

Narrating History with a Vengeance: Interracial Marriage as Bessie Head's Doctrine for Racial Harmony in *Maru*

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In Bessie Head's autobiographical novel, *Maru*,¹ the late South African writer achieves some of the literary goals she once spelled out to her audience at a Writers Workshop at the University of Botswana: "I have found that the novel form is like a large rag-bag into which one can stuff anything—all one's philosophical, social, and romantic speculation. I have always reserved a special category for myself, as a writer—that of a pioneer blazing a new trail into the future."² The "new trail" that Head blazes in *Maru* consists in transforming the ruthless reality of oppression and pain into the material for romance. It has been remarked that "there is nothing so far in African literature to parallel love stories like, for instance, Tristan and Iseult, or Abelard and Heloise; nor do we have anything to liken to Romeo and Juliet, Manon Lescaut, Madame Bovary, and a host of other passionate love figures of European Literature."³ Phanuel Egejuru attributes the absence of the passionate love theme in African literature to the contrasting lifestyle and world views of Africans and Westerners. She makes the claim that, while "Love is seen . . . as very fundamental to the Western concept of self-fulfillment, and it is basic to intimate personal relationships . . . [to] an African, it is unthinkable for a man to abandon his ancestral home in pursuit of a woman in the name of love."⁴ If Egejuru is right, *Maru* can be considered a truly revolutionary work.

In this essay, I argue that *Maru* is a monumental contribution to the literature on racial prejudice. Although it is on one level a superficial piece of historical reconstruction—a narrative conducted with a sense of vengeance—the novel is also an accomplished work of fiction for the depth and breadth of insight it provides into the pain brought about by restrictive social labels, and the vision of love it projects as a counter to the frustrations generated by ethnocentrism. Readers might find it difficult to pin down the narrative to any particular country. The reason for this is furnished by Head's own admission that she took the whole Southern African region to be her creative constituency: "All my work had Botswana settings but the range and reach of my preoccupations became very wide. People, black people, white people, loomed large on my horizon. I began to answer some of

¹ Bessie Head, *Maru* (New York: McCall, 1971). Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text. Bessie Head, who died in 1986, wrote other novels, including *A Bewitched Crossroad* (London: Heinemann, 1984); *A Question of Power* (London: Heinemann, 1974); and *Serowe: The Village of the Wind* (London: Heinemann, 1981); also, a collection of short stories, *The Collector of Treasures* (London: Heinemann, 1977), and numerous essays.

² Bessie Head, "Some Notes on Novel Writing," *New Classic 5* (Johannesburg 1978): 32.

³ Phanuel A. Egejuru, "The Absence of the Passionate Love Theme in African Literature," in *Design and Intent in African Literature*, ed. D. Dorsey, P. Egejuru, and H. Arnold (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1982) 83.

⁴ Egejuru 83.

the questions aroused by my South African experience. My work has covered the whole spectrum of Southern African preoccupations—refugeeism, racialism, patterns of evil, and the ancient Southern African historical dialogue."⁵

To understand Head's work fully, one must have some basic familiarity with both South Africa's now defunct apartheid system of government and Botswana's history, which Head tends to conflate. The seventeenth century marked a turning point in the history of Southern Africa with the arrival of Dutch traders and explorers, who found the land and climate exceptionally attractive for settlement, and who killed, expelled, or enslaved the original inhabitants, whom they renamed "Bushmen" and "Hottentots." The nineteenth century saw the occupation of the Cape area by the British, and in 1911 the region became a British protected area (until the 1948 Boer victory), leading to the proclamation of the Republic of South Africa in 1961. Throughout the period of Afrikaner rule—until the victory of the African National Congress (ANC), which passed on power to the black majority in early 1994—apartheid was the system in operation. It was a systematic method of racial discrimination through which the whites maintained control of the politics and economy and exploited the labor of the blacks. Under apartheid, black protest and self-assertion were stifled, and the policies of racial segregation were pursued with a brutality the world had not known since Nazi Germany. It was into this system that Bessie Head was born in 1937, product of the union between a woman of British origin and the black stable "boy" (servant) of her parents.

