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Author(s): Earl G. Ingersoll

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SEXUALITY IN THE STORIES OF BESSIE HEAD

BY EARL G. INGERSOLL

Bessie Head's tragically early death in 1986, at the age of 49, may seem to have silenced a powerful voice for sanity and sensitivity in the discourse on human sexuality and relations between women and men. On the other hand, her voice has not really been silenced, for, as Susan Beard has remarked, recent years have witnessed a "remarkable Bessie Head renaissance," signaled perhaps by Alice Walker's singling her out among her "favorite uncelebrated foreign writers . . . whose work deserves more attention in this country."¹ In the remarks to follow, I will focus on selected stories from her collection *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales* (1977),² in an attempt to demonstrate that Head is both an advocate for women and an advocate for women and men. The stories to be examined are "The Deep River," "Heaven Is Not Closed," "Life," "Witchcraft," "The Special One," and "The Collector of Treasures."

The full title of the first story in the collection, "The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration," points up its origins in a "village tale" of how the Talaote tribe came into being. It attempts to exhume a legend of origins for a people who have merged with other peoples and lost knowledge of their history. The ancestors of the Talaote were numbered among the Monemappee moving through time as a "deep river" of unself-conscious harmony and unity. When Monemappee died, he left three wives and five sons, ranging from adult sons—Sebembele of his first wife,

¹ Linda Susan Beard, "Bessie Head's Syncretic Fictions: The Reconceptualization of Power and the Recovery of the Ordinary," *Modern Fiction Studies* 37.3 (Autumn 1991): 575.

² Bessie Head, *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1977). Subsequent references will be to this text.

Ntema and Mosemme of his second—to the infant Makobi of his third wife. Sebembele announces that he will marry his father's young and beautiful third wife, Rankwana, and that Makobi is the fruit of their secret love. Concerned that Makobi will supplant them in the succession of the chieftdom, Ntema and Mosemme gather enough supporters to confront Sebembele with the bitter choice: renounce Rankwana and Makobi or his claim to succeed their father as chief.

Traditional voices in the tribe attempt to persuade Sebembele to be a "man," for theirs is "a world where women were of no account" (3). Furthermore, they remind him that "[a] ruler must not be carried away by his emotions" (3), and that "[a] man who is influenced by a woman is no ruler. He is like one who listens to a child" (3). Those traditional male voices are juxtaposed to the quiet but powerful voice of Rankwana, who tells Sebembele: "If you would leave me, I would kill myself" (4). Sebembele is overwhelmed with the "sickness" or "paralysis" of his impossible dilemma, and then he cures himself by renouncing his chieftdom and his people diverting part of that "deep river" of his fatherland into a new course, becoming the Talaote, or those allowed to leave.³

The "deep river" of the story's title also seems to be the love of Sebembele and Rankwana, subtly understated in Head's evocative tale of passionate love overcoming the pain of a kind of amputation inherent in the choice made first by Rankwana and then by Sebembele to make love their priority. Head herself in a footnote admits that this is "an entirely romanticized and fictionalized version of the history of the Botalaote tribe" (6), and the reader senses the truth of her statement before reading this footnote.

³ Femi Ojo-Ade is singularly unsympathetic to Sebembele, as one of several male characters in these stories for whom "one might not wish to shed a tear" (83). Her essay "Of Human Trials and Triumphs" appears in *The Tragic Life: Bessie Head and Literature in Southern Africa*, ed. Cecil Abrahams (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990) 79-92.

However, the story functions as a strategic starting point for the collection and a kind of anticipatory balance for the second-to-last and the most powerful story in the collection, "The Collector of Treasures." Even though Head adds a kind of disclaimer to acknowledge that the story is "romanticized and fictionalized," it establishes a framework of legend or myth within which it is possible to conceive of a love powerful enough to make men as well as women willing to sacrifice everything else for its preservation. The reader believes Rankwana when she tells Sebembele that she and the child will perish without him, and he is willing to renounce, as she does too, his favored position within the deep river of his people's history. Small sacrifice though it may seem to some, he is willing to sacrifice his being as a man by violating his allegiance to the male code of manliness, thereby risking a future as no-man if patriarchy is the sole determinant of identity and being.

