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SYMBOLISM AND IMAGERY: AN ANALYSIS OF BESSIE
HEAD'S FICTIONAL WORKS. 4

GACHANJA KIAI

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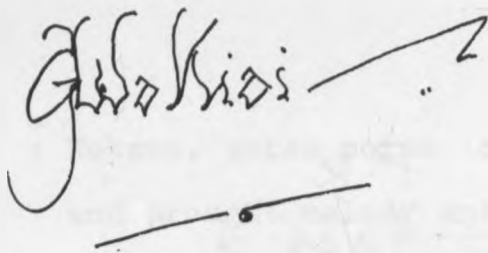
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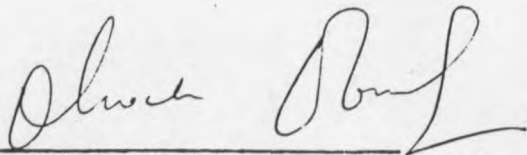
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This thesis has been submitted for examination with our approval as University Supervisors.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Chris L. Wanjala', with a horizontal line underneath.

PROF. CHRIS L. WANJALA
FIRST SUPERVISOR

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Oluoch Obura', with a horizontal line underneath.

DR. OLUOCH OBURA
SECOND SUPERVISOR.

DEDICATION

To : My father Mr. Bethuel Kiai and mother
Mrs. Assumpta Kiai whose wisdom I
greatly treasure.

For : Nekesa, whose poise diffused despondency
and brought melody and charm thus radiating
spectra of hope.

In memory of : Bessie Head, who toiled to
give us a vast and rich literary
reservoir.

: Samora Machel brought
down as the struggle to
free South Africa intensified.

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A cordial and inspiring atmosphere was created by the friendliness of Hoss, Nyangi, Muraguri, Obondo, Ruji and Wangu. They are all very precious to me.

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ABSTRACT.

This thesis is entitled "Symbolism and Imagery: An analysis of Bessie Head's fictional works." It examines the following four titles, A Question of Power, When Rain Clouds Gather, Maru and selected short stories from the anthology, The Collector of Treasures.

The approach adopted in this study entails an appreciation of each text through a demonstration of the way symbols and images portray and express ideas and content of individual texts. It further illustrates the way images and symbols illuminate the totality of a work of literature and the manner in which the author handles and relates characters in various conflicts to bring about the meaning of the texts.

The development of Bessie Head's fictional works can be traced and appreciated as a journey. The destination of the journey is geared towards the attainment of self-realisation, human dignity and self esteem. Central to this lies man's strife with a hazardous, unpredictable environment. The image of the destructive nature looms large on the society. The cooperative movement symbolises the conquest and triumph of

man over nature.

Oppressive forces which imperil man's liberty include racial discrimination, sexual and ethnic prejudices. They are articulated by the author through symbolism.

Darkness in the novels signifies agony and mental frustration of the individual. But the savouring spirit conceived in communal strength is the source of ultimate light and hope for emancipation in the society. In this struggle is borne a new awareness which seeks to make the society better than it was before. This is gained through the restoration of humanistic values of justice and liberty. The awareness is arrived at by the author through an effective exploration of symbols and character portrayal.

INTRODUCTION:

METHODOLOGY AND PERSPECTIVES.

At various stages in the development of literary criticism, scholars have grappled with questions of the nature and function of form and content. Symbols and images are figures of speech that enhance a work of art albeit in an indirect manner. The use of imagery and symbolism enriches the subject matter of art by translating meaning through associations and by establishing contrast and comparisons through what Caroline Spurgeon terms, "likeness between dissimilar things."¹

To clarify the method and approach pursued in this thesis a definition of imagery and symbolism is attempted. Further the functions of these artistic devices are enumerated.

Symbols are stylistic features in a work of art that "stand for, represent or denote something else."² They have a "capacity to excite ... a response."³ They stimulate this response by their ability to offer memorable impressions to the mind. A drum in an African setting could for instance be the physical symbol of communication if it is sounded as a warning of impending danger. Symbolism is the art of projecting symbols in

a systematic and skilful way. This manner enables meaning and significance in literary works to be assimilated by suggestion or by inference.

An image on the other hand can be defined as a "likeness ... a representation ... an idea that closely resembles something ..., artificial imitations or representations of the external form of any object."⁴ Imagery is the art of image projection in a work of art "to represent descriptively things, actions, or even abstract ideas."⁵ This function of imagery can magnify an idea in the mind of the reader to "effects beyond the range of literal language."⁶ The imagination of the reader receives and responds to articulate symbolism and imagery. This quality in a work of art exhibits craftsmanship by an author in the attempt at re-creating and reflecting reality.

In African Literature, Emmanuel Ngara has made the observation that there is "need to find an adequate method of studying the English of African Writers."⁷ This recognition calls for additional studies in stylistic criticism. African artists portray a wealth of talent and skill as they compose their creative works. Important elements of language like symbols and images are strongly projected as this thesis hopes to demonstrate.

Bessie Head's consistency and enormous contribution to literature have to a large extent been excluded from serious studies. Available are scattered acknowledgements in critical appraisals and sketchy reviews on her contribution to literature.

Oladele Taiwo in Female Novelists of Modern Africa, underlines the specific role of women within the context of the African situation. He attributes the success of family life to the dominant role played by women especially in the development of a child's personality in urban and rural areas. In the rural area women are involved in oral literary contributions as they expose children to rhymes, riddles proverbs and short stories. He goes on to question the credibility of the negative presentation of the role and contribution of women in African literature;

What image of the women emerges from African writings? what stereotypes have been created and what is being done to correct any wrong impressions? What should be the role of a female novelist in modern Africa and how successfully is she playing her role?⁸

Taiwo asserts that the contribution of women writers have tended to be undermined within African literature because the majority male writers have portrayed a negative image of their women characters. This image is the culmination of unequal social relations prevailing within patriarchal society. The writer and critic thus reflects this situation of women. There have been instances where the psychological

weaknesses of women have been exaggerated. Taiwo cites the example of Onitsha market literature to illustrate this contention.

A more favourable image of women is highlighted by Sembene Ousmane in God's Bits of Wood. Taiwo picks Ousmane's edifying portrayal of women as exceptional. The woman as a pragmatic and enduring character demystifies male chauvinism, an image that Alex La Guma paints in Time of the Butcherbird. La Guma builds around Mma-Tau a symbol of resistance against racial oppression and in this regard portrays a strong female character.

Taiwo looks at the manner in which women writers have reacted to their reality and how they have responded to the different ways in which they are portrayed in literature.

In regard to Bessie Head, Taiwo asserts that she is preoccupied with evaluating various levels of abuses of power by individuals or groups. She opposes any form of oppression and exploitation and sees the prevalence of injustice as a pre-requisite to disaster. Taiwo is of the opinion that Bessie Head exhibits a strong and positively feminist perspective.

Keiko Miyamoto in a paper, "Women's image in Bessie Head's works" evaluates the nature and function of various pronounced images that occur in Head's works. The core of these images is the nature of

oppression and exploitation experienced by women as subordinate members of their society. She looks at various levels of exploitation that manifest themselves. The woman as a child bearer and domestic hand is undermined by the apartheid system. Miyamoto does a credible analysis by studying Head's images along the development of society and reflects the environment within which characters are developed. She demonstrates the power of imagery as it enriches a work of art. We gain an insight through the images Miyamoto studies of the attitude, convictions and world view permeating the works of Bessie Head. The critic concludes that Bessie Head's fictional texts illuminate the degree to which exploitation and oppression destroys man. In this regard Miyamoto presents an objective analysis of Head's artistry in the exposition of her ideas through skilful use of imagery.

Lloyd Brown in, Women Writers in Black Africa, observes that women writers have received scant attention by critics. He observes that;

"Western male Africanists have contributed heavily to an old boy network of African studies in which the African woman simply does not exist as a serious or significant writer."⁹

He emphasizes that this peculiar situation has given rise to a literature by women that describes their experiences, a perspective at variance with their male counterparts. Myths created around the role of women and their

subordinate position constitute major themes in Women's literature.

He analyses Bessie Head's works in relation to the development of a feminist perspective. He rightly traces the development of Head's artistry with her emerging political convictions. Bessie Head gains a social perspective from her participation in communal activities. Her heightened consciousness demands an analysis of the causes of oppression within the existing political structure. It is this perspective that gives insight to women's precarious position within this structure. Women share problems like dependency and sexual exploitation. The exploitation and oppression that Head experiences inspires a rebelliousness that is crucial in the search for justice. In this respect Lloyd Brown regards Head as a unique writer in South Africa. She overcomes her sexual and racial limitations to portray a positive image of women.

The cooperative movement so vivid in Bessie Head's works symbolises a new world with optimistic possibilities for the future.

