

**FROM PERIPHERY TO
CENTRE? *THE
COLLECTOR OF
TREASURES* BY BESSIE
HEAD (1977): THE
TRANSLATION AND
(MIS)RECONSTRUCTION
OF AN AFRICAN
WOMAN'S IDENTITY IN
SPANISH, ITALIAN AND
FRENCH**

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Bessie Head was a South African writer who has finally entered the great canon of Southern African literatures written in English. Her life experience of suffering, her search for a new life in a new environment and country – Botswana, her balanced but disturbing ideas, her interest in women's experience and the high quality of her writing are some of the unavoidable points of interest when dealing with her work. Furthermore, Bessie Head has also been translated into other European languages. This article deals with the Spanish, Italian and French translations of one of her most popular short stories, *The Collector of Treasures*, which can be regarded as both an intelligent and a very emotive text. In other words, it involves Gender Studies, African identities and Translation and Intercultural Studies at play as well as the travelling of a peripheral text to a set of different European Centres.

1. BESSIE HEAD (1937-1986): THE IDENTITY OF AN AFRICAN WOMAN'S LIFE OF SUFFERING

The number of colonial and post-colonial African women writers is very low: a fact that emphasises the relevance of writers such as Bessie Head (1937-1986). Furthermore, her life and literary career can be regarded as a dramatic ground of contest for identity searching and internal wound healing. These facts about Bessie Head have attracted a great deal of critical attention.

1.1. SOUTH AFRICA (1937-1964)¹³⁵

Bessie Head was a mixed-race South African woman; the child of an illicit union between a wealthy white woman (Bessie Emery) and a black man, a stable-hand, who worked for her family. Bessie Head was born in a mental hospital in the city of Pietermaritzburg (Natal), where her mother was being treated for mental instability. The baby was taken from her mother at birth and raised in a foster mixed-race family until the age of thirteen. Then Bessie attended an oppressive missionary school and eventually obtained a teaching certificate in 1955.

She taught for a few years, but did not like the job. Later on, she worked as a journalist, writing for the South African *Golden City Post* and for *Drum* magazine. She also married a journalist named Harold Head, but the marriage ended in divorce in 1964 (betrayal in marriage?),¹³⁶ and she took her son, Howard, to a small rural village, Serowe, in a new country, Botswana.

1.2. BOTSWANA (1964-1986)

The new country meant two main things in Bessie's life:

¹³⁵ For a better understanding of South Africa's troubled past, read Davenport (1991).

¹³⁶ Little is known about her marriage and the reasons for its breakdown (MacKenzie 1990: ix).

1.2.1. *THE EXPERIENCE OF ASYLUM AND MIGRATION*

She left South Africa for Botswana on an exit permit in 1964 and took a teaching post (Adey 1986:98) as her means for making migration survival possible, but she could not avoid living there in deep poverty for many years. Bessie retained refugee status for fifteen years in a refugee community at the Bamangwato Development Farm before finally gaining citizenship in 1979. But, unfortunately, she died of hepatitis in Botswana in 1986 at the young age of forty-nine (LitLinks 2004:1).

1.2.2. *THE NEGOTIATION AND BUILDING OF A NEW IDENTITY: A NEW LAND OF CHOICE, A NEW LIFE, A NEW MATURE INDIVIDUAL*

She left South Africa and her past life and sought her own community of belonging beyond the borders of the South African apartheid state in Botswana. She went in search of a sense of roots, of historical continuity as an African woman. Botswana was (in her view)¹³⁷ a country largely untouched by the disjunctions of colonialism and racism (Van Wyk Smith 1990:116). It was very African and that was what she wanted.

And finally the regularity of her new rural life in the refugee community brought her the peace of mind she had sought: “In South Africa, all my life I lived in shattered little bits. All those shattered bits began to grow together here ... I have a peace against which all the turmoil is worked out!” (LitLinks 2004:1). Botswana became a new beginning (MacKenzie 1990:xi).

Here she began writing novels and collections of short stories in English where she left the best of her life’s double struggle, for identity building and for ridding herself of an inherited, regulated and rejected identity of discrimination and suffering:

-*When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968)

-*Maru* (1971)

¹³⁷ Unlike SA, Botswana had a benign form of colonial rule and invasion under the old British Bechuanaland Protectorate established in 1885. Colonial rule was benign for an odd reason – the country was grim and unproductive, subject to recurrent cycles of drought. The British had no interest in it, except as a safe passageway to the interior. Due to this, Botswana remained independent in a way; its customs and traditions were left intact and people’s traditional rulers had a large say in governing their people. From *Despite broken bondage, Botswana women are still unloved* (Head 1990:55).

