed the range of possible identity construction in a postcolonial analysis of literary commitment. The aspect of construction implies that a self image does not rely on essentialist formulations but is in need of a difference against which to define itself whereas post colonial means an attempt to come to terms with the disrupting experiences of colonialism, the question of identity inclusive.

At the turn of the century, hybridity had become part of a colonial discourse of racism. However, the crossover inherent in the imperial experience is essentially a two way process. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2003), postcolonial studies have focused on the nature of postcolonial culture as strength rather than a weakness. It is not a case of the oppressor obliterating the oppressed or the colonizer silencing the colonized. In practice it stresses the mutuality of the process. The clash of cultures can impact as much upon the colonizer as the colonized. Multicultural fiction thus does not have to accept a cultural tradition or adopt it uncritically. It may well encompass stories in which the protagonists feel uneasy with their cultural tradition and modify or even discard it (Genetsch, 2003).

Homi Bhabha (1995) stresses the interdependence of colonizer and the colonized. He argues that all cultural systems and statements are constructed in what he calls the 'Third Space of Enunciation.' Bhabha urges us into this space in an effort to open up an international culture not based on exoticism or multiculturalism of the diversity of cultures but on the inscription and articulation of cultures' hybridity. Bhabha in this instance hopes that it is in this space that we can find words with which we can speak of ourselves and others. And by exploring this Third Space we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves.

According to English (2002), the Third Space, a term originally coined by Homi Bhabha, is a concept used to describe the possibility for a negotiated reimagining of cultural identity. 'It refers to the constructing and reconstructing of identity, to the fluidity of space, to the space where identity is not fixed ... it is where we

negotiate identity and become neither this nor that but our own'(n.p.). 'Third' is used to denote where negotiation takes place, where identity is constructed and reconstructed, where life in all its ambiguity is played out.

The Third Space therefore is an opportunity that opens up and broadens horizons and challenges ideas of polarity or binary distinctions, replacing either/or with both/and. Negotiating the Third Space entails listening and giving others the opportunity for self expression (Hannula, 2001). Importantly, there must be a commitment from both parties to grasping the opportunity.

For Inkas and Wagner (2008), the idea of Third Space conceives the encounter of two distinct unequal social groups as taking place in a special Third Space of enunciation where culture is disseminated and displaced from the interacting groups, making way for the invention of a hybrid identity, whereas those two groups conceive themselves to partake in a common identity relating to shared space and common dialogue.

In the two scholars' view, the promise of the Third Space is its ability to imagine an identity or subjectivity, even a culture that does not succumb to an either/ or logic but rather embraces a simultaneity of the also /and. The Third Space is thus considered as the contact zone within which different cultures encounter. Hybridity is an inevitable result of this cultural encounter. The Third Space results from the overlapping of cultures understood as 'hybrid' and can be understood as contact zones between cultures and as the encounter of spaces, which now as the product of translation between cultures can generate borderline effects and identification (Wolf & Fukari, 2007).

Bessie Head's literary works are an expression of commitment in the Third Space, a zone where different cultures collide, given her biracial nature. The study assumed that due to her multicultural background and history of displacement, her commitment as a writer reflected hybrid syncretic crossings thus revealed an interesting dimension of the African novelist's literary commitment. This was inspired by the fact that her critics had so far overlooked an examination of how her multicultural identity possibly influenced her commitment.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

The study was be guided by the postcolonial theory. This is because post colonialism is the platform through which one can investigate issues of identity and commitment of the Third World writer. This theory deals with the writing and reading of literature written in previously or currently colonized countries or literature written in colonizing countries which deals with colonization or colonized people. Notable theoreticians in this field include Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha among others.

The theory focuses particularly on the way in which literature by the colonizing culture distorts the experience and realities, and inscribes the inferiority of the colonized people. It also focuses on literature by the colonized people which attempts to articulate their identity and reclaim their past in the face of that past's inevitable 'otherness.' It can also deal with the way in which literature in colonizing countries appropriates the language, images, scenes, tradition and so forth in colonized countries (Lye, 1998).