The prevailing apartheid system prohibited sexual intimacy between blacks and whites, and Head's mother was sent to a mental home when her pregnancy was discovered. Bessie Head was born in this mental home. Her mother dying before she attained the age of three, Head was then given to an Afrikaner family to raise, although "they soon rejected her because she was not sufficiently white."⁶ She was later handed over to a colored family, which also rejected her soon afterwards. Head was ultimately raised in a mission orphanage, before she escaped into exile in neighboring Botswana in 1964.

Of all the countries in the region, Botswana has experienced a less vicious history than most. It remains the only area in Southern Africa which did not witness a ruthless "reign of terror" during colonization, but it experienced the spillover effects of apartheid all the same. Because of its harsh environment, which the whites found largely inhospitable, an intensive white settlement did not develop in Botswana. However, Botswana had its own problems—absence of surface sources of drinking water, and infertile soil, which caused serious food production problems. The difficulties were aggravated by the large number of refugees who flooded into the region from Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), South Africa, and South West Africa (Namibia) as a result of the hardships of the apartheid system. (When Head herself became a South African refugee, she lived in a refugee camp in Northern Botswana for two years.)

⁵ Bessie Head, "Social and Political Pressures that Shape Literature in Southern Africa," in *The Tragic Life: Bessie Head and Literature in Southern Africa*, ed. Cecil Abrahams (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1990) 13.

⁶ Charles P. Sarvan, "A Question of Power and Identity," in *Women in African Literature Today*, ed. E. Jones (London: James Currey, 1987) 83.

Bessie Head writes in *Maru* that discrimination against the "Bushmen," or Marsawa, was there in Botswana even before the white man arrived: "The white man found only too many people who looked different. That was all that outraged the receivers of his discrimination" (11). In upholding such a view, Head fails to accord sufficient recognition to the fact that the ethnic hatred among Africans was triggered by the land pressure generated by white occupation. Head views the discrimination to which other Botswanan tribes subjugated the Marsawa as a facsimile of the South African color bar, and ventures the suggestion that it was based on skin color differentiation, as the Marsawa "hardly looked African but Chinese."⁷

The plot of *Maru* centers on the decision of Prince Maru to renounce his hereditary chieftaincy in favor of marriage with Margaret, a Marsawa woman. Maru and Margaret have to overcome numerous obstacles before they can get married, but Head stresses that the transforming power of their relationship will reach out beyond them as individuals and change Botswanan society as a whole. Their love is the force that will break the barriers of race in the region.

The first obstacle they have to overcome is their feelings for Moleka. Although Moleka is the ruler of an opposing kingdom, Maru treats him as a great friend because those "he wanted or loved became the slaves of an intensely concentrated affection" (50). But while Maru is silently suffering from his infatuation with Margaret, Moleka is the man she really loves. Margaret is a strong-hearted woman who is proud of her Marsawa identity, and Moleka reciprocates her love for him because "he had communicated directly with her heart" (32) and, with her love, he felt "reborn, a new man" (38). As a result of the transforming effect of their love-at-first-sight, Moleka changes from being an exploiter of women into a compassionate individual. Similarly, Moleka's love means that Margaret is "really no longer lonely" (31). Moleka demonstrates his love for Margaret by freeing all the Marsawa slaves in his possession. However, it is Maru who gains the upper hand in the power struggle for the possession of Margaret, thus thwarting the realization of Moleka's dream.