- A Question of Power* (1973)
- The collector of treasures* (1977)
- Serowe: Village of the Rainwind* (1981)
- A Bewitched Crossroad* (1984)

And her writing finally brought her world recognition and prominence as one of the most accomplished writers of the continent (Adey 1986:98). In other words, she was hailed as the finest woman novelist in Africa (MacKenzie 1990:xviii).

2. THE COLLECTOR OF TREASURES

Among her books, *The Collector of Treasures* (1977), a very gender-oriented collection of African short stories full of female and male characters – and different perspectives, symbolises her whole life experience and literary career: “If these stories of the village are simultaneously stories of the modernising society, they are also versions of Head’s own story” (Chapman 1996:381). However, the first origin of her plots lies in the oral sources of village gossip shaped into subtle tales and in the many interviews and conversations enjoyed with the locals.¹³⁸

And among the short stories of the book, “The collector of treasures,” giving the whole collection its title, is the most symbolic of them all.

All Bessie Head’s interests and life experiences can be traced in this short story:

- Pain and loneliness: “Theirs is not a tender, compassionate and romantic world,” she said (Van Wyk Smith 1990:116).
- Need to speak about herself: autobiographical hints.
- Feminism, men and women relationships, and gender discrimination.
- Emphasis on interpersonal relationships, love and tenderness.

¹³⁸ When I first arrived in Botswana in 1964, women confided in me as follows: ‘Botswana men are not nice. When you take up with a man he sleeps with you for two weeks, then he passes you on to his friend, who passes you on to his friend. This is how we live’. From *Despite broken bondage, Botswana women are still unloved* (Head 1990:57).

- Beauty, happiness, understanding and human compassion as superior values (Chapman 1996:380).
- Family life: Bessie grew up without a real family.¹³⁹
- African history and politics: Bessie was a committed journalist who studied Africa without any idealisation of the past (Adey 1986:98).
- Interest in the testing situation of the old coping with the new (Chapman 1996:380).
- Education (Bessie was a teacher).
- A world of good and evil.

The Collector of Treasures tells dramatic stories of two married couples: Dikeledi Mokopi and her husband, Garesego Mokopi, and Kenalepe Thebolo and her husband, Paul Thebolo (Bernardo 2004b:1-2). From the point of view of women, Bessie Head defends the following theory about *men*:

There are really two kinds of men in society (Head 1986:87-103). The first kind is characterised as follows:

- He creates misery and chaos and can be broadly damned as evil.
- He lives near the animal level and behaves just the same.
- He accepts no responsibility for the young he procreates like dogs, bulls and donkeys.
- He is in the majority of society.
- He is responsible for the complete breakdown of family life.
- He dominates the government and political life.
- He regards sex as a means of exerting power over his wife and is not faithful. He has sex with his women like dogs, out of pure carnal lust.

History can explain the origin and characteristics of this type of man, who can be analysed across three time frames (Bessie Head's interpretation of the history of Africa) (Head 1986:87-103):

- In the old days, before the colonial invasion of Africa, man lived by the tradition and taboos outlined by the forefathers of the tribe. The

¹³⁹ I have not a single known relative on earth, no long and ancient family tree to refer to, no links with heredity or a sense of having inherited a temperament, a certain emotional instability or the shape of a fingernail from a grandmother or great-grandmother. I have always been just me, with no frame or reference to anything beyond myself. From *Notes from quiet backwater* (1982) (Head 1990: 3).

ancestors made the big mistake of relegating a superior position to the men in the tribe and women were regarded as an inferior form of human life. This made the women very unhappy.

- The Colonial era and the period of migratory mining labour to South Africa – it destroyed the hold of the ancestors but also the traditional form of family life. Men were separated from their wives and children for long periods.¹⁴⁰
- African independence – it provided the first occasion for family life of a new order,¹⁴¹ but men of this kind started a new process of wild destruction and dissipation. The new jobs and the higher salaries brought corruption and moral decay (strong criticism of the current African political systems).

In contrast, *women* are regarded as follows (Head 1986:87-103):

- *Full of delicate feelings*: “Our men do not think that we need tenderness and care.”
- *Responsible for their families*: “My husband left me after four years of marriage but I managed well enough to feed those mouths.”
- *Better friends*: “It was not long before the two women had going one of those deep, affectionate, sharing-everything kind of friendships that only women know how to have.”
- *Value education*: “Uncle paid for my education for six years, then he said I must leave school. I longed for more because as you know, education opens up the world for us.” They resent the lack of access to education for native Africans.
- *Hard workers and savers*: “I am the woman whose thatch does not leak.” “Her post office savings book.”
- *More capable of assuming risks and change*: Bessie argues that *African men*, who have traditionally had firmly entrenched roles in tribal society, consequently have less ability to change; the people that their postcolonial societies have made them is simply who they are. *Women*, on the other hand, because of their more tenuous position in traditional

¹⁴⁰ It is a fact that colonialism disrupted former family and gender relationships in many different parts of the world (Moore 48).