Brown underscores Head's commitment to present a new purposiveness in the community which symbolises hope and replaces the disillusionment and hatred which initially characterises the community. It is significant that the main characters are women and these articulate the plight of oppressed women in South Africa.

Bessie Head's first novel, When Rain Clouds Gather, was published in 1968. Its central concern is the influence the threat of drought has, to the lives of the inhabitants of Golema Mmidi in Botswana. The community is up in arms attempting to find alternative methods to combat this raging menace.

With the aid of the exiled Makhaya and Gilbert a foreigner, they initiate modern farming methods. With Makhaya now a refugee in this village, from South Africa, they face stiff opposition from the local administrative chief. The threat of drought pronounces the arduous task confronting the society, as it endeavours to transform its reality towards self reliance.

The second novel, Maru was published in 1971. It takes a critical look at racial and ethnic prejudice. Independent African countries project this salient feature. Favouritism in employment for instance, is largely determined by ethnic bias that excludes members of other ethnic communities. The conflict in this novel arises out of the animosity other ethnic groups have towards the "Masarwa" a derogatory reference to the equally unpalatable term, "Bushmen."

A Question of Power, published in 1974, reflects the effects of domination and the influence this has to the personality of an individual. This novel's

movement glides through the consciousness of Elizabeth, the major character. In regard to this structure we can appreciate it as an internal novel. Events unfold in her mind and give insight to the force of evil, generated by Sello and Dan. The force they unleash symbolises destructive power that undermines the will of the main protagonist to determine the destiny of her life.

Elizabeth's mind is the image of a sick and abnormal situation and projects the reality of apartheid and its destructive nature. As a victim of evil power Elizabeth endures intense suffering.

She symbolises the tortures of millions of South African Blacks, Coloureds and other oppressed groups. The community's concern and support weans her back to health. This communal display projects the vision of the novel. The love Elizabeth receives from the community is a cardinal principal that society should cherish. This love unifies Elizabeth an exile, to Motabeng life and society. The ease with which she settles down on recuperation illustrates the power of the society to transform reality out of the old and brutal apartheid system. Tranquility returns to the life of Elizabeth and for the first time after a long spell of torment an inner calm overwhelms her as she experiences a sense of security and confidence; "she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging."¹⁰

Published in 1977, is Bessie Head's short story anthology The Collector of Treasures. This text synthesises popular Botswana short stories. These stories trace various conflicts that are the consequence of a changing society. We explore the mythical beginnings of Botswana society through the first story entitled "The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration." The sequence follows this story up with the impact Christianity had on feudal society. The consequence of Christianity and colonialism was felt within the family unit. Under colonialism and neo-colonialism feudalism, buckled. This comes about due to increased awareness of women after receiving formal education. These issues are handled in the stories and will be examined, to determine their significance.

Serowe : Village of the Rain Wind, was published in 1981. This text is a valuable historical insight into the various development stages of Botswana society. The text cites the experiences of selected respondents of the community and records their thoughts and perspective of colonial and post-colonial Botswana. The material is relevant as a reference source on the social, economic, cultural and historical events of this society.

Another title A Bewitched Cross Road published in 1984 credits Bessie Head's latest literary contribution. This particular text is not analysed here for its unavailability. However it is hoped that the vision rather than be marred by the absence of this text will still suffice as the other contributions are lucid enough in regard to the authors vision of society and since the lucid images that are studied crystalise and express experiences that are conceived at various stages of the authors development. Imagery and symbolism probes into the vision of the author and leaves a perennial impression. In this sense therefore this thesis will have done justice to this author.

This thesis seeks to illuminate the nature and function of symbolism and imagery by illustrating through analysis, the depth and complexity that is projected by these two figures of speech. This will suffice as we explore the manner in which Bessie Head reflects ideas through images and symbols realising in the process, cohesion and artistic unity in the intrinsic relationship of form and content.

Literature as a product and synthesis of social values, attitudes and worldview will be studied through the critical analysis of sampled images and symbols. The interdependence of form and content compels this thesis to take cognizance of various important literary features like, characterisation, thematic concepts,

sociological relations and the ideology posited. Characters that are typical and representative of ideologies and attitudes are important elements in showing how various trains of thought are articulated through them.

It is noted that female characters dominate the fictional texts. The plight and agony of women under apartheid and also burdened by a patriarchal and feudal traditional system cannot be over emphasised. Lucid imagery and symbolism articulate the struggle of women to overcome political, economic and cultural inequities. Female oppression is a symptom of unequal relations in society. It denies liberty and justice to ^wman. Zillah Eisenstein makes this observation in her analysis of female oppression:

Women's oppression occurs from her exploitation as a wage-labourer but also occurs from the relations that define her existence in the patriarchal sexual hierarchy -- as mother, domestic laborer, and consumer. Racial oppression locates her within the racist division of society alongside her exploitation and sexual oppression.¹¹

In addition, this study evaluates the developing social awareness of various characters in relation to the circumstances and context within which they operate. Symbolism and imagery is the looking glass through which meaning of the texts is enunciated. Through the study, an evaluation of the style is done. The style demonstrates the flexibility of the author's skill from an easy flowing short-story narrative technique to the complex and subjective structure of A Question of Power.

Bessie Head's literary works display a deep sense of historical development. We observe the nature of feudal society and the effect of colonialism to this feudal structure. The emergence of apartheid and its harsh reality is presented in the texts.

This thesis is divided into four chapters. A brief first chapter traces the life of the author. From events of Bessie Head's life we grasp the significance of parallel incidents in her fictional works. The literary biography unravels the source of the author's motivating and inspiring forces.

Chapter two is entitled "Elizabeth the Victim of Evil Powers." It sets to demonstrate through symbolism and imagery, the frustrations of Elizabeth, the main protagonist. The story is reflected through her ailing mind. This structure differs from that of her two titles Maru and When Rain Clouds Gather. These three novels form what is considered Bessie Head's trilogy.

"A Journey Towards a Definition of the Self", is the title of chapter three. It discerns the meaning of the two novels, When Rain Clouds Gather and Maru. Symbolism and Imagery trace the life of characters living in hostile situations. This chapter looks at the manner in which "alien" characters assert themselves and harmonise their existence in environments that are new to them. These characters are confronted by racism, ethnic and sexual prejudices and also their own unbalanced psychology. This dimension of their psychology is the result of an unfavourable political and economic system. Human rehabilitation is thus the central concern of this chapter.

Chapter four, features four representative short stories from the anthology, The Collector of Treasures. The criteria for studying these

four stories are based on the compulsion to project the emergence of Botswana society. The stories analysed, display a sense of sequence, and articulate various stylistic features. The style gives credence to the sequence of events in these tales. The various incidents contained in these stories enables us to capture the antagonisms and resolve of various conflicts inherent in Botswana society.

In the conclusion the achievements of this study are highlighted. We emphasise that the thesis presents a method that seeks to appreciate the nature and function of figures of speech in literary works of Iessie Head.

This alternative and complementary method is in addition to other approaches now gracing African literature.

CHAPTER ONE

LITERARY BIOGRAPHY

Bessie Head's literary biography is the source of significant and valuable information regarding the circumstances and influences that formed the thrust of her artistry. This dimension is obvious right from circumstances of her birth.

Great secrecy surrounded her birth in a Pietersmaritzburg mental hospital in 1937. Her mother, Bessie Emery, had conceived Bessie Head with an "unnamed" black stable attendant who worked for the family. Their family was of upper class origins. The relationship could not withstand the rigours and demands of the Immorality Act, enforced in 1927. The association was thus seen not only as a breach of South African legislation but also as an irregular and embarrassing situation for the family.

The family preferred to sustain what little was left of their pride and interpreted Emery's association with a black man as mental aberration. Unaccepted by upper class society and family, Emery was committed to a mental hospital. It was here that Bessie Head was born. Rejected by her grandparents Bessie

Head ended up being fostered by a couple of mixed blood. Her mother, then isolated, was forbidden from taking care of her child.

A tragedy occurred in 1943. Her foster father died in the same year that Bessie Head's real mother committed suicide in hospital. This threw her foster mother into deep financial problems. This situation deteriorated rapidly until the timely intervention of the Child Welfare Society. They took custody of her and placed her in a mission orphanage at Durban. At that time she was thirteen years of age.

At this orphanage Bessie Head confronted an insensitive and callous White Missionary headmistress. Without much thought to consequence, the headmistress took delight disclosing to Bessie Head the facts of her birth. A similar incident is enacted in the novel A Question of Power. The central character, Elizabeth is jolted by information communicated to her by a hostile and impercipient school principal:

You must be careful. Your mother was insane. If you're not careful you'll get insane just like your mother. Your mother was a white woman. They had to lock her up, as she was having a child by the stable boy, who was a native.¹

The themes of isolation and rejection are a persistent feature of Bessie Head's fictional works. She fought to undermine evil that arose from racial, ethnic and sexual discrimination.