All things considered, the series of intrigues through which Maru achieves his ambition are less important for Head than the role that he plays as a spokesman for her social ideals. Nor are the author's interests served by the distinctly shadowy figure of Margaret beyond her role as a pawn in the power struggles of Maru and Moleka. The character of Dikeledi, who is Maru's sister, also serves as a foil in the working out of the author's message. Dikeledi, a sensitive soul who feels the pain of social abuse, is in love with a man—Moleka—who loves another woman. Patiently, she puts up with a man who says "the wrong, crude things that jarred against the delicacy of her love for him" (81). Ironically, Dikeledi hits it off instantly with her would-be rival, Margaret.

When the two women meet for the first time, Dikeledi becomes protective of the newly arrived Margaret, who is the target of social scorn at Leseding school, where she teaches. However, although Dikeledi rightly understands that the schoolchildren who look down upon Margaret are acting out the prejudices of

⁷ Head, "Social and Political Pressures" 14.

their parents, she considers her brother's decision to marry her an instance of bad judgment. Margaret emerges to fill a void in Maru's life; she becomes both a symbol for the absolute and pure love that Maru desires as well as a means by which he can escape his social frustrations. When Maru opposes the loaning of the Leseding school bed to Margaret, his real desire is to show the authority that he possesses. Indeed, we learn that "Almost everyone grovelled before him, because of his position" (64). His gesture is merely a ploy to press his advantage in the power struggle with Moleka for possession of Margaret, and Head endorses the direction in which Maru seeks to use this power.

Central to Head's vision is the freeing of society of the mental lethargy and the irrationality which pervade its soul. This is the task awaiting Maru, who is so utterly disgusted with privilege that he seeks to overturn the social structure that legitimizes it. He rediscovers his inner being and tells his sister Dikeledi: "There was a world apart from petty human hatred and petty human social codes and values where the human soul roamed free in all its splendour and glory. No barriers of race or creed or tribe hindered its activity. He had seen majestic kings of the soul, walking in the ragged clothes of **filthy??** beggars." (67) To be worthy of Margaret, and to reach the new society, Maru has to deny his ascribed status. He cries out: "I was not born to rule this mess. If I have a place it is to pull down the old structures and create the new" (68). He opposes rulership over his fellow men, and declares an intention to "remove the blood money, the cruelty and crookery from the top" (68). Maru's new social ideals are Head's as well, for he dreams the dawning of "a day when everyone would be free and no one the slave of another" (69). And so, Head portrays Maru as a seeker after truth, who has to discard his former self in order to attain a new, better identity. For Maru, therefore, marrying Margaret is a spiritual goal, and saving her from the grip of Moleka is a divine calling. Indeed, "life with Moleka was a series of high dramas, always ending in paternity cases" (74), and Moleka's various affairs have already resulted in eight children, all of them living with his mother.

Arthur Ravenscroft once asked, "are we sure, at the end, that the two chief characters, Maru and Moleka, who are close, intimate friends until they become bitter antagonists, are indeed two separate fictional characters, or that they are symbolic extensions of contending character-traits within the same?"⁸ The excesses of these two characters definitely mirror Head's perception of the African royalty as a group of depraved, self-indulgent, and lazy people, whose lives consisted of "giving orders: Do this! Don't do that!" (74). Maru boasts: "I'm not like you Moleka . . . I still own the Marsawa as slaves. All my one hundred thousand cattle and fifty cattle posts are maintained by the Marsawa. They sleep on the ground, near outdoor fires. Their only blanket is fire. When the fire warms them on one side, they turn round and warm themselves on the other side." (59) This would give the reader the impression that Head adopts a patently bourgeois approach to African history. For her, it seems, history is made up primarily of the antics of the rulers, who are basically a bunch of lunatics who indulge in indiscriminate sexual adventures, who carelessly make a mess everywhere they go and expect other people to clean it up.

⁸ Arthur Ravenscroft, "The Novels of Bessie Head," in *Aspects of South African Literature*, ed. C. Heywood (London: Heinemann, 1976) 174-86.