¹⁴¹ The current patriarchal social system, oppressive of women, though very old now, has not always been dominant. This means that it can be substituted by something different, by a new balance more favourable to women (Sau 163) (Michel 7-32).

African society, are more able to break both their tribal and postcolonial bonds and learn to be someone new (Bernardo 2004a:1).

There is also a second idyllic type of man, a tailor-made ideal for women (Head 1986:87-103):

- He can create himself anew and break away from the past.
- He turns all his resources, both emotional and material, towards his family life.
- He has tender feelings.
- He takes care of everything so that his wife never has a day of worry.
- He provides food and all material needs. He pays for the education of his children.
- He is not very fond of politics and does not participate in the new corrupt governments of Africa.
- He makes sexual life enjoyable for his wife.

Paul is an example of this second type of man and *Kenalepe* is his fortunate wife. *Garesego* belongs to the first type and *Dikeledi* is his victim: a poor and abused black woman dealing with both racist and sexist discrimination.

3. *THE COLLECTOR OF TREASURES* TRANSLATED INTO SPANISH, ITALIAN AND FRENCH

This collection of short stories by Bessie Head, published in 1977, was recently – in other words, twenty-six years later (1977-2003) – translated into Spanish, *La coleccionista de tesoros* (2003), by Mercè Diago and Abel Debritto, and into Italian, *La donna dei tesori* (2003), by Maria Antonietta Saracino. A few years earlier – in 1994 – a French translation by Daisy Perrin was published, but it was 17 years after the first publication of the original. What they all have in common is that they represent a very late reception.

3.1. MACRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

At first, there seems to be a difficult negotiation between the source and target languages, regarding semiotic, historical, ethnical, cultural and gender

realities: those of a southern African context in the 1970s and southern European Latin countries, such as Spain, France and Italy, at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century.

But it is also possible to give it a second thought. What, for example, caught the attention of and lured Diago/Debritto to translate, for the first time, a book by Bessie Head into Spanish: *La coleccionista de tesoros* (2003)?

- The oppression against African women and their struggle against ghost-ridden pasts? – “‘So, you have killed your husband, have you?’ the wardress remarked, with a flicker of humour. ‘You’ll be in good company. We have four other women here for the same crime. It’s becoming the fashion these days’” (Head 1986:88).
- Dikeledi’s tragic decision to kill her husband because she can no longer endure his abuse? Her lack of guilt? - “‘Do you feel any sorrow about the crime?’ ‘Not really,’ the other woman replied. ‘How did you kill him?’ ‘I cut off all his special parts with a knife,’ Dikeledi said” (Head 1986:89).
- The fact that she does not mind going to prison; and that for her this is not confinement but liberation? (Bernardo 2004a:1) – “‘It’s not so bad here,’ Kebonye said. ‘We get a little money saved for us out of the sale of our work’” (Head 1986:90).
- The beauty of the treasures of love and tenderness she has been collecting all her life to be able to survive and make up for so much sadness and pain? Where everybody can only guess heartbreak, she has collected treasures: “This is a terrible world. There is only misery here. And yet she had always found gold amidst the ash, deep loves that had joined her heart to the heart of others. She was the collector of such treasures” (Head 1986:91).

Are these feelings local or universal? Do they belong only to a small community or to humankind as a whole? Can they be *reconstructed* for another culture or only *misreconstructed*? For many it is impossible to understand them, being absolutely local, for many others they are universal. However, Bessie Head herself wrote that she viewed her activity as a writer as “a kind of participation in the thought of the whole world” (Bissell 2004:2). She also greatly resisted attempts to categorise her writing as *African* or *feminist* (Reboussin 2004:1), which proves her interest in becoming *global*.¹⁴² She also

¹⁴² Hand in hand with world government I clearly foresee a new race of people – not nations or national identity as such but rather people who are a blending of all the nations of the earth. Its beginnings are already there so I do not see any of this as being forced on people, but that is the

wrote about Christianity, that it presented itself as doctrine above all traditions and mores: a moral choice freely available to both men and women (1990 56). In a certain way, she is reproducing the concept of *Natural Law*, as it is defended by Christian religion:

The natural law, present in the heart of each man and established by reason, is universal in its precepts and its authority extends to all men. It expresses the dignity of the person and determines the basis for his fundamental rights and duties [...] Applications of the natural law vary greatly; it can demand reflection that takes account of various conditions of life according to places, times, and circumstances. Nevertheless, in the diversity of cultures, the natural law remains as a rule that binds men among themselves and imposes on them, beyond the inevitable differences, common principles (Catechism of the Catholic Church 426-427).