For the purpose of this research it was useful in analyzing how identity influences commitment in Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*. Emphasis was laid on the comprehensive comparative model of post colonial literature which argues for features such as hybridity and syncretism as constitutive elements of all postcolonial literatures.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Various scholars have studied Bessie Head's works with particular focus on the concept of identity and come up with varied views. Mhalahlo (2002) for instance, explores the perceived intricate relationship that exists between constructed identity, discrimination and violence as portrayed in Bessie Head's trilogy from varying perspectives including aspects of coloniality, materialist feminism and liminality. His major concern is with the affinities that exist between identity, discrimination and violence. The current study relates to Mhalahlo's to some extent in that it probed the possible range of identity construction in the texts of study given the hybrid nature of the author. However, the difference lay in the fact that it proceeded to address other aspects of commitment as well.

Along the same line, La Rose (2005) examines the element of being and totality in Bessie Head's A Question of Power. He argues that while Marxist criticism may be instructive in its provocation of materialist literary analysis, these readings may obfuscate pertinent discursive issues of individual ontology. In his view, this literary conundrum is exemplified by A Question of Power in which a Marxist critic may elucidate the protagonist's social-political reality. Nevertheless, it may also overlook several

ontological questions which would be more appropriately examined through a 'pluralist' feminist critic that integrates several critical approaches: the significance of gender, the formation of individual consciousness as it appertains to feminist existentialism and the psychoanalytic and existential theories of Frantz Fanon: the dialectic of political power and Head's own universal moral idealism. The present study closely relates to La Rose's in that it too, revolves around the question of being and becoming and how this informs literary commitment. La Rose's view is also pertinent in that it recognizes the need for further studies of Head's works from varied perspectives; the only difference is that his argument is limited to A Question of Power only.

Adding to the debate on identity, Dieke (2007) argues that Head's Maru, more than A Question of Power distils the very essence of her creative enterprise laced with an overriding concern for an investigation into the enigma of human prejudice. He points out that although A Question Of Power can be said to be an important site for unraveling the strands of her anguished life story with instances of immense suffering, privation and crippling alienation, Maru, on the other hand, provides the fertile site for mounting a literary resistance to the mistaken ideology which often gave rise to the anguished life story. For, without this insane ideology there would not be crippling alienation. Without this ideology there would not be suffering and privation. Both the ideology and its accoutrements represented the same morbid state. The current study however examines Maru with regard to how identity informs commitment in the text contrary to Dieke's which is limited to results of human prejudice.

From the above review, it is evident that various studies have been conducted on Bessie Head's works with regard to the question of identity. However, no scholar has so far focused on how her identity influences her literary commitment, thus the interest of this study.

METHODOLOGY:

The research was mainly qualitative. It was conducted through an analytical research design. Analytical research, as a style of qualitative inquiry is a non interactive document research which describes and interprets the past or recent past from selected sources (Macmilliam & Schumaher, 1997). These sources may be documents preserved in collections or participant's oral testimonies or as in the case of this research, a literary text of an author. This design is ideal in a situation where a researcher attempts to analyze a situation and make evaluation. For the present research, it was instrumental in examining the influence of identity on Bessie Head's literary commtitment.

DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES:

The study was mainly library based. It began with a preliminary study of the available related literature in the library which formed the basis for secondary data.

The primary data was generated through content analysis of the selected text. Nachmias (2009) defines content analysis as any technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics of messages. Qualitative content analytical approaches focus on analyzing both the explicit or manifest content of a text as well as interpretations of latent content of texts- that which can be interpreted or interpolated from the text, but is not explicitly stated in it (Granhein & Lundman, 2003).

In the current research, reading, analysis and interpretation of the selected text was done to establish the extent to which the writer is committed as a woman and as a Third World person. This process was accomplished through use of the postcolonial theory.

DATA ANALYSIS:

The data collected through content analysis of the selected texts was then coded according to thematic concerns, the mode of characterization and vision of the author. The postcolonial theory was applied in the textual analysis to establish the nature of the writer's commitment as reflected in the text of choice.

IDENTITY AND COMMITMENT IN *MARU:*

In the text *Maru*, identity is seen to influence the writer's commitment in the choice of characters and the treatment of pertinent issues. The character Maru, for instance, is destined to be the paramount chief. On the contrary, he renounces his heritage and opts to marry Margaret Cadmore, a Masarwa. This union presents a

merger between the tribes thus is reflective of hybridity.