In the stories that follow, Head offers the reader various expressions of women who have been less fortunate than Rankwana in finding lovers willing to meet them as alternative "currents" in that "deep river" of passion and tenderness. Galethebege in "Heaven Is Not Closed" seems to come closer than others, even though she has been forced by her traditionalist husband to conduct her worship as a Christian in secret. It is left to her to grieve the possibility that her nonbelieving husband may never gain access to the Christian heaven she herself aspires to. Gaenametse, in "The Special One," the story just before "The Collector of Treasures," seems confident that she has found love with the old priest of her church who has promised to marry her, but the reader has difficulty sharing her hope. Gaenametse apparently followed the example of her neighbor, Mrs. Maleboge, becoming the nighttime lover of boys who go to her for sexual release because they need not fear impregnating her. The narrator, a young woman, gets a lesson in female sexuality, for she is shocked that these older women are so sexually active. Indeed, Gaenametse's marriage, we

learn, ended in divorce not because her husband was a philanderer but because he was unable to satisfy her sexual hunger, now that she was free from the fear of constant pregnancies. According to a gossip neighbor, Gaenametse even risked her husband's life by coercing him into intercourse while she was menstruating.

Three other stories in the collection demonstrate Head's perceptions about women and sympathy for their difficulty in dealing with their sexuality. The reader is impressed with the range of situations in which these women find themselves. For example, *Life*, in the story of that title, is a young woman who left the village for Johannesburg with her parents when she was ten. Now that they have both died, she has returned seventeen years later to a culture within which she can no longer find a place. In the city she made her way as a "singer, beauty queen, advertising model, and prostitute" (39). Because she is a "city girl," the village women find her attractive and hope that she can bring a "little light" into their lives. Things change, however, when *Life* becomes the "first and the only woman in the village to make a business of selling herself" (39). To demonstrate that *Life* is different only in taking money for her sexual responses, the narrator offers the reader the following context:

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, or else one's life would be extinguished or one would get dreadfully ill. To prevent these catastrophes from happening, men and women generally had quite a lot of sex but on a respectable and human level, with financial considerations coming in as an afterthought. (39)

The tragedy for *Life* is marriage to Lesego, a cattleman, who insists that she accept him as the only man in her bed. His overconfidence that *Life* can renounce forever her earlier experience is put to the test when he must be away on business, so to speak, and is immediately informed upon returning that his wife has been "unfaithful." When he asks

for tea, Life tells him she has to go out for sugar, but once she has gone he discovers the canister has plenty and surmises that she is off to complete an assignation. He surprises her—perhaps—with her “John” and kills *her*, of course, not the man whom she is with and for whom this is all an exciting drama.

The word *tragedy* is not an intrusion here, since Head crafts this narrative so well that the reader has the sense of Life as a tragic figure,⁴ virtually from the moment she agrees to marry Lesego. Afterward, her friends, the “beer-brewing women,” recall hearing Life say: “My motto is: live fast, die young, and have a good-looking corpse.” To them, Life was a heroic figure who had reached “dizzy heights”—foreclosed from their more ordinary lives—“the bold, free joy of a woman who had broken all the social taboos” (40). Indeed, readers like Maxine Sample⁵ go too far in their judgments about “the sinful, perverse activities” which make Life’s yard a “place of inevitable destruction because of the moral decay” (318). The narrator seems much less judgmental. With marriage Life has descended from the independence of full personhood to a boring existence with a man who insists that she ask him for every cent she spends. On the other hand, he has been made well aware of what Life is about by the chorus of male villagers, whose leader took upon himself to warn Lesego: “You can’t marry that woman. She’s a terrible fuck-about!” (42). Lesego proceeds with a kind of overweening pride that he is “man enough” to fulfill her sexual hunger, when obviously no one man likely can. The judge, a white man, gives Lesego five years—it is a “crime of passion”—and the leader of the chorus returns to ask why Lesego was so stu-

⁴ Cecil Abrahams encourages readers to think of Head and her writing in just such a context in the collection of essays that he edited and entitled *The Tragic Life: Bessie Head and Literature in Southern Africa* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990).