At the age of 18, Bessie Head earned her primary school certificate. This was as a result of available funds, set aside for Head by her mother. It was through this fund that she finally pursued a course that led her into the teaching profession.

Her early childhood experience was to have a lasting impression on her. She took issue with racial injustice and her view of this aspect is captured in this extract:

I feel with a situation like we have in South Africa, there must be a lot of people who have tragic circumstances surrounding their birth. When there are so many artificial

barriers set up between
the races, people being
people are going to try
to break through
those artificial barriers.²

She left the orphanage and taught briefly at Durban. Later she joined the staff of "Drum" magazine. She was then in her early 20's. During the 1950's she worked for this magazine and at the same time contributed articles to "Golden City Post", a paper that dealt with issues pertaining to African problems. This was a period of political repression. Head's main interest was the racial attitudes that divided South Africa. She recommended reforms to remedy this anomaly. It was for her journalistic contributions, that she was identified by the Pan-Africanist Congress Party (P.A.C.). Her regular contributions were outstanding. She became active in politics in 1960 and marched during the Sharpeville demonstrations. It was about this time that she enrolled as an active member of the Pan-Africanist Congress Party.

In her childhood she had experienced racial animosity. She had been rejected by her grandparents on account of her colour. In South Africa as an active member of her Party

harassment, molestation and arbitrary detention was the reality of the day. She had witnessed violence and this had traumatised her life. She decided, on this account to seek refuge in neighbouring Botswana. She settled there in 1964. Her perception of politics was hampered by the brutality she observed in South Africa. Politics appeared to her as the root cause of human suffering and in an interview she denounced the role of active politics in society; "I wanted to take in the total story of life. I cannot cope with the smallness and pettiness of politics..."³

The statement, rather than dismissing the concept of politics illustrates that political systems can and are manipulated to rationalise an unpopular social economic system that exploits and oppresses the majority.

She pursued her teaching career in Botswana where she resided with her young son, from a short, uneventful marriage.

Bessie Head settled in Serowe and taught at Tshekedi Primary School. This is mainly, a desert region with little agricultural activity. In her endeavour, to reduce human suffering she

enrolled in the Bamangwato Development Farm. This co-operative scheme sought to enhance agricultural productivity by introducing modern agricultural methods. It included in its membership, people of diverse social and economic backgrounds. All had one common goal - to tame nature and eradicate the threat to life by improving the living standards of the community.

Bessie Head has six book titles to her name. The most intriguing being, A Question of Power, published in 1974. Bessie Head suffered several * bouts of mental illness. This novel captures, with taunting realism, the story of a mentally diseased character. The deeper vision of humanity is sought in the power of love. This is the cure Bessie Head had for society in the fight against the delirious apartheid system.

When Rain Clouds Gather, was her first publication. It was published in 1968. Others include Maru (1971), The Collector of Treasures (1977), Serowe : Village of the Rain Wind (1981) and latterly, A Bewitched Cross Road (1984).

The theme of reclaiming devastated and barren land is pronounced in her works. She complements this with her own vision of society, living in a world where virtue prevails. This society is marked by sanity and respect:

It is preferable to change the world on the basis of love for mankind. But if that quality be too rare, then common sense seems the next best thing.⁴

This curative process seems idealistic, but one appreciates the sensitivity with which Bessie Head handles prejudices of race, sexism and ethnicity. These limitations in society hamper human relations and tilt the balance that should guide society.

Her short, uneventful marriage which was formalised and dissolved before her departure to Botswana, left her alone, and this affected her emotional life. The only child from this marriage, a son, often stayed with his father. Botswana thus provided for Bessie Head, a place where she could start her life afresh.

In Botswana she learned to cherish communal life. She joined a team that sought to rehabilitate human beings through an

agricultural co-operative project. The Bamangwato Development Farm with its rapid success was the result of their tireless efforts. The getting together of the community showed Bessie Head that, collective effort could realise positive results. Since the community was multi-racial, she further observed that when they got down to work all barriers of race, sex and ethnic consideration were forgotten. These shortcomings in society, are projected in her fictional works.

Serowe : Village of the Rain Wind (1981) is a factual narration that attempts to trace the history of Serowe village. It is based on impressions and perceptions of various people of standing in their society. This is a historical text that recreates the past of society.

In 1984 Bessie Head was commissioned by Heinemann to write her autobiography. To date this has not been published. It is hoped that what remained to be completed in it will be finalised and consequently be published posthumously.

This was her last major project before she passed away. Despite royalties from her literary contributions, she could barely sustain herself. She ate a deficient and unbalanced diet which made her susceptible to disease, as noted by Ellen Drake.⁵

On the 17th of April 1986 she succumbed to infectious Hepatitis and was buried at Serowe on the 26th April 1986. To Lauretta Ngoobo, Bessie Head's death robbed Africa of a hardworking artist. This gap would "have a profound effect on the African literary scene."⁶ Ellen Drake, in her tribute, saw Bessie Head a world artist. Her creativity would deny the world the "sensitivity and idealism" that marked her work.

The harsh life she weathered gave us her thoughts. Her courage is reflected in her literary contribution which focuses on man's struggle to create a more humane society for himself and his progeny.

CHAPTER TWO

ELIZABETH, THE VICTIM OF
EVIL POWERS.

Various critics consider A Question of Power a "controversial"¹ novel. Its rigid and tightly woven structure, not only differs from preceding novels of this author, but it also increases grounds for unending debate on the nature and meaning of its content.

This novel seeks to project the effects of the abuse of political power. The author focuses on the individual's psychology. In pursuit of the meaning this fictional work projects, this chapter analyses the effects and results that accrue, as a consequence of power abuse. Imagery and symbolism projected through the author's artistry, will be the pointer to the meaning of this text. For purposes of clarity, the study of power play, will be handled at what I will loosely refer to as the physical level and later on I will look at the psychological dimension of the main character. The meaning unveiled by selected images and symbols will no doubt, portray ideas permeating this novel.

This study will thus dwell at some length on the vision drawn by symbolism and imagery and also reflect upon the manner in which these devices enhance the text.

A Question of Power, is the tragic story of Elizabeth, an illustrious and overwhelmingly adjustable citizen of South Africa.

She migrates to neighbouring Botswana in an attempt to retrace her political vision, obscured, so to speak, by prevailing racist attitudes in South Africa. Her recollection of apartheid, is captured in traumatic psychological setbacks. The mental breakdowns that follow, make the arduous task of settling down as a refugee all the more difficult. The physical environment is no help either. Desolate and severely barren it holds only threats to human rehabilitation. Agricultural reform is the only certain measure to check future drought situations.

This endeavour to sustain life, is a central activity in Motabeng village. Elizabeth's voluntary enrolment in the co-operative project, is acknowledgement that man must be optimistic and transform his reality even in the face of calamity.

In Elizabeth's strife to be productive to society, her constantly impaired mind, is a tragic setback. From this novel we shall study her psychological torment and torture which results from her insanity. Additionally we shall examine how her suffering, gives meaning to the novel. In her world of mental agony three characters, Sello Dan and Medusa, prevail upon her, and dominate her psyche. They drive her insane by their persistent struggles to dominate her mind. Thus, these three, influence Elizabeth's life, literally driving her to the abyss. Elizabeth's life lies on a pedestal and at various times she contemplates suicide.

The power of these agents is so devastating that it parallels the power of apartheid. The cruel reality of apartheid demoralises the individual in much the same way as Elizabeth suffers in the hands of Sello, Dan and Medusa. They slowly but surely fragment her personality and confidence.

Elizabeth, however in a feat of Herculean effort asserts her will to live and be free. This gesture enables her to triumph over evil powers, of the trio. Her recuperation is significant. The symbolism of

this new liberation, coming so timely, visualises the broader political struggle by man to overthrow apartheid. It crumbles in the face of concerted resistance and with a new purpose.

The malaise of Elizabeth's mind, brought by the pestilent intervention of Sello, Dan and Medusa is projected by images that portray destruction. By inference this suggests the downfall of apartheid. Sello, Dan and Medusa the evil trio, display a penchant for vice and obscure Elizabeth's vision of reality. Their eventual defeat in the face of Elizabeth's triumph is thus symbolic, as it reinforces the potential of the oppressed to overcome the waning power of evil and apartheid.