From the point of view of religion, but also from the viewpoint of Jungian Psychoanalysis, it can be claimed that her ideas, her thinking, and her experience are so deeply human, so *archetypal*,¹⁴³ that it can be understood in translation by all cultures, all human societies, all men and women, who share the same or very similar conflicts.¹⁴⁴

Thus, the translated short story helps spread the realities of the formerly colonised African peoples and discriminated African women. It also spreads their specific power and gender relations in a dramatic African postcolonial context. And all these realities are taken into an Iberian target language and culture that are not very aware of, or interested in, Africa.

This is local and specific but it is not the best part of the content. This story takes place in Botswana, Africa, but the problem it deals with is universal.

Just the opposite approach can be exemplified by some branches of feminist translation theorists and practitioners:

Feminist post-structuralist textual theory and writing is seen to have provided women translators with the assurance that no text is neutral or universally meaningful, nor original, for the matter. Any text carries the mark of its producer, which is also the mark of the ideological and cultural context in

natural outcome of mankind's slow spiritual unfoldment over the centuries. These are the themes that have preoccupied me as a writer. From *A reverence for people* (1985) (Head 1990: 100).

¹⁴³ Michael Chapman also makes use of the term *archetypal* when dealing with Bessie Head in his manual: "Like Head, Margaret is despised as a half-caste, and her arrival in the 'pure' African chieftom sparks the archetypal conflict in the protagonist Mary between his love for Margaret and his responsibilities to the chieftaincy" (381).

¹⁴⁴ Lawrence Venuti's discussion on the translator's invisibility with two types of translating strategies: 'domestication' and 'foreignisation' could also be very useful here (2002). Diago and Debritto keep their Spanish translated text foreign and they are probably right. There does not seem to be much need to domesticate it.

which it is produced. Moreover, every reader adds their own individual meaning to the text (Van Flotow 43).

Consequently, every translation is an interpretation, a manipulation, *difference*, or an ideological construction, and nothing else. This is another fascinating theory that seems to predominate somehow in our contemporary world.

3.2. MICRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS

3.2.1. SHEER MISTAKES

Unfortunately, the Spanish translation of Bessie's short story frequently presents a very poor understanding of the original content and lacks mastery of English grammar (Head 2003a:147-170). In contrast, the quality displayed by the Italian and French versions is much higher (Head 2003b:157-185) (Head 1994:153-182).

The translators do not often understand the original meaning or choose incorrect alternatives, for example, the Spanish name given to the tax in the following example is too technical for this context and difficult to understand for the great majority of Spanish readers. The Italian and French versions are much better. Besides, the French one displays a very marked tendency towards a curious "show-off" of "explicitness," which can be regarded as a deeply entrenched characteristic of its translators, as the following examples will also prove.

-To raise the money to pay his British colonial *poll-tax*.

-Y así conseguir el dinero para pagar el *impuesto comunitario de capitación* de la colonia británica.

-Le *tasse di suddito* delle colonie inglesi.

-Afin de *gagner* l'argent nécessaire pour payer ses *impôts coloniaux* à Sa *Majesté britannique*.

It is very unnatural to translate this kind of English "noun plus noun compounds" literally into Spanish. The Italian and French translations avoid this mistake and provide more renditions:

-He then became "the boy" of the white man and a *machine-tool* of the South African mines.

-Entonces se convirtió en el “chico” del hombre blanco y en una *herramienta-máquina* de las minas sudafricanas.

-Il *boy* dell'uomo bianco e un *utensile umano* nelle miniere sudafricane.

-Ainsi il devint le « boy » du Blanc et un *outil* dans les mines sud-africaines.

“Of custom” does not mean something “habitual” in this context, but the old uses of the African peoples, as the Italian and French translators clearly understand:

-It provided the first occasion for family life of a new order, above the childlike discipline *of custom*, the degradation of colonialism.

-Se trataba de la primera oportunidad para disfrutar de una vida familiar nueva, más allá de la disciplina infantil *habitual*, de la degradación del colonialismo.

-Che andava aldilà della disciplina elementare *della tradizione*.

-Une vie familiale d'un nouveau type apparut pour la première fois: elle se libérait du respect naïf des *coutumes* et annonçait la chute du colonialisme.