Traditionally, the Masarwa were merely destined to be slaves. Maru's marriage to Margaret may thus be seen as Head's strategy to erase binary distinctions accentuated by race or class. It is thus symbolic of the destruction of racial or ethnic barriers among individuals. It is supposed to be an eye opener to the fact that human beings were basically the same and that differences of color should not be a hindrance to equal opportunities.

The choice of Margaret as a character is symbolic of the writer's own experience. Being hybrid – the product of a white mother and black father, Head is cast in the in-between space. Likewise, Margaret is Masarwa yet defies easy categorization because though African, she looked Chinese or could pass for a colored. The creation of a character that defies easy categorization like in Margaret's case pegs no particular identity to the character. In this way the writer appears to advocate a society with no racial borders, a society in which identity is fluid allowing cultures to crisscross so as to make up a global identity.

This marriage is also seen as a gateway to freedom. This is seen from the fact that when the other Masarwa hear of Maru's marriage, they realized that their oppression had come to an end. 'They started to run out into sunlight, then they turned and looked at the small dark room. They said: We are not going back there' (p123). The sunlight in this case implies freedom and by extension a break from previously oppressive conditions. The experience of freedom is so blissful that the Masarwa swear not to go back to the small room from which they had emerged. The fact that those who did not know that the wind of freedom had also reached people of Masarwa tribe were in for an unpleasant surprise because it would no longer be possible to treat Masarwa people in an inhuman way without getting oneself killed, alludes to the suddenness of this freedom. The marriage had been planned in secret thus its accomplishment had caught the people by surprise. For the Masarwa, this was an opportunity at construction of a new self image. Their vow not to go back to the small room in which they had been imprisoned implies their change in personality resulting from a changed consciousness.

Likewise Maru's marriage to Margaret constructs for him a new image. As the destined paramount chief he turns out to be a rebel because he defies the status quo prescribed by tradition. This implies that for individuals to make significant changes, they have to shun inhibitive traditions. In certain instances they have to sacrifice lucrative opportunities just like Maru sacrifices chieftaincy in order to dismantle racial barriers. On the contrary, Maru's positive intention does not result to positive results. When the people of Dilepe hear about the marriage, they begin to talk about him as if he had died. In the people's view, he shifts from being royalty to being an outcast.

For Margaret, the situation is no different; the people's contemptuous attitude towards her prior to the marriage remains the same even after the marriage. She only finds acceptance from Maru and not the people. It is as if her relationship with Maru only ends up dragging him away from mainstream society to join her on the fringes of the society. Maru's attempt at inclusion thus results in further exclusion. The people's reaction emphasizes the difficulty of erasing cultural barriers imposed by racial prejudice. Perhaps this marriage would have been of greater significance to the people if it had won their approval.

Maru's marriage to Margaret also casts him with a sense of ambivalence. His insistence that Margaret should return the bed given to her by Moleka makes him appear stead fast in tradition and thus like everyone else, acknowledges the fact that the Masarwa are an inferior lot. He criticizes Moleka's generosity to Margaret declaring that he had several Masarwa slaves who maintained his cattle and cattle posts. He wonders what they would do when they heard that a certain Masarwa in his village was being treated as an equal of the Batswana and had even been given a bed from his office. Lending Margaret a bed would complicate issues since he would not be able to find enough beds for all the other Masarwa out in the field.

He maintains this stand even when Margaret herself goes to the head office to request for an extra day or two to enable her acquire a bed of her own. Through this despicable act, Maru speaks for all the Totems who were the custodians of the society's norms. Having acted in concordance with the customs, it was therefore shocking that behind the scenes he was laying strategies that would lead to his marriage to Margaret. Maru's intentions and actions thereby conflict resulting to his being cast in an in-between space.

In an earlier episode, the realization that Margaret was a Masarwa had thrown Pete, Seth and Morafi off balance. They had left the matter to be resolved by the Totems. Maru's stand against Margaret thus echoes their greatest desire and indeed boosts their ego. Unknown to everyone else, this was Maru's plot to isolate Margaret and make her an easy prey for him as Moleka later discovers.