These two levels, of Elizabeth's life and mind, are reciprocal and capture the personality of this character and also illuminate the tragedy of her community. When focus lies on the mind of this character, abstract scenes are enacted based upon mythical figures like Sello, Dan Medusa and Caligula. This premeditates and demands of the reader and critic, not only comprehension of the myths involved but, a

certain amount of effort to appreciate this structural innovation, if meaning is to be envisaged. An idea of this postulation can be illustrated in this apparent reference to the Egyptian myth of Isis and Osiris:

He (sello) produced a brief reconstruction of the story of Osiris and Isis. He had been the Osiris who had been shattered into a thousand fragments by the thunderbolt of the Medusa. She had been the Isis who had put the pieces together again. The details did not unfold. What unfolded fully was the picture of the reconstructed man, with the still sad, firewashed face of death.²

This seemingly obscure passage is an indirect reference to the story of Osiris and Isis that occurs in Egyptian mythology. As the wife Isis had to locate and recast the forty pieces of Osiris' dismembered remains, so, has Elizabeth to trace and revive her fading psychology and orientate herself within her community. This myth occurred within farming communities and this renders it significant to the Motabeng society now deeply involved in agricultural activities.

The structure is unfamiliar and it is an innovative ingenuity by the author. Meaning, sought through images and symbols is emitted through indirect reference. Distorted images projected by Elizabeth's sick mind, necessarily warrants a cause and effect analysis to comprehend this character's mind. Her constant dive into this world of obscurity necessitates constant focus on her mental consciousness, and self assurance. Sometimes this unfamiliar structure shocks the reader by its use of crude or "prohibitive" language. An example of this particular aspect is captured in the following extract :

Medusa was smiling. She had some top secret information to impart to Elizabeth. It was about her Vagina. Without any bother for decencies she sprawled her long black legs in the air, and the most exquisite sensation travelled out of her towards Elizabeth.³

Different sensations are exchanged and translated without contact. The reference to the private parts is suggestive of womanhood in the sense that it is the passage of life and birth. In licentious overtones Medusa, bares Elizabeth's fallible situation. The life

passage is translated to a weapon used by Medusa to torment Elizabeth by reminding her that she is a slave of man because the sensations she feels are stimulated by men and can so be exploited. This situation exposed by Medusa in indecent and perverse imagery is condescending and propagates the inferiority attitude in Elizabeth due to persistent taunting of her womanhood.

Away from Elizabeth the physical setting of the novel is centred in Motabeng village, a semi-feudal society threatened by unfavourable weather conditions and desolate agricultural land. Images that suggest this state of affairs are forged ahead alongside the description of a fragile and lifeless landscape. This reinforces the vulnerable position that confronts this society in their daily activities. The brittleness of this society is underscored in powerful imagery in the following passage:

Motabeng means the place of sand. It was a village remotely - in land, perched on the edge of the Kalahari desert. Seemingly, the only reason for peoples settlement there was a

good supply of underground water... The preponderance of mud huts with their semi-grey roofs of grass thatching gave it an ashen look during the dry season... It rained in the sky, in long streaky sheets, but the rain dried up before it reached the ground... The village of the Rain-Wind.⁴

This arresting image of gloom and calamity, indicates that this is not a geographically well endowed region. Natural imbalances dictate that drought is a constant threat to human settlement. The immediate alternative to society is to nurture scarce food and water resources. Agriculture is the necessary activity in this endeavour. It requires the active participation of members of this society. This culminates in the setting up of a co-operative project. Despite Elizabeth's ill health she volunteers her physical support. This moral boosting gesture sees the establishment of a productive rehabilitation centre. Elizabeth's contribution is a source of inspiration to others and is acknowledged by the symbolic reference to her as "Cape gooseberry", a

title fondly addressed to her by fellow co-workers in appreciation of the transformation the resistant gooseberry surmounts, in the face of dry and unfavourable weather conditions. This obvious endearment is postulated in the following passage:

The village women always passed by Elizabeth's house to collect firewood in the bush. If they saw her in the yard they stopped, laughed and said; "Cape Gooseberry, to show how well they had picked up the propaganda... The work had a melody like a complete stranger like the Cape gooseberry settled down and became a part of the village life of Motabeng. It loved the hot, dry Botswana summers as they were a replica of the Mediterranean summers of its home in the Cape.⁵

The Cape gooseberry coming timely as it does, symbolises life. It creates harmony in the environment as it promises a constant supply of food. It is like Elizabeth a 'foreign' element and it's settling down also promises the same bloom in Elizabeth's life.

The hostility of South Africa recedes into the background and harmony returns to her life.

The two sides to Elizabeth's life are mutually exclusive. Her ill mind is in a state of hallucination and reality is not perceived. In her normal life, she is active and creative and fully involved in the social life of Motabeng. However her infirmity interferes with her productivity and deters her wish to be actively occupied in matters pertaining to the society. In a sense her mental condition undermines her capacity to be of value to her community. She is helpless, like a rat tormented by a callous cat. Its power seemingly prime, the cat intimidates the rat. Trapped by such persistent power, the battle in Elizabeth's mind is one of life and death. Her vision is blurry and the reality a maze of utter confusion. In this situation then, she doesn't realise her enemy and retaliates in outbursts that illustrate her confusion. Here is a brief extract to illuminate this perversion:

I am not a tribal African
If I had been, I would
have known the exact truth
about Sello, Whether he was
good or bad. There aren't
any secrets among tribal Africans.⁶

To contemplate that, being African invests one with knowledge of the nature of Sello is fallacious. The only explanation we can conceive of why Elizabeth cites Sello, is because he torments her mind. In this jumble of confusion she seeks to explain him in the context of African society since this is the one society she can claim to understand, living amongst them as she does. Images of mocked and ridiculed Africans, remind Elizabeth in her nebulous mind of the harsh reality prevailing in South Africa. This situation increases her suffering as it jolts her memory to the realities of oppression.

In the context of apartheid, the theme of racial prejudice and its effects permeates. Apartheid is a system that legislates oppression and exploitation. It is rationalised by racism, a conscious manouvre at oppressing one race for the benefit of the

dominant one. It thus stimulates racial animosities and hostilities by pronouncing disrespect to the culture of the dominated. This is designed to alienate and disorientate the victim of racism. This feature of demoralising the victim is discerned by Elizabeth. She articulates her thoughts on this aspect as she endures mental agony:

The victim of a racial attitude cannot think of the most coherent and correct thing to do to change the heart of evil. He can scare them with violence. He can slaughter them; but he isn't the origin of the poison. It's two separate minds at work. The victim is really the most flexible, the most free person on earth. He doesn't have to think up endless falsehoods. His jailer does that. His jailer creates the chains and the oppression. He is merely presented with a thousand and one hells. The faces of oppressed people are not ugly. They are scarred with suffering... The victim who sits in jail

always sees a bit of
the sunlight shining through.⁷

Images illuminating this situation of subjugation are pronounced by words such as, "victim" "jails" and "chains." In a victimising environment where particular races of people are harassed and made a mockery of, violence is a resultant consequence. The victim lives in fear of police violence, his colour, the inherent crime. He lives in hell because the law does not make provisions for his rights. His life is regulated by strict regulations whose penalties are severe to those contravening them. The effect of this harsh reality is physically visible in their faces, reflecting harassment and demoralisation. This image of the suffering victim illuminates the adverse effect of the situation to the characters' lives. It sends them mad like Elizabeth. It sends them into exile and finally it kills them off.

The road out of this faulty organisation, is through collective resistance by the society. The peoples' passionate involvement, is the guiding principle of this endeavour. In this way they realise the power they possess in much

the same way as does Elizabeth as she emerges out of her malaise. This is the vision of the novel. It posits the concept of power sharing. This power emanates from the people's realisation of their potential to transform reality. The triumph of Elizabeth over the forces of evil symbolises the liberation of the deprived community and their triumph over apartheid. Thus, Elizabeth symbolises, the culmination of a new dynamic phase in society. This phase realises the results of communal partnership in agriculture. The co-ordinator of the agricultural co-operative taps local labour from the community. He mobilises this society and slowly their efforts are translated into positive results. They become capable of sustaining themselves. This acquired unity in participation penetrates barriers of racial prejudice. Eugene the co-ordinator of this project is white. His acceptance illustrates harmony that accrues to society when it is involved in productive endeavours. His devotion and commitment wins him acclaim as "he has shared the fate of the blacks in South Africa".⁸ Thus this unity undermines the effects of racial animosity. Racism

haunts the victim. Its damaging effect is stressed by Elizabeth in this extract:

That was the kind of world we operated in in the dark times, so narrow... So shut in, that scavengers arose and ate whatever was in sight leaving nothing for the ordinary man.⁹

Darkness arises out of the activities of the scavenger - an opportunistic bird that seeks to feed on what is left over. The fight to eradicate paternalistic and opportunist tendencies is the struggle Elizabeth associates with a struggle she views in cohesive terms as follows:

That's my struggle and that's black power, but it's a power that belongs to all mankind and in which all mankind can share.¹⁰

With this awareness, a significant landmark in Elizabeth life is achieved. This is the final stage in her recuperative process. The peoples in their collective efforts undermine totalitarian and authoritarian rule that apartheid propagates. its deceptiveness is demystified and its

proponents are treated with contempt in this image of them as dehumanised opportunistic freaks:

Once you make yourself a freak and special any bastard starts to use you. That's half of the fierce fight in Africa. The politicians first jump on the bandwagon of the past suffering. They're African nationalists and sweep the crowd away by weeping and wailing about the past... They don't view the African masses as having any dignity or grandeur...¹¹

The thrust of this observation is the quest by Elizabeth to create a just and humane society. This melancholic picture of Africa has been created by the selfish crave to control and manipulate people. This individualistic crusade only leads to further complications as seen in the chaos that confronts Elizabeth, under the power of Sello, Dan and Medusa.