“Cross-country” does not mean “crossing the fields,” but what the Italian and French texts say:

-On the Wide, dusty *cross-country* trackroad.

-Camino amplio y polvoriento que iba *campo a través*.

-La carreggiata ampia e polverosa che *attraversava il paese*.

-Sur la piste bien large et poussiéreuse qui *conduisait vers le nord*.

The countryside seems indifferent to the prisoner's pain and not the opposite, as the Spanish version incorrectly states:

-The everyday world of ploughed fields, grazing cattle, and vast expanse of bush and forest *seemed indifferent to the hungry eyes of the prisoner*.

-El mundo cotidiano de los campos arados, el ganado pastando y las enormes extensiones de maleza y bosque *parecían carecer de interés para los ojos hambrientos de la prisionera que observaba*.

-L'universo cotidiano di campi arati, di bestie che pascolavano e di vaste distese di boscaglia e foresta *sembrava non curarse degli sguardi avidi che la prigionera lanciava loro*.

-Les champs labourés, le bétail paissant et les vastes étendues de broussailles et de forêts défilaient, *paysage banal, indifférent aux yeux affamés de la prisonnière*.

“Ayudanta” is not a standard Spanish word, as any (semi-)literate native speaker of this language knows. “Ayudante” is not a word with a formal gender

differentiation in Spanish. It can refer to both genders. The other translators do not make such gross errors:

- A second sewing-machine and employ a *helper*.
- Otra máquina de coser y a contratar a una *ayudanta*.
- Un' *aiutante*.
- Et prit une *aide*.

“Lost to the world” does not mean “lost in a different world” (Spanish option), but not devoting any attention to that world, the world or reality, as can correctly be read both in Italian and French:

- Lost to the world*.
- Perdido en otro mundo*.
- Insensibile al resto del mondo*.
- Complètement inconscient*.

There are not two different things: gifts and food. Food IS the gift. The Spanish version is incorrect again:

- Gifts of food*.
- Regalos o comida*.
- Doni di cibo*.
- Ils me payaient en nature*

The ambiguous Spanish translation is simply funny here if not ridiculous. The Italian version avoids this with the addition: “*maschi in questo caso*.” The French rewording is always clear, without the need for any added explanation:

- The man Paul attracted as wide a range *of male friends as his wife*.
- El hombre, Paul, *atraía a tantos hombres como su esposa*.
- Come la moglie, anche Paul, il marito, *attraeva a sé un numero altrettanto vasto di amici, maschi in questo caso*.
- Son mari, Paul, *s’était fait un grand nombre d’amis, comme sa femme*.

In Spanish “*todos*” (all) includes men and women. “Men” (*uomini*) (*homes*) cannot be omitted here, as the Spanish translators do:

- But the story took such a dramatic turn that it made *all the men* shudder with horror. It was some weeks before they could find the courage to go to bed with women.

-La historia dio un vuelco tan inesperado que *todos* se estremecieron de horror. Transcurrieron varias semanas antes de que reunieran el valor para acostarse con mujeres.

-Ma la storia assunse un risvolto tanto drammático da far rabbrivire d'orrore *tutti gli uomini*.

-Mais l'histoire prit une tournure si dramatique qu'elle fit frémir d'horreur *tous les homes*. Au point qu'il se passa quelques semaines avant qu'ils aient le courage d'aller coucher avec des femmes.

3.2.2. *LOSS OF EMPHASIZERS*

Bessie Head places lots of emphasizees in her story. They are difficult to understand, but the Spanish translators omit almost all of them. The Italian and French translations retain them very carefully:

-*To this day*, women *still* suffered from all the calamities that befall an inferior form of human life.

-Las mujeres han sufrido las calamidades inherentes a una forma inferior de vida humana.

-*Anche in epoca recente* le donne soffrivano *ancora* di tutte le sventure che capitano alle specie inferiori di vita umana.

-Tandis que les femmes étaient considérées, dans un sens biologique, comme une forme inférieure de la vie. *Jusq'à ce jour*, les femmes avaient souffert toutes les calamités propres à cette situation.

-He was so peaceful as a person that the sunlight and shadow *played all kinds of tricks* with his eyes.

-Era tan tranquilo que la luz del sol y las sombras *jugaban* con sus ojos.

-Che il sole e l'ombra potevano *giocare in tutti i modi possibili* con i suoi occhi.

-Il était si paisible que *le jeu* du soleil et de l'ombre dans ses yeux ne permettait pas *de déterminer leur couleur*.

-*Ultimate* source of pain.

-A la fuente de su dolor.