The character Maru is himself given a god like poise. He is at times in communion with the gods, has the

ability to see right through people and in Margaret's case, is able to communicate to her through dreams. As the writer observes, there had never been a time when he had not thought a thought and felt it bound to the center of the earth then bound back to his heart again with a reply. Also in his superhuman mould as Tladi – the invisible godlike being, Maru punishes Pete, Seth and Morafi for their evil deeds. The author's creation of a character that is human, but occasionally operates in the realm of the gods, casts Maru in the borderline space. In the same way, the writer herself by virtue of her mixed race is in an in-between space. This borderline stance gives Maru a malleable identity, combining godlike and human elements. Perhaps it is this hybrid nature that allows for syncretic crossing in his actions – appearing to be representing the Totems yet at the same time he is preparing to marry the Totems' object of derision.

Besides emphasizing the difficulties of erasing cultural boundaries, the people's complete failure to recognize the marriage between Margaret and Maru also seems to emphasizes the fact that change is easier to embrace if it comes gradually. If it is suddenly imposed on the people then it is bound to meet resistance. Head in this way seems to express the fact that racial prejudice cannot be dismantled overnight. Contrary to Maru's noble action in recognition of human value, the people pretend he had died, his attempt at dismantling racial barriers instead comes to a roadblock. The people's indifference to his efforts is reflected in the fact that village life including the oppression of the Masarwa, remains unchanged in the community. In their view Maru had descended from royalty to become an outcast in the society.

At another level, the marriage between Maru and Margaret would be seen as an attempt to dissolve individual prejudice on basis of race differences by acceptance of each other as partners on equal terms . However, this does not come to be, the marriage only serves to cement Margaret's voicelessness and powerlessness. Maru had dictated the course of her life behind the scenes all along, communicating to her through dreams. His instruction that the bed be retrieved had sealed her marginal position in the community since this was also in compliance with the prevailing contemptuous attitude towards her.

Unknown to her, he had provided canvas and paint on which she had expressed her innermost desires yet even these had been taken away from her and given to him except for the very last painting which he had rejected. Even the marriage was Maru's idea and she was powerless against the decision. In any case it had come at a time when her whole world had crumbled. Dikeledi's impending marriage to Moleka, who all along had been the object of her adoration, had completely shattered her composure. Her acceptance of Maru had thus been as a last resort as Head puts it, 'What could she say except that at that moment she would have chosen anything as an alternative to the living death into which she had so unexpectedly fallen?' (p120). Moleka's inability to openly declare his love to Margaret points to the difficulty of breaking ethnic barrier. This reveals the difficulty of totally erasing the cultural differences. Even Maru does not out rightly declare this love for Margaret but largely manipulates her through his spies who smooth the way for him behind the scene. His decision to live in a house far away from the populace is testimony to the fact that this marriage has resulted in the marginalization of Maru by the people. It confirms his new identity as an outcast in the community. At a wider level, this marriage can be viewed as an attempt at miscegenation. It may also imply an attempt at construction of a new identity and this is true for Maru has relinquished his leadership position to unite with a non-entity. For the writer, Maru's marriage portends the destruction of all binary distinctions in favor of a global identity that recognizes people for their worth and not their races. This is only achievable by people who brave the odds to design a distinct identity for themselves by defying the inhibitions of tradition.

Through the choice of Margaret as a central character, Head finds a vent through which to express her personal dilemma. She was colored born of a white mother and a black father. As a result of her mixed-blood status, she was marginalized just like Margaret who suffers discrimination because of her race. Like the protagonist, Bessie was raised by a foster family and sent to mission school. Echoes of childhood are reflected in the fact that Margaret is named Margaret Cadmore after her foster mother. In the same way, the only link Bessie had with her mother was her mother's name given to her at birth upon her mother's insistence.

Through Margaret, Head creates a character that defies easy categorization by virtue of the character's proximity to a white woman and her skin color. The near perfect English accent and manners did not fit her looks. In fact, not one thing about her fitted another and 'she looked half as a Chinese and half as an African and half like god knows what' (p19). This creates a sense of ambiguity in the character and she is most often mistaken for a 'colored', the racial designation in South Africa for mixed blood children of white and black parentage.