To rid mankind of these vicious evils, resistance through organised struggle must ensue. This obviously precipitates death, symbolised by a coffin. Death is contrasted to the formerly ravaged land. The fruitful

land now flourishing with abundant crop is the result of collective endeavour. The battleground is the scene of bloodshed out of which liberty and justice will be borne to generations thereafter. This element is noted by the recuperating Elizabeth; "It was out of death itself that a great light had been found".¹²

This light alluded to symbolises hope.
It is this hope that the society now embraces.
It is the realisation of collective unity that the people have. A power to determine their own destiny. Elizabeth's subsequent but meteoric recovery is a new birth symbolised by a womb. It is the revelation of a new knowledge and a heightened consciousness:

It was as though a crossroad had been reached and that people would awaken to a knowledge of their powers, but this time in a saner world.¹³

This final realisation is donned by colours and shades that are symbolic. They enhance character portrayal as their moods are projected by various levels of their activities. In the world of Sello, Dan and Medusa the shades

are melancholic, 'pitch black, mad ferocious'. They project images of destruction and doom. They contrast avidly with clear colours of hope and kindness exuded by description of amiable characters like Tom. These colours are balanced and sparkle rendering hope in situations where pessimism almost overwhelms the characters. R

The totality of this technique gives the novel the tone of hope as illuminated by the images and symbols analysed. Hope lies in the characters and they are central to the meaning of the work. The final realisation of the power of the characters is symbolised by Elizabeth and her fighting spirit to overcome evil and emancipate her mind from pressure and forces that wreck havoc as they struggle to control her mind and her will to live. Therefore we appreciate the correlation of her two sides as representative of her society and man's will to overcome all forms of imprisonments and his desire to be free.

CHAPTER THREE

A JOURNEY TOWARDS A DEFINITION
OF THE SELF.

In a good writer's hand, the image, fresh and vivid, is at its best used to intensify, to enrich; a successful image helps to make us feel the writer's grasp of the object or situation he is dealing with, give us his grasp of it with precision, vividness, force economy; and to make such an impact on us, it's content, the stuff of which it is made can't be unduly fantastic and remote from our experience but must be such that it can be immediately felt by us as belonging in one way or another to the fabric of our own lives.¹

This lengthy quotation forms the basis of
this chapter in regard to the two texts
under study.

Imagery and symbolism will show how characters attempt to rediscover their personalities in new environments. The various levels of conflicts emanating from hostilities within society generate antagonism and their resolve is portrayed in

the desire by man to transform social systems that undermine his potential and desire for justice.

These two novels are, When Rain Clouds Gather and Maru. Alongside A Question of Power, they form what is referred to as Bessie Head's trilogy.

Two characters, Makhaya in When Rain Clouds Gather and Margaret in Maru are seen within new environments trying to settle down. Makhaya is in exile. He flees South Africa to escape persecution for his anti-apartheid activities. He settles in Golema Mmidi and joins the agricultural co-operative society operated by the local people and other refugees. Ideas in these novels are built along peculiar characters.

From the outset a prominent idea is presented in When Rain Clouds Gather. In this idea a journey is enacted. This journey is symbolic. Additionally it is an image. At the end of this journey the character becomes aware of possibilities in society he never before thought possible. His disillusionment is overcome by a new purposiveness and a new outlook to life. We observe a pattern

involving two journeys. The physical flight to Golema Mmidi and secondly his soul searching journey that culminates into an acquired confidence in the new environment.

His flight leads him into the refugee centre. His exile is thus imposed on him by political conditions prevailing in South Africa. He recollects this melancholic flight, thus:

"It's not so much what I'm running away from... It's what I'm trying to run into".²

This is the stage of his physical journey, in attempt at searching for an environment where justice, freedom and dignity are treasured. He recollects the torture that prevails within when one is captured by security forces. The lucid image of inhibition and coercion is strong in this extract:

Its a law of life that they rise up but there are man - made laws to keep them down there. After a time it begins to drive you crazy. You either drink too much, or you join underground sabotage movements which are riddled with spies... Nothing is quite clear to me.³

This is the inner journey, as Makhaya solemnly questions his role in a situation so treacherous that man is dehumanised and threatened by physical imprisonment. A cause one considers just is a case for mental frustrations because the consequences and reverberations are too severe. Makhaya makes this observation in view of his experiences in south Africa:

You keep a piece of paper in your pocket with a plan to blow something up, and you get thrown into jail for two years before you've blown anything up.⁴

In his individualist crusade various inhibiting forces swing Makhaya towards fatalistic conclusions. His only escape seems exile and he sets out on a physical journey to Botswana. This physical journey is not without blockages. His earlier experience of prison life hinder the progress towards achieving his goal. It is with this in mind that images of his life in prison flush to the fore of his imagination as he hears the sound of security sirens at the border post.

The reference to a "black dog"⁵ symbolises his situation as a marked character, haunted by a system which undermines black people and dehumanises them. Like a wild animal he is intimidated by the threat of a greater power. This power in the case of Makhaya is the physical presence of the large border fence that restricts his movements. Its imposing presence is described in suggestive words:

The two border fences
were seven - foot-high barriers
of close, tautly drawn
barbed wire.⁶

Makhaya's successful escape bid, does not liven up his spirits as he still does not feel an inner calm. He has been taught by experience to be of suspicious nature. This is described in Makhaya's initial sensation after his successful bid:

In fact the inner part of
him was a jumble of chaotic
discord, very much belied
by his outer air of
calm, lonely self containment.⁷

The impotence he experiences is as a result of the harsh struggle and animosity prevailing in South Africa. As an individual

the forces of apartheid are too intense for him to bear, and he recedes into futility. He is represented by the image of a cornered rat, brewing racial hatred. Racism isolates him and blurs his social vision. He becomes racist and explains his situation in racial overtones as can be extrapolated by this chain of thoughts:

He hated the white man
in a strange way. It was
not anything subtle or sly or
mean, but a powerful
accumulation of years and years
and centuries of silence.
It was as though in all
this silence, black men had
not lived nor allowed themselves
an expression of feeling.⁸

In regard to Makhaya we can envisage
that he is symbolic of the ravage and wasted
life of the average South African black man.
He is the victim of a severe system, designed
to keep the black man subjugated and demoralised.
It is this situation that Makhaya flees from
and the consolation and tranquility he
experiences in Botswana justifies his new
life style in Golema Mmidi village. His
acquaintances are characters who also reside
in Golema Mmidi in an attempt at securing a

peace of mind. They live in a harmonious environment. The tranquil blue sky is reminiscent of the calm that Makhaya feels. The symbolic sun's rays project the penetrative strength and power Makhaya has to transform the ravaged environment so as to provide food for sustenance.