⁵ See her essay “Landscape and Spatial Metaphor in Bessie Head’s *The Collector of Treasures*,” *Studies in Short Fiction* 28.3 (Summer 1991): 311-19.

pid as not simply to walk away. The narrator ends with the ironic commentary: "A song by Jim Reeves was very popular at that time: *That's What Happens When Two Worlds Collide*. When they were drunk, the beer-brewing women used to sing it and start weeping. Maybe they had the last word on the whole affair" (46). The sentimentality here is only *apparent*: Life is indeed tragic when all avenues to fulfillment are closed.

At the other end of the age range is another of Head's older women, Mabele, who has a son by the man who kept talking marriage until he had impregnated her and then left. The men in the village have nicknamed her "he-man" because she refuses to "show" herself to them anymore. The narrator tells us: "The only value women were given in the society was their ability to have sex . . ." (49). Mabele is tormented by the men, one of whom passes himself off as a *baloi*, or demon. A Christian, she prays for help. When none comes, she wastes away almost to death until she recovers on her own and declares her selfhood: "You all make me sick! There is no one to help the people, not even God. I could not sit down because I am too poor and there is no one else to feed my children" (56).

All of these themes come together in the "biggest" story in the collection, "The Collector of Treasures," which is a masterpiece of short fiction destined to become a "classic." As in the story "Life," Head constructs a tragic framework in this tightly controlled story. Dikeledi has just been transferred to prison to serve a life sentence for having killed her husband, Garesego. The wardess who processes her entry wryly tells her, "You'll be in company. We have four other women here for the same crime. It's becoming the fashion these days" (88). Soon, Dikeledi, whose name means "tears," meets the other four, one of whom, Kebonye, asks how she killed her husband. Dikeledi answers, "I cut off his private parts with a knife," to which Kebonye responds, "I did it with a razor" (89). Knowing this, the reader is led back through Dikeledi's life to account for her desperate

act.

First, Kebonye tells her story. Her husband was an education officer who "used to kick me between the legs when he wanted that. I once aborted with a child, due to that treatment" (89). He had a penchant for impregnating schoolgirls, and when the parents of his last conquest came to her, Kebonye told them that she would take care of the problem. In her loving helpfulness, Kebonye becomes a new treasure for Dikeledi's collection of acts of unselfish love and kindness.

Dikeledi's story is much more complicated. The narrator prefaces its narration with the generalization that there are two kinds of men: the first is like the male dog who, while enjoying sex from which he has ousted his rivals, temporarily "imagined he was the only penis in the world." Worse, such men "accepted no responsibility for the young [they] procreated and like the dogs and bulls and donkeys, [they] also made females abort" (91). Given the fact that such men are the majority now, the narrator offers an analysis of their present evil as a result of the weakened sway of the laws of their ancestors and confrontation with their colonizers, who have made them "boys." Dikeledi's husband, Garesego, is one of that majority. After impregnating her three times, he has abandoned her and her three sons, aged four, three, and one, for the latest in a string of conquests. Dikeledi is "semi-literate," and Garesego has discovered that educated women are more "exciting" in these heady days of "independence" (92).

She has the good fortune to meet the second variety of men, Paul Thebolo, the husband of her neighbor and friend, Kenalepe. Paul is, the narrator informs us, "another kind of man in the society with the power to create himself anew. He turned all his resources, both emotional and material, towards his family life and he went on and on with his own quiet rhythm, like a river. He was a poem of ten-

derness" (93). One reader of the story, Ezenwa-Ohaeto,⁶ calls him an "oasis of goodness" (129). Dikeledi accepts the invitation of first Paul and then Kenalepe to fashion with them a loving and harmonious sense of a larger family, which Dikeledi finds "rich and creative" (94).