Maru protests, "Why must Moleka have everything? He's always touched gold and handled it carelessly. I've always touched straw" (84). But the distinction lacks merit, since they are both spoiled children who like Head herself, believe that the history of a society consists mainly in the activity of its leaders, and that once you change the quality of the leadership, the life of the masses will follow the same pattern. Head's effusions at the end of the novel articulate just such a vision: "When people of the Marsawa 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 for all people, turned and flowed into the room. As they breathed in the fresh, clear air their humanity awakened. They examined their condition. There was the fetid air, the excreta and the horror of being an oddity of the human race with half the head of man and half the body of a donkey. They laughed in an embarrassed way, scratching their heads. How had they fallen into this condition when, indeed, they were as human as everyone else. They started to run into the sunlight, then they turned and looked at the dark, small, room. They said: 'We are not going back there'" (126-27). This defiant stance reflects the transformation that Head intends the marriage of Maru and Margaret to cause in the lives of the oppressed Marsawa people.

While the narrative is engagingly believed as a literary and imaginative piece of work, we need to return to the question: can we extrapolate from it an authentic view of history? Carol Durix defines fictionalized biography or autobiographical fiction as "a moment in the life of the author" which contributes immensely to "the life that is being recounted." However, she warns, "As a historical document, it is possibly untrustworthy, but as a work of art it provides the critics with an intimate declaration which constitutes a precious link between the author and his writing."⁹ To establish Head's particular personal experiences, which provide the broad framework for the novel, we need only to recall that Head and her fictional double Margaret were born under similar circumstances, were raised by Christian missionaries, and both chose Botswana for exile. Margaret's Marsawa identity, which crushes her, equates nicely with Head's mulatto identity in the South African context, although Margaret's marriage promises to be successful whereas Head's ended in divorce.

Furthermore, we cannot turn a blind eye to the issue of Bessie Head's confusion, which is receiving increasing attention in current criticism. For example, a recent study by Modupe Olaogun has analyzed Head's use of the construct of schizophrenia in the portrayal of characters in *Maru*. Particularly suggestive are her observations regarding the "English missionary, Mrs. Margaret Cadmore, who bequeaths to her ward not only her names, but a schizophrenia traceable to her ideological ethos."¹⁰ Olaogun notes further that "The schizophrenia of colonial discourse emanates from a civilization whose agents do not have an intimate interest in the individual natives. Mrs. Cadmore exhibits a defining attitude of the

⁹ Carol Durix, "Literary Biography or Autobiographical Literature? The Work of Sylvia Ashton-Warner," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 18.2 (1987): 3.

¹⁰ Modupe O. Olaogun, "Irony and Schizophrenia in Bessie Head's *Maru*," *Research in African Literatures* 25.4 (1994): 69-87. See also Craig Mackenzie, *Bessie Head, An Introduction* (Grahamstown National English Literary Museum, 1989); and Linda Susan Beard, "Bessie Head's Syncretic Fiction: The Reconceptualization of Power and the Recovery of the Ordinary," *Modern Fiction Studies* 35.3 (1991): 575-88.

benevolent colonizer, but she cares for a natural, not a personal entity" (74). It could well be that similar abuses were responsible for the mental problems which afflicted Head herself.

Bessie Head has said that she was inspired by her South African experience: "[I] longed to write an enduring novel on the hideousness of racial prejudice. But I also wanted the book to be so beautiful and so magical that I, as the writer, would long to read and re-read it."¹¹ In *Maru* she realized this ambition. But her approach to the racial problem in the novel takes little cognizance of her own observation in the same essay that "Most of the tribes in South Africa were landless by the 1830s when foreign invasion reached the southern tip of Botswana";¹² therefore, the historical vision explored in *Maru* is superficial. As a novel, *Maru* gives vehement expression to the hurt feelings of one woman writer, narrating history with a vengeance, but as history the narrative lacks depth.

¹¹ Head, "Social and Political Pressures" 14.

¹² Head, "Social and Political Pressures" 16.