This latter struggle of man against nature is symbolised by the success of the co-operative society. It is significant that Makhaya's aggressive and positive contribution is instrumental in the realisation of this project. Negative attitudes and suspicions are broken in the endeavour to free society from a situation of threat by natural calamities. The power of this communal strength is captured in the image of the powerful sun around which the galaxy revolves:

No doubt the sun knew
why the clouds formed and
why the wind blew and
the lizards basked in its
warmth, and all this
immense knowledge made the
sun gay and bright, full of
trust and affection for
mankind.⁹

The image of calm and serene surroundings suggests a return of peace in the life of Makhaya in Golema Mmidi. He has left behind him in South Africa a dehumanising and brutal situation. The barriers that confronted him in this village take a different form and ~~are~~ by the tyrannical figure of chief Matenge. His imposing and archetypal character construe opaque images of the scavengers. "In this desolation the Vultures reigned supreme".¹⁰

The wealth that chief Matenge wields is symbolic of his orientation and attitude to life. This wealth has made his life style extremely permissive. His power is epitomised by his lavish mansion which radiates his wealth and power to manipulate others as he stands out among the few wealthy characters in Golema Mmidi. The centrality of his sprawling living quarters, suggests his authoritarian rule that extends, due to feudal power invested in him. This feudal authority is rapidly losing ground in the wake of the peoples rising awareness of their rights. However chief Matenge clings desperately to this authority and his is the face of a tormented

character:

It was a face of a tortured man, slowly being devoured by the intensity of his inner life, and the tormented hell of that inner life had scarred deep ridges across his brow and down his cheeks.¹¹

Terms like "tormented" "devoured" "hell" construe images of brutality and in the novel, form a contrast between Matenge and Makhaya. Like Makhaya, Matenge is a lonely man. He is individualistic and extremely callous. Makhaya's loneliness has its basis in his past experience under apartheid and Makhaya realises this distinct difference in their isolated personalities:

Being himself a lonely man, Makhaya instinctively sensed this. But they differed. Makhaya's was a self-protective loneliness, and he had the sun inside him all the time.¹²

The suggestion here is that Matenge has within him a dark spot and thus the two characters are antagonistic. Makhaya stands for the virtues in life whereas Matenge is

a malignant representative of the vice in human nature. This is symbolised by his suicide which is an act of self destruction. His loneliness is thus irreconcilable whereas Makhaya finds strength and solace in communal work and sets about being productive and providing sustenance to human life. His final fulfilment and triumph is the marriage he undertakes with Paulina Sebeso, an industrious and amiable inhabitant of Golema Mmidi. He illuminates Paulina's life and becomes the light in an otherwise "shut-away world where the sunlight never penetrated."¹³

An interesting character who is closely associated with Makhaya is Mma Millipide. She watches and comments about the different changes taking place in society. She is symbolic of the maternal instinct in society, the caretaker of society. She is instrumental in this respect in seeing the union of Makhaya and Paulina. She links the society to its feudal past and wishes for the society a harmonious environment. Dinorego, who admires her warmth and personality invokes in her the image of the mother in his elaboration of her hospitality:

The yard was crowded with children... "The children belong to the families of Golema Mmidi "Dinorego said, "They are supposed to be out in the bush grazing goats, but here they are all playing at the home of Mma Millipede. I told her she will one day become bankrupt through having to feed all these children ... but she pays no attention.¹⁴

She, like the reformed Makhaya, searches for the good in man and this leads her to the religious path. She has tremendous faith in humanity and can be seen as the conscience of that community. It is her overwhelming desire to do good that purges Makhaya from the trail of destructive tendencies and he begins to appreciate the appealing qualities of Paulina as he falls in love with her:

He (Makhaya) would throttle himself to death behind this wall because love was really a warm outflowing stream which could not be dammed up.¹⁵

Mma Millipede's open kindness overwhelms Makhaya and no amount of reluctance can resist

her strong personality. It awakens in him the realisation and subsequent role of the woman in society; a role that is clearly extrapolated in this extract.

How could people and knowledge be brought together? ... Women were on the land 365 days of the year while the men shuttled to and fro with the cattle. Perhaps all change in the long run would depend on the women.¹⁶

This statement underlines the importance of female labour in the productive process. Women in this feudal state had had their role undermined by this same feudal and patriarchal system and like the rest of stratified society, been victimised by the "Matenges" who sought to retain their privileged positions. The condemnation of this "Matenge" class illustrates the decadence of this class that thrives upon the exploitation and oppression of the majority. Their lives are so easy going in contrast to that of the oppressed. They drive sleek cars and live in lavish mansions parading their immense wealth. Yet symbols of wealth do not give them satisfaction and confidence

as Matenge reflects abysmally:

Still he felt insecure.
He should have reigned
supreme over the commoners,
and yet his eight-year
administration of the
village had dealt him
one shattering blow
after another to his
self-esteem.¹⁷

Their authoritarian rule is crumbling and their wealth is threatened by the peoples' rising consciousness acquired as they get deeply involved in the co-operative enterprise. They realise collective power in their unity and thus accelerate Matenge's fall from grace. They acquire a sense of independence from the slavery that binds them to the land. The co-operative farm in this regard is symbolic of this new found awareness and the vision of hope in the future that it promises to the society. This awareness is symbolised by the sun in this vivid extract:

Suddenly, the sun sprang clear of all entanglements, a single white pulsating ball, dashing out with one blow the last traces of the night. So sudden and abrupt was the sunrise that

the birds had to pretend they had been awake all the time.¹⁸

Once again, the sun is projected as powerful, and its breaking free from bondage signifies the peoples new situation and the realisation of economic and political possibilities. It is therefore of paramount significance that Matenge commits suicide. His is an abnormal situation, where the majority of the people depend on a subsistence economy. Matenge's death is symbolic of an end to poverty and the realisation of humane relations. This normal situation is the final victory of virtue over vice and the underlying meaning to Matenge's death is expounded to Makhaya by Maria:

You may see no rivers on the ground but we keep the rivers inside us. That is why all good things and all good people are called rain. Sometimes we see rain clouds gather even though not a cloud appears in the sky. It is all in our heart.¹⁹

Rain water is closely associated with agriculture. This is even more significant in this desolate land where man is attempting to reclaim land through co-operative efforts. Rain water indicates a return of normal life and the triumph of the people in their collective efforts. As the people gather together like the clouds they bear fruits seen in the food that they produce. The realisation that collective effort is decisive in propelling the destiny of society awakens the consciousness of the community. Prior to this knowledge, their lives were bound around feudal authority. With the capacity to produce and feed themselves, a deep sense of emancipation dawns upon them. This particular aspect is laid out in the following passage:

Communal systems of development which imposed co-operation and sharing of wealth were much better than dog-eat-dog policies, take-over bids and grab what-you can of big finance. therefore, in Makhaya's mind, the poverty and tribalism of Africa were a blessing if people could develop sharing everything with each other.²⁰

This is the vision Makhaya posits for Africa. His has been a vigorous experience and his recuperative period in Golema Mmidi has seen the nurturing of this vision. His awareness is a new beginning since now "his thoughts cover a wider spectrum of life and bring under focus the whole of Africa".²¹ This vision arises out of the beneficial circumstances and warmth of Golema Mmidi society. In this respect, it is Makhaya's dialectically and symbolic journey. His flight which is his attempt at discarding his social obligations in South Africa, has now resulted in his heightened sensitivity. It has made him conscious of his private and social obligations as this extract pronounces:

Loving one woman had brought him to this realisation: that it was only people who could bring the real rewards of living, that it was only people who give love and happiness.²²

His reserved personality and constant loneliness is overcome as he realises the potential of love. He comes to terms with this aspect due to his active involvement in the peoples determined effort to control

and tame the natural environment and thus this endeavour is symbolic in this regard.

A notable motif in these novels is the use of female characters. They are captured attempting to assert themselves amidst the hostility of patriarchal society. The fact of oppression is a reality that they endure. Female characters are portrayed progressively engaged in productive activities. Their activities undermine the bourgeois feminist assertion that "women constitute a social class which is oppressed by men."²³ This assertion obscures the central, exploitative nature of the system of private ownership of the means of production. This system also obliterates the participation of women in socially productive endeavours.


which exploits both men & women

By mystifying this problematic issue of social and material conditions as pre-requisite to development of society, the feminists nullify the existence of "economic class distinctions among women"²⁴ deceptively positing "that material conditions of bourgeoisie women are the same as those of worker-peasant woman",²⁵

The realisation that communal commitment, is socially and economically rewarding underlines an important issue, that the liberation of women is only possible with the establishment of a just, humane and communal oriented system in society. This system should aim at abolishing the exploitation, hostility and prejudice of one man by another. To add credence to the portrayal of positive characters, it surfaces, that women have been oppressed at various times by preceding social structures. Historically this phenomena is explained lucidly by Frederick Engels thus:

It means that the oppression of women first began with the beginning of class society and had the same origin as the first division of society into classes and the first class of oppression, namely the establishment of the system of private ownership of the means of production.²⁶

In regard to this, we observe that Margaret Cadmore is oppressed by a stiff ethnically chauvinistic feudal system, and as a woman. Representatives of remnants of authoritarian power are Maru, Moleka and



Morafi just as Chief Matenge is in; When Rain Clouds Gather. Ethnic prejudice which is another major motif is yet another form of mystifying an issue, by oppressing and prejudicing one ethnic community. Margaret who for all intents and purposes is a brilliant individual meets this prejudice. The woman question therefore assumes a symbolic significance as images of their diabolical predicament are projected and as the women recede to the background position as child bearers and to the "eternal drudgery of the kitchen and nursery."²⁷

The portrayal of the woman is no longer that of the frail, subservient character but of a dynamic forthright and pragmatic figure. Her portrayal within society's strife to eradicate suffrage gives her credence as she joins society to apprehend social threats. Her characterisation therefore is representative. Margaret not only represents the oppressed woman but she also symbolises the potential of the "Masarwa" to overthrow the proponents of an oppressive social and economic system.