It is the relationship between Dikeledi and Kenalepe that the narrative stresses. It becomes "one of those deep, affectionate, sharing-everything kind of friendships that only women know how to have" (94). Other women flock to Kenalepe's yard, and soon Dikeledi's dress-making business has become so successful that she has to buy a second sewing-machine and hire an assistant. In addition to this nurturing of her creativity as a dressmaker, Paul offers her, along with his wife, intellectual stimulation, when the two women sit at the fringes while Paul and the other men talk politics. This is still the old Africa, so that the two women cannot participate, but they continue the debates the next morning by themselves. This is important in the relationship because, as Dikeledi tells her friend, her uncle forced her to leave school before she wanted to: "I longed for more," she tells Kenalepe, "because . . . education opens up the world for one" (95). Contact with Paul's discussion group has "opened up" "a completely new world" which seems to Dikeledi "impossibly rich and happy" (96), and yet Kenalepe knows that her friend is missing something.

Kenalepe herself initiates the discussion of sexuality that ends with her surprising proposal. She tells Dikeledi that she ought to find another man, but Dikeledi confesses that she has no interest since sex with Garesego was never much more than "jump on and jump off" (96). Kenalepe confesses in turn: "I sometimes think I enjoy that side of life too much" (96), and goes on to tell her friend that Paul is continually surprising her with some new way of loving her.

⁶ Ezenwa-Ohaeto, "Windows of Womanhood," *The Tragic Life: Bessie Head and Literature in Southern Africa*, ed. Cecil Abrahams (Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 1990) 123-31.

Because Dikeledi is a special friend and because she is expecting a child, she offers to “loan” Paul to Dikeledi. This is too great a “gift” for Dikeledi to accept and she never does. Kenalepe, however, reveals her offer to Paul, who is first astonished at his wife’s daring, then amused by her high regard for him as a lover, and finally rendered silent by this proposal. Dikeledi understands Paul’s silence: “I think he has a conceit about being a good man. Also, when someone loves someone too much, it hurts them to say so” (97). Later, Paul will silently acknowledge his wife’s offer, and Dikeledi accepts the generous gift of his and her friend’s love. The “treasure” is in her friend’s offer, not any actual love-making which Femi Ojo-Ade mistakenly concludes took place. In this way, Dikeledi can accept her friends’ love without compromising the couple’s fidelity to each other.

Eight years later, like the return of a ghost, Garesego comes back into Dikeledi’s life. She appeals to him for help in paying for his son’s education, as he has done so for the sons of the latest woman in his life. Garesego refuses, directing his wife to seek support from Paul: “Everyone knows he’s keeping two homes and that you are his spare” (99). When Paul confronts Garesego, the latter publicly accuses him of having sex with Dikeledi, whom he supplies with food: “Men only do that for women they fuck!” (100). To assert his “rights,” Garesego moves into Dikeledi’s home after refusing to pay for his son’s education, and she puts to use the knife she has been sharpening for his return.

More than anything, this emasculation, which causes Garesego to bleed to death, is an attempt to nurture the hope for a future in which tenderness and affection may continue to be connected to the power of sexual passion. Dikeledi seeks in part to cleanse Paul of the obscenities flung in his face by her husband. Even more, Dikeledi seeks to make it possible for her sons to be new men in Paul’s mode rather than to grow up in their father’s image. Dikeledi joins Life as yet another tragic figure who sacri-

fices herself in a world in which the possibilities for joy, passion, tenderness, and generous love are worth giving one's life for. The trope of the river that Head uses to introduce Paul is no accidental echo of the first story in the collection; indeed, Paul seems a reincarnation of the legendary Sebembele in his rare combination of passionate tenderness as a lover and nurturing love as a father. Indeed, when he comes onto Garesego's death scene, his first assertion is the offer to father Dikeledi's sons and to ensure their education. Bleak as her future appears, Dikeledi has framed her sacrifice within the tragic construct of Rankwana's unwillingness to live without Sebembele. Until the world offers the hope of more men like Paul, there is little room for women like Life and Dikeledi to find fulfillment as women. In their reaching out to others to draw them into the embrace of their relationship of almost unimaginable passion, tenderness, and trust, Kenalepe and Paul seem reincarnations of Rankwana and Sebembele and the best hope for the future.

*SUNY College of Brockport
Brockport, New York*