As a result of this mistaken assumption, Margaret's experience thus merges aptly with the author's. The

bottom line being that members of one group are physically indistinguishable from those of the other. Both Head and her protagonist are thus marked by events of miscegenation. Margaret's in between position as well as adoption into a white family are projections of her liminal, meditative position. She cannot lay claim to a white heritage because she does not belong there at the same time she cannot profess her true identity as an African because her upbringing had alienated her from her roots. She thus remains at the threshold.

This in-between position often presents the character with loopholes which she can exploit to her advantage, however the young girl had grown above petty prejudices as she confesses to Dikeledi, 'But I am not ashamed of being a Masarwa'(p20). Her childhood experiences were such that they had hardened her against racial injustices. Above all, she had realized that man is helpless in the face of nature - a notion that had been drummed into her by her foster mother who always reminded her that there was nothing she could do about her appearance but had to live with it.

The drama of Margaret thus becomes the drama of cultural denigration as a result of colonization of the African continent. This ideally is the drama of domination of one culture over another. The dominating culture in this sense implies a supposedly superior culture. Margaret had been adopted by a white woman at birth upon her mother's death and this implied a total immersion into a different cultural experience. As Head puts it, 'There seemed to be a big hole in the child's mind between the time that she slowly become conscious of her life in the home of the missionaries and conscious of herself as a person'(p11). This big hole is attributed to the fact that 'unlike other children she was never able to say: I am this or that my parents are this or that' (p11).

This dilemma derives from her total alienation from her culture. In this way, the white woman creates a child of ambiguous identity. A bushman on the outside but an English woman inside. As a child, Head too had been raised in by a foster family. She neither had the opportunity to interact with her white mother nor her black father. Her ideals were those acquired from the Heathcotes- her adopted family, and the mission school she attended.

In Margaret's case, this total immersion into the English culture renders the child out of touch with the Masarwa, and subsequently, her own culture. Within the home of her foster mother, she is also sheltered from the sense of racial inferiority that bushmen are subjected to in Botswana. In fact as a child her encounter with oppression had been limited to the wild jiggling dance: "since when did a bushy go to school? We take him to the bush where he eat mealie pap, pap, pap'(p13). This was performed whenever other children caught her in some remote part of the school building during the play time hour.

However, despite being sheltered from racial prejudice, her relationship with the white woman was never that of a child and a mother. It was as though she was a semi servant in the house yet at the same time treated as an equal by given things servants do not usually get such as kisses on the cheeks and toes at bed time, bedtime stories, long walks into the bush to observe the behavior of birds as well as lots of reading material. In this way Margaret shuttles between points of inclusion and exclusion.

It is only in later life that she is confronted by discrimination based on her identity since there was no one in later life who did not hesitate to tell her that she was a bushman, mixed breed, half bred, low breed or bastard. As a teacher at Leseding school for instance, she finds herself in the full glare of discrimination. This discrimination was however based on her appearance and not culture for in real sense she was out of touch with this culture.

Margaret Cadmore's experiment thus results in the creation of a border line character. The writer acknowledges that it was hardly African 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. The final product of this creation seems to reflect the writer's most personal conviction – the desire for a race free society in which everybody projects a global identity. However as reflected by Margaret's experiences, this dream is encumbered with a lot of challenges. The text thus offers hybridity as a bridge that bonds though it does not obliterate cultural oppositions.

CONCLUSION:

From this discussion it is evident that Head's commitment is largely influenced by her identity. Being multicultural, her characters are thrown into the in between space. They shuttle between points of inclusion and exclusion as in the case of Margaret and Maru.

The quest for a universal identity that defies definitions of race or tribe is shrouded in shackles of prejudice enshrined in the traditional outlook which as proposed by the author must be dismantled to

attain total liberty. This is true of Maru who renounces his heritage in order to marry Margaret who by virtue of her Masarwa identity is considered an untouchable.

The creation of Margaret, a borderline character that as the writer acknowledges was hardly African 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, seems to reflect the writer's most personal conviction – the desire for a race free society in which everybody projects a global identity.
However as reflected by Margaret's experiences, this dream is encumbered with a lot of challenges. The text thus offers hybridity as a bridge which bonds though it does not obliterate cultural oppositions. It implies an unsettling of identities so that the characters grapple with issues of being and becoming in their quest to redefine their identity.

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