"Masarwa" is a derogatory reference to an ethnic group in Botswana. Loathed and

abused they are the target of scorn and
ridicule. Stereotype images are used to
explain and demean this group referring to
them as Zebras: *Animals or beasts.*

If you can catch a Zebra,
you can walk upto it, forcefully
open its mouth and examine
its teeth. The Zebra is not
supposed to mind because it is
an animal. Scientists do the
same to Bushmen and they are
not supposed to mind.²⁸

This comparison dehumanises the "Masarwa"
and the contemptuous tone projected by the
author's rhetorical question elaborates the
condemnation of systems of oppression:

Some time ago it might have
been believed that words like
'Kaffir' and 'nigger' define a
tribe. Or else how can a tribe
of people be called Bushmen
or Masarwa: Masarwa is the
equivalent of "nigger"...²⁹ ~~_____~~

The outstanding Margaret, challenges the
notion of prejudice against her people. She
lives with the knowledge of her background in
full pride amidst frustrations created by Pete,
her school principal. He prides at prodding
into her affairs and making her feel uncomfort-

able. This is reflected in this uncanny pose that emphasises his callousness:

He kept nothing out of
the corner of his eye
that the Masarwa (she was no
longer a human being) seemed to
be extraordinarily friendly with
Dikeledi, who, in his eyes, was
royalty of royalty.
Should he warn Dikeledi
that she was talking to it?
It surely had all the appearance
of a coloured.³⁰

This callousness reinforces images of
"back stabbing" and opportunist tendencies
aimed at further inhibiting individual progress,
as "they all had knives in their backs from
Pete".³¹

✓ Margaret's courageous attitude gains
admiration from Maru, a reformist chief's
son. Being as it may, a strong power structure
exists within this society and the marriage of
Maru a chief's son and Margaret of a slave
class is unacceptable. Their action
challenges the power base of feudal power and
Maru is forced to abdicate the chieftaincy.
They form a duo that sets up a protest
against an evil and decaying tradition

7.8

of prejudice. Their departure to another place is symbolic and suggest possibilities in the context of rebuilding their lives from scratch in the new place. It is a desire to be free as Makhaya pronounces:

I want to feel what it
is like to live in a free
country and then may be some
of the evils in my life will
correct themselves.³²

Their decision to escape old, inhibitive traditional norms is dialectical and projects images of man's desire for justice and freedom. It awakens the society to further realisations of their situation:

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. The wind of freedom, which was blowing throughout the world. As they
breathed in the fresh, clear air
their humanity awakened.³³

This new picturesque situation has become a reality and need not be captured in paintings that Margaret artistically portrays. They form a new generation who "have the strength to build

a new world!"³⁴ She represents life to the frustrated hopes of her people symbolised by the calm water that ingratiates the yellow daisies that "grew alongside the dusty footpath and danced in the sun".³⁵

This image of the sun is translated at an individual level in the life of Maru. Washed of all evil tendencies, Margaret illuminates hope in his stormy heart and purged in "clean of all things he hated."³⁶

This task is enormous and continuously arduous as they search for a humanistic way of life. Maru living in a new social order and value system as a new man averse to chauvinism and narrow inhibitive nationalism, scorning any ethnic or racial prejudice since "you could not marry a tribe or race"³⁷ as Maru reposes in his newly found awareness. Margaret epitomises the crave for equality although a victim and product of a denigrating system. She overcomes her victimised state by acquiring a sturdy and progressive life. In this situation Maru gains a heightened consciousness as he acquires a class perspective of the nature of oppression, reflecting thus:

How universal was the language of oppression! They had said of the Masarwa what every white man had said of every black man... The matter never rested there. The stronger man caught hold of the weaker man and made a circus animal out of him, reducing him to the state of misery and subjection and non-humanity. The combinations were the same, first conquest, then abhorrence at the looks of the conquered...³⁸

This state of affairs enkindle hatred due to class interest that is subsequently dialectical as possibilities of freedom and a return of justice are forged ahead and the "Masarwa" reclaim their humanity in images of light and darkness:

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."³⁹

They see the possibility of emancipation
and images of light contrast with a darkened
past and symbolises hope in their collective
power as a "sea"⁴⁰ of possibilities to a
healthier future where the "moon was so bright
that few stars appeared in the sky."⁴¹ This
harmony in the cosmos is symbolic of the balance
found in the peoples articulation of the nature
of their problem, in a dehumanising environment.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SHORT STORIES.

The Collector of Treasures, is the title of Bessie Head's short story anthology. It was published by Heinemann in 1977. The anthology contains thirteen short stories of various lengths. They recreate aspects of the society in transformation and depict its historical experiences. The first story reflects upon the mythical origins of Talaote community. This Botswana society is captured in a pre-colonial context.

The next eight stories take into account the sources and reasons that contributed to the breakdown of village life. This is drawn against the infiltration of Christianity that led to a subsequent cultural clash. A monetary economic system, reinforced western influence and the education system further isolated certain individuals. This is the era of colonial imposition.

Finally, the last four stories of the anthology, highlight family feuds and the folly of infidelity in marriages. Irresponsible

behaviour by male spouses is given prominence in these stories. In this situation the tragic alternative of murder by injured marriage partners is a criticism of contemporary marriages. It symbolises the impulsive response to injustices and dehumanisation.

The tales integrate various aspects of folklore narrative technique. Dialogue is a foremost folklore element appearing in these stories.

Representative stories that take into account various aspects of changing society will be analysed in this chapter. These four tales are; "The Deep River," "Heaven is not Closed," "Life" and lastly "The Collector of Treasures."

In each of these tales, female characters play pivotal roles. Other characters are evaluated in relation to these female characters. The tales are commentaries on limitations imposed to female roles, by patriarchal society. They examine the status of women in this society and highlight the important activities women have been involved in. The village setting, symbolises feudal society. This is an ideal

beginning from which to project female oppression.

"The Deep River" enacts the mythical origin of Talaote community. The metaphor of the deep river dramatises the static and deceptive calm of this community:

The people lived together like a deep river. In this deep river which was unruffled by conflict or movement forward, the people lived without faces except their chief.¹

The chief is the symbol of feudal authority. He has power over the lives of the people:

Although the people were given their ploughing lands, they had no authority to plough them without the chief's order.²

The outward calm of the river is temporary. Life in this society is monotonous and tedious concealing internal conflicts as we recognise the effects of inevitable social changes on people.

The set-up treats women with cynicism and contempt. Emotions and women are two aspects considered of little account:

A man who is influenced by a woman is no ruler. He is like one who listens to the advice of a child.³

This statement arises out of Sebembele's decision to marry Rankwana, his father's third wife. Sebembele is of royal blood. The customs demand that sexual relationships within the same family are unacceptable. He is left with the dilemma of marrying Rankwana or taking the throne left by the demise of his father. His insistence and subsequent union to Rankwana is symbolic. It announces the beginning of an awareness that renounces traditional beliefs and at the same time recognises the feelings and emotions of individuals as important social aspects to any society.

In this crusade the historical dispossessions of women in society is reassessed.

Sebembele challenges the despised and brutalised woman image by his forthright assertiveness to marry Rankwana. His position sends ripples in the calm waters of the river. It calls for a purge in society as it examines

ways of resolving this conflict.

Sebembele's abdication of the throne returns dignity to Rankwana. It exonerates her from a society that denies justice to all and creates a new and humane image of the women treated with respect and equality.

The next stage in Bessie Head's narratives, deal with cultural conflict. The setting is contemporary and takes a look at the effects of Christianity on traditional norms and beliefs. The story "Heaven is not Closed" takes a look at the hypocrisy of missionaries. Galethebege had passionately embraced Christianity, a religion described as "a terrible religion which terrified people with the fate of eternal damnation in hell-fire."⁴ Ralokae the character who wishes to marry Galethebege is bound to customary life. This life is treated with scorn and suspicion by missionaries:

Sexual malpractices were associated with the traditional marriage ceremony (and shudder!), they draped the stinking intestinal bag of the Ox around their necks.⁵

This attitude represented the general colonial reserve and paternal overtures

towards African people. The imagery of this patronising manner is reflected in this clinical observation meted out to Galethebege by the missionary priest:

He stared at her with polite, professional interest. She was a complete non-entity, a part of the vague blur which was his congregation.⁶

Galethebege is in a predicament. Two choices glare at her. She either rejects Ralokae in order to retain her church status, or she accepts Ralokae's marriage proposition and become excommunicated by the church in the process. Her eventual decision to marry Ralokae is a symbolic rebellion against a foreign tradition, whose representative, loathe and undermine those they set out to convert. This statement is underlined by her virtuous character which also symbolises the good in individual characters:

Anyone with eyes to see would have known that Galethebege had been born good; under Setswana custom or Christian custom, she would still have been good.⁷

The society is reflected going through a period of degenerating morality. "Life" is a story depicting this situation. It is the story of a female character, Life and how influences of urbanisation turn her into prostitution. Her descent into the village causes a stir:

A few months after Life's arrival in the village, the first hotel with it's pub opened. It was initially shunned by all women and even the beer brewers considered they hadn't fallen low - yet the pub was also associated with the idea of selling oneself.⁸

Life represents the generation born after the attainment of political independence. The onset of rapid urbanisation has resulted into activities such as prostitution. This is a direct by-product of existing material and social conditions. Unequal distribution of material wealth has turned those unable to fend for themselves into social malaise. In this regard Life is the image of the downtrodden rejected and abused members of society. Her symbolism is a criticism of prevailing unequal conditions in society, which kept Life up and down the streets of Johannesburg as "a singer,

beauty queen, advertising model, and prostitute"⁹ not for gain of fame or dignity but for the crumbs of bread to sustain her life. The pun of her life is an ironic pointer to the degenerating mores of society. Her life is really not one to be envied but rather one to be sympathised with.