-*Extrema* fonte di dolore.

-Un point *d'extrême* souffrance.

-They all greeted her *quietly*.

-La saludaron.

-Tutte la salutarono *con fare pacato*.

-Elle lui dirent bonjour *tranquillement*.

The part (mouths) is more dramatic and emphatic than the whole (children), as the Italian translator notices very clearly. The French one also omits this rhetorical device, but compensates for it by means of the double verb construction:

-To feed those *mouths*.

-Alimentar a mis hijos.

-A nutrire quelle *bocche*.

-J'ai nourri et élevé mes enfants.

3.2.3. INCORRECT OMISSIONS

The Spanish translators do not seem to understand the relevance of words such as “tribe,” “challenge,” “conceit” or “men” to this story. The Italian and French professionals do. The Spanish translators do not even try to find equivalent idiomatic expressions:

-A man who lived by the tradition and taboos outlined for the people by the forefathers of the *tribe*.

-Era un hombre que vivía según las tradiciones y los tabúes que los antepasados habían establecido para todos.

-Un uomo che viveva nel rispetto delle tradizioni e de tabù stabiliti per tutti dagli antenati della *tribù*.

-Un homme que vivait selon les traditions et les tabous érigés pour tous par les ancêtres de la *tribu*.

-*You are just hanging around here like a chain on my neck.*

-Porque aquí tampoco haces mucho.

-*Giacché te ne stai qua a ciondolare e per me sei una pietra al collo.*

-*Au lieu de traîner là autour, comme un boulet à mon cou.*

-With no *answering challenge*.

-Sin obtener *respuesta*.

-Senza alcuna *provocazione di ritorno*.

-Sans rencontrer de *défi*.

-He has a *conceit* about being a good man.

-Creo que piensa que es una buena persona.

-Io credo che lui sia *orgoglioso* de essere un così brav'uomo.

-La certitude d'être un bon Mari le rend *vaniteux*.

-But the story took such a dramatic turn that it made *all the men* shudder with horror. It was some weeks before they could find the courage to go to bed with women.

-La historia dio un vuelco tan inesperado que *todos* se estremecieron de horror. Transcurrieron varias semanas antes de que reunieran el valor para acostarse con mujeres.

-Ma la storia assunse un risvolto tanto drammatico da far rabbrivire d'orrore *tutti gli uomini*.

- Mais l'histoire prit une tournure si dramatique qu'elle fit frémir d'horreur *tous les homes*. Au point qu'il se passa quelques semaines avant qu'ils aient le courage d'aller coucher avec des femmes.

3.2.4. POOR COHERENCE/COHESION

The original writer – Bessie Head – weaves a thick structure of lexical networks that the Spanish translators do not retain at all. The Italian translator clearly retains them and the French one usually does:

-New *independence* town of Gaborone.

-De la ciudad de Gaborone.

-Cittadine di Gaborone, il nuovo centro nato con *l'indipendenza*.

-La ville de Gabore qui venait d'acquérir son *indépendance*.

-He could repeat the performance every day until he broke the mettle of the other *cock* again and forced him into angry abuse.

-Podía repetir la actuación todos los días hasta hacer perder la paciencia al *macho* y obligarlo a maltratarlo.

-Avrebbe potuto ripetere l'impresa ogni giorno fino a quando non avesse nuovamente infranto la resistenza dell'altro *gallo* forzandolo a ricorrere, infuriato, alla violenza.

-Il pourrait continuer à agir chaque jour de cette façon jusq'à ce qu'il pique l'honneur de l'autre et le force à surtir de ses gonds.

-Not everyone has the *gift* of a husband like Paul.

-No todas tienen un marido tan maravilloso como Paul.

-No tutte hanno la *fortuna* di avere un marito come Paul.

-Tout le monde n'a pas le *bonheur* d'avoir un mari comme Paul.

3.2.5. DOMESTICATION NEEDED

Sometimes some degree of domestication is unavoidable in all these languages. The ingredients and appearance of “porridge,” “gachas” and “polenta” are very different, but they are probably a good translation choice. Here the French translator opts for a different alternative: she foreignizes and retains the exotic African “porridge:”

-A plate of *porridge*.

-Un plato de *gachas*.

-Un piatto de *polenta*.

-Une assiette de *porridge*.

The names of academic marks also vary from country to country:

-To pass with a *grade A*.

-Aprobar con *sobresaliente*.

-Essere promosso con *il massimo dei voti*.

-Il voulait obtenir une *mention*.