The village community is suspicious of her. Her manners seem alien and the unease of the village community at her arrival underlines the suspicion they have to values and norms they consider intrusions. She challenges village morality and thriftiness with her casual and pragmatic portrait:

People's attitude to sex was broad and generous - it was recognised as a necessary part of human life, that it ought to be available whenever possible like food and water.¹⁰

The simile in the latter part of this extract is ironical. Unlike food and water which is a basic necessity of life, women are treated scornfully, drenched in a subduing patriachal society. They are transformed into commodities, traded in as prostitutes. This aspect also pronounces the isolation of

individuals and their sense of morality by the introduction of a monetary economy. This is illustrated by the idle adventurism that pivots the whims of men:

Men could get all the sex they needed for free in the village, but it seemed to fascinate them that they should pay for it for the first time.¹¹

These are symptoms of a decaying society, a moral waste land. It symbolises the social disorder in society and the evil of the world in South Africa. This particular aspect of moral decay is well postulated by Zillah Eisenstein in her analysis of the oppression of women:

Women's body becomes the defining criteria for her existence. It also becomes the central focus in terms of freedom from her reproductive biology.¹²

This pervasive society lends itself subject to violence, a direct protest by the downtrodden. Life's death symbolises this tension and violence and it awakens the society to its own inevitable collapse:

People clutched at their heads and began running in all directions crying Yo! Yo! Yo! in their shock. They were so disordered because murder, outright and violent, was a most uncommon and rare occurrence in village life.¹³

Despite this chaos and fragmentation in society, a new social order is visualised. * The main character in "The Collector of Treasures," shows the impulsive alternative to irresponsible and brutal male behaviour. We follow Dikeledi tread the difficult path of a discarded wife. She is the image of a dutiful mother who is victimised by a heartless husband:

She had always found gold amidst the ash, deep loves that had joined her heart to the hearts of others... She was the collector of such treasures.¹⁴

A conflict ensues between Dikeledi and her licentious husband Garesego. He is the image of parasitic tendencies and his exploit of women is revolting:

Like the dogs and bulls
and donkeys, he also
accepted no responsibility
for the young he procreated
and like the dogs and bulls
and donkeys, he also made
females abort.

He exploits established social¹⁵ inequities
which have prescribed a dominant position to men.
This social arrangement suppresses women and
relegates "to men a superior position in the
tribe while women" were regarded as being an
inferior form of human life."¹⁶

Garesego is an important character as
he symbolises male domination. It is because
of constant harassment, that Dikeledi realises
the need to protect and defend herself. The
desire for freedom is awakened and she aspires
for liberty, justice and equality:

Our men do not think
that we need tenderness
and care. You know, my
husband used to kick
me between the legs
when he wanted that.
I once aborted with a
child due to this
treatment.¹⁷

From this perspective the institution of marriage is an accomplice to conditions of servitude. It denies liberty and equality to women and chains a wife to her husband. The prison Dikeledi is condemned to on conviction for murdering her husband is thus a metaphor of society. The physical mutilation of Garesego symbolises her rejection of destructive traditions, a rebellion against oppression and domination. It is thus, not Dikeledi who is on trial but a society that allows the subjugation of women to pervade all its institutions. This criticism is evaluated in the light of Paul Thebolo, a neighbour to Dikeledi. His deep concern for his family posits a hope for society. He directs material and emotional energy to the welfare of his family winning Dikeledi's admiration:

He was tall, large boned
slow-moving. He was so
peaceful as a person that
the sunlight and shadow
played all kinds of
tricks with his eyes,
making it difficult to
determine their exact colour.
... He was a poem of tenderness.¹⁸

He is the symbol of humanity. He does not subscribe to female oppression and in this view his marriage is a microcosm of the kind of harmony society should strive to achieve. His relationship to his wife is based upon mutual respect and a sense of social responsibility. He embodies the new man in society and symbolises the ideal man, who strives to improve the lot of the oppressed setting as it were, the vision of a new society that creates:

The necessary conditions
conditions for the fullest
possible happiness and the
all-round harmonious
development of all members
of society ... and the
elimination of the exploitation
of man by man.¹⁹

The ability of individuals to create this society is emphasised by the optimism of the author through the creation of Paul Thebolo's harmonious marriage.

CONCLUSION.

This study has come up with a technique that seeks to demonstrate that Bessie Head has credibly used symbols and images to enhance her fictional works.

We have examined the author's perspective and seen that she takes a critical view of society. This view is relayed by characters of various racial background. They are drawn against a background of unpredictable weather conditions and further compounded by ethnic and racial prejudices. This acute situation is captured here in the image of death and decay:

It was just as though everything was about to die. The small brown birds had deserted the bush, and the bush itself no longer supplied the coverage and protection for the secret activities of the scarlet and golden birds... In this desolation the vultures reigned supreme.¹

Despite this chilling reality, the author sustains a tone of optimism. In A Question of Power and When Rain Clouds

Gather, the extremities of unfavourable weather conditions are yielded by the setting up of Co-operative Societies.

The author's vision of society is posited by progressive characters that enhance the artistry of her work. Her ability to criticize society through characters that are "rejected", enables her work to be among those others that highlight the plight of the disadvantaged. In Maru, Bessie Head accords Margaret features that identify a variety of racial groups. This is done to strengthen the vision of the author, that rejects racial and ethnic prejudices and recommends a world free of all forms of injustices.

Women predominate as characters in Bessie Head's fictional works. They are victims of patriarchy as they are dominated by a system hostile to them. The assertion of the need to be treated justly is a basis for articulate symbolism. The images of Sello and Dan as sexual perverts who compete to control Elizabeth's personality in A Question of Power is therefore adept. This state of affairs reflects disorders in society. The fictional works project a society of the future ingrained

with humane qualities.

It is important to note that one cannot analyse the content of a work of art without looking at features of form. Consequently one cannot merely look at style without closely referring to the content of literary works. What this study has tried to do is to see whether there is a balance between the two which have made the works credible. Bessie Head relates the woman question to prevailing political and racial issues in South Africa. Characterisation is an important element in literature. Symbolism and Imagery have been shown to enhance character portrayal. Characters posit the vision of the work through language. This role of characterisation is articulate by Georg Lukacs:

Characterisation that does not encompass ideology cannot be complete. Ideology is the highest form of consciousness; ignoring it, a writer eliminates what is important in his delineation of character. A characters' conception of the world represents a profound personal experience and the most distinctive expression of his inner life; at the

same time it provides a significant reflection of the general problems of his time.²

We have attempted to deal with symbols and images to arrive at the meaning of Bessie Head's fictional works. The contribution of this work has illustrated that symbolism and imagery can be applied as standards to show the artistic merit of Bessie Head's works. Images and symbols suggest a deeper meaning. Their significance is important. A rigorous study of these devices therefore brings about conclusions that give meaningful interpretation to the texts. They highlight the capability of the author to draw meaning by articulate imagery and symbolism, so as to capture the beauty of the work under analysis.

This thesis has not been exhaustive in its work on Bessie Head. Interested critics could for example look at the significance of the "colored" in Bessie Head's fictional works. This need not be studied in all her texts. Two novels would do justice enough in this endeavour. The problems of the "colored" form strong symbolism especially

in A Question of Power and Maru. A critic would have to thoroughly study the recurrence of "colored" characters and interpret the meaning and significance of the character through Symbolism and Imagery.

It is on this note, I hope, that despite whatever limitations, this thesis will stimulate discussion and interest in Bessie Head's literary contribution. Further it is hoped that this will serve as a contribution to African literary criticism.

FOOTNOTES:

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