The three translations fail when making it clear that in Botswana, and the entire southern hemisphere, Christmas holidays are summer holidays and the end of the academic year. The result is that the following sentences do not make sense for target audiences:

-Midway during the *Christmas school holidays* the results were announced. Banabotho passed with a *Grade A*.

-Durante las *vacaciones navideñas* se anunciaron los resultados de los exámenes; Banabotho había obtenido *sobresaliente*.

-A metà della *vacanze natalizie* furono resi noti i risultati; Banabotho era statu promosso con “*ottimo*.”

-Au milieu *des vacances de Noël*, les résultats furent annoncés. Banabotho avait réussi avec la mention.

3.2.6. *MISSING KEY WORDS*

If you know a little about Bessie Head’s literature, it does not seem a very good idea to omit “bitter” and “long term.” In Italian they have not been omitted. In French they are retained only sometimes:

-The ancestors made so many errors and one of the most *bitter-making* things was that they relegated to man a superior position in the tribe.

-Los antepasados cometieron múltiples errores y uno de los más terribles fue que otorgaron a los hombres una posición superior en la tribu.

-Una delle cose que *amareggiano* di piú.

-Les ancêtres avaient commis de nombreuses erreurs, et l’une des plus injustes fut d’attribuer aux mâles une position supérieure dans la tribu.

-The *long-term* central state prison in the South.

-La cárcel estatal del sur.

-La prigione di statu *per le lunghe detenzioni*, al sud.

-La prison centrale pour les détentions de *long durée*.

As stated before, the Spanish translation is very poor. The Italian translation is much better, and the French one is also a good one, although it exhibits more debateable options from time to time.

4. POLYSYSTEM THEORY AND TRANSLATION: THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN CENTRE AND PERIPHERY

It is a very well-known fact that in the early 1970s, a scholar from Tel Aviv, Itamar Even-Zohar, took the early 20th century systemic approach of the Russian Formalists – Tynjanov and others – and applied it to translation theory and exemplified it in the Hebrew literature. He proposed a new term of his own, “polysystem,” in order to stress the dynamic nature of the concept of “system” that he inherited. According to Even-Zohar, societies and cultures are polysystems, that is, they are made of a number of heterogeneous, hierarchized conglomerates of systems that interact to bring about an ongoing, *dynamic* process of evolution within any polysystem as a whole (Shuttleworth 176-179).

A given national literature is one of those systems making a socio-cultural system, alongside the other possibilities: the artistic, the religious or the political ones, for example. But, in its own turn, it is also a polysystem displaying the same characteristics. In other words, it is formed by a number of strata or subdivisions that are constantly competing with one another for the dominant position.

Two key concepts enter here: “centre” and “periphery.” Some genres, forms or norms occupy the centre of the system, are canonised, are accepted as more legitimate, preserved and protected. Others are rejected or neglected. This is a question of the so-called “masterpieces” versus “children’s literature,” “popular fiction” or “translated works.” But polysystems evolve, and what occupies the centre may be challenged and eventually beaten by new models from the periphery (Shuttleworth 176-179). This is “History of Literature” in action.

Another key concept regarding translation claims that translations tend to occupy a peripheral position in most polysystems and that those translations that are finally performed tend to support the most conservative, or even outdated, foundations thereof and conform to already existing models. But it is also true that there can be important exceptions: when a national literature is young and looks to older literature for models, when the original literature of a system is

peripheral or weak, or when there is a moment of crisis in a polysystem. In such cases, translated works can be far more centrally located (Even-Zohar 117-127).

The consequences of the application of this theoretical framework to the translations of Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasure's* can be multi-faceted. The following checklist can help in the understanding of this claim:

1. Although arousing a great deal of interest in recent years, the postcolonial literatures of Africa in European languages, those of the former colonial powers, are typical examples of peripheral systems: peripheral national literatures within the world context and peripheral compared with their counterpart of central national literatures in their same languages: English (British, American, etc.), French, Portuguese, etc.
2. When instances (big local names such as Bessie Head) of these peripheral literatures conquer all barriers and perform the heroic deed of entering such difficult polysystems for African literature as the Italian or the Spanish-Hispanic ones, they may be restricted to an ultra-peripheral position in the system, but the cultural relevance of this feat is extraordinary. And the responsibility of the translators, who become pioneers and possible agents of change in their respective target systems, is of the utmost importance.
3. Italian and Spanish audiences almost do not have the possibility of reading African literature in their own language. The fact is that they have never seemed to be very interested in that literature. For those systems, translations are the only means of receiving African literatures originally written in English, French or Portuguese. For them, *The Collector of Treasures*, whether in Italian or Spanish, is just a rarity, a curious product that appeals to a minority. Indeed, this collection of short stories is the only book by Bessie Head, among all her works, that has ever been translated into either language. This is a revolution, but without a sound revolutionary following.
4. The French situation is different. France and the literary polysystem of French-speaking nations enjoy the huge benefit of a strong appreciation for African literature in French. Bessie Head in French translation is much more central than its Italian or Spanish counterparts. Her writings can be matched with, and assimilated to, the many popular French African writers. The result is quite evident: There are translations into French of all of Bessie Head's main works. The South African-Botswanan writer is much less of a rarity in the French polysystem.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The Collector of Treasures can be regarded as a full feminist text. It deconstructs an African traditional opposition of man/woman and all the pain associated with it; it fiercely attacks the supposed inferiority of women no matter the tragic consequences; and it proposes and envisages a new sensible balance based on a new kind of man and a new kind of woman. It is a very didactic story full of consequences: “The conditions of a society in upheaval: the women of Head’s bustling Botswanan village encounter religious conflict, the burden of poverty and, partly as a result of the clashes of ancient custom and the modern way, stressful marriages” (Chapman 1996:381). The teacher behind it can be noticed easily, as many critics have done. A trace of the didacticism of the oral tale can also be spotted (Chapman 381).

It makes a fascinating link between African postcolonial independence and political freedom as well as feminism and the liberation of African women. It is a unique opportunity not to be missed. It has been said that for better or worse, her female characters are willing to leave the oppressions of the past behind, all of them, and go forward into the future without looking back (Bernardo 2004a 1). In spite of its tragic end, it is a story full of hope.

If feminist theorists champion the identity of women, demand rights for women and promote them, and represent the experience of women, Bessie is a feminist theorist. If they see women as a radical force that subverts the structure of patriarchal phallogocentric discourse, Bessie’s characters are like this – Dikelidi, for example.

If gynocriticism means the literary criticism concerned with women authors and the representation of women’s experience with the aim of transforming the canon by privileging women writers, Bessie Head provides an excellent opportunity to develop its methods. We have a woman writer, women characters, a woman’s point of view, feminine experiences and longings, and a radical women-oriented transformation of society, etc.

Bessie Head is not a fanatic. The story is not anti-man either. It only attacks, symbolically castrates and kills the negative kind of man, the one that is stopping transformation. It is not only his fault. History is much to blame, but now it is impossible for him to change.

Gender distinctions, for Bessie Head, are a construction that can be changed. She denies the essentialist theory. The roles of women and men are made, not born.

Bessie does not write for African men or women. She writes for all, male and female individuals. She intends to become universal. The essence of the problem can be understood by all cultures. This is where translation can play a leading role. It becomes a protagonist in the process of reaching all kinds of social communities.

The Spanish and Italian translations, whether better or worse, not only fulfil this enterprise, but also help raise the level of appreciation of Africa, so frequently misrepresented in the Western collective conscience. They should become a kind of eye-opener for those language communities, Spain for example, where Africa is almost ignored.

Consequently, the poor quality of this first translation of Bessie Head into Spanish is a great pity. It is a unique, golden opportunity lost. And it lends more support to our claims in favour of the Italian translator who was really aware of the great responsibility that was granted to her: open for the first time, and probably determined further reception, the soul and words of a unique, although much neglected, genius from Africa.

And as far as responsibility is concerned, the French rendering studied, although very talented and skilful, was not loaded as much: neither was it the only French translation of unfortunate Bessie Head, nor did it determine its fate in French. Centrality has its own advantages.

Returning to the original, there is only one main objection against *The Collector*. Although very dramatic and literary, perhaps there are better alternatives rather than castration, murder and life imprisonment. Bessie tends to praise good too much and to condemn evil absolutely. This may be the result of a too rigid kind of Christian education:¹⁴⁵ her writing is filled with references to the Bible (Reboussin 2004:1), or the impact of the traditional folk stories, including good and evil types (Chapman 1996:381), or the leftovers of her life's hurt, resentment, anger and loneliness, the sources of her contents according to Chapman (1996:381).

The very same Bessie Head produced unique images of love like the collection of love treasures and the following: "Love is so powerful, it's like unseen flowers under your feet as you walk" (Bissell 2004:1). And there is no love without forgiveness.

¹⁴⁵ I was steeped in it when young and had a thorough acquaintance with the Bible and the life of Jesus Christ but Christianity and formal church going were never going to be an expansive way of life for me. However, I value my early background and training with its ideal service to life. I value that vivid, great short story teller, Jesus Christ, and the foundation he laid for such terms as mankind, the human race and love of one's neighbour. From *A bit of Christianity* (1985) (Head 1990:96).

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