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Politics of Race, Power and Gender: An Analysis of Bessie Head's *Maru*

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Abstract: The paper examines the politics of race, power and gender in Bessie Head's *Maru* (1971). A critical study of the novel is undertaken to identify the subordinating and the marginalizing tropes that result in silencing of female subjectivities in Bessie Head's protagonists. The paper analyzes the role of cultural and psychological forces in maintaining patriarchal hegemony, which is based upon hierarchy and domination of women rather than equality. By using Foucault's theories, this paper attempts to show the intersections between racism and sexism and how these constructs are implicated in the conception and construction of power. The present study argues that racial and sexual difference due to their arbitrary applications be viewed as dynamic and contested, rather than fixed.

Keywords: Politics, Race, Power, Gender, Patriarchy, Discourse, Identity.

Politics is the structure through which power functions, race and gender on the other hand are extreme manifestations of power. Race, Gender and Politics are discourses in themselves, in the sense that they all have power operating as its motivating force. Foucault's central interest in the functioning of power in modern societies leads to findings significant to any marginalized group, informing gender and cultural studies with an understanding of both the structures of power dynamics and an analysis of the multiple forces at work in oppressor/oppressed relations. In this context, the novel selected for analysis, does attest to the relevance of Foucault's theories on power and sexuality for gender studies, since they contribute to unveiling the artificiality of the gender dichotomy and shed light on the encoding of subjectivity and bodies within the power-knowledge system. Foucault's notion of power offers lenses to magnify a dimension of the dynamics of power relations that enables a process of making sense out of the interactive diverse and complex forces. It reveals more clearly the control patterns that are easily overlooked in everyday situations. Foucault views

power not only as a juridical notion or as something possessed and consciously exercised, but also as a relation or mode of interaction.

According to Foucault, Power:

> … must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and …, as the process which, through ceaseless struggle and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them, as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain which isolate them from one another, and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in … the various social hegemonies. (Foucault 92)

Power represents the different modes by which a human being is made a subject, "… subject to someone else by control and dependence," and ties his or her own identity by a consciousness or self-knowledge both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes "subject to" (Foucault 170). Foucault calls for a conception of power where the privilege of the law is replaced with "… the viewpoint of the objective, the privilege of prohibition with the viewpoint of tactical efficacy, the privilege of sovereignty with the analysis of a multiple and mobile field of force relations, wherein far reaching, but never completely stable, effects of domination are produced" (Foucault 102). "Force relations" in this characteristic of power must be understood as meaning relations of dominance rather than the application of brute force. Power is exercised in our society through subtle mechanisms and not through such open application of force. One such mechanism is discourse or, more exactly, "discursive practices" (Foucault 100-101).

Foucault's notion of discourse offers a means of dissecting some of the elements of the more inherent dimensions of power relations. He views discourse as the joining of power and knowledge, as "… practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak … Discourses are not about objects, they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention" (Foucault 2). This explains meaning not as something that arises only from language, but also "… from institutional practices, from power relations, words and concepts change their meaning and their effects as they are

deployed within different discourses" (Foucault 2). Accordingly, discourse can be "an instrument, an effect of power, but a hindrance, a stumbling-block, and viewpoint of resistance" (Foucault 101). Thus, one can say that a discourse defines what can be said, who can speak and who must remain silent, in this way defining their being, or as Foucault has said, defining the way persons are constituted as subjects. It is by limiting who can speak, and what can be said that discourse is inextricably linked to power. Power relations also need to create knowledge and discourse in order to "hold good" (Foucault 119). In is this two-way interrelationship between knowledge and power that Foucault Tries to convey in his term "knowledge/power."

Even today persons and groups continue to be identified, and identify themselves, as particular races and/or ethnic groups. While theorizing race and racism, Les Back and John Solomos in *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader* remark:

> One of the more reliable, if depressing predictions about the twentieth century was made by the American scholar W. E. B. Du Bois back in 1903 when he asserted that 'the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour line - the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and in the islands of the sea.' (3)

As Du Bois predicted, what he characterized as "the problem of colour line" - the problematic relations involving persons distinguished, initially, by skin colour as constituting or belonging to distinct races has been a major problem during the twentieth century. According to him, the 'colour line' is an everyday reality based on institutional patterns of racial domination.

Bessie Head's *Maru* focuses on the ramifications of "the problem of the twentieth century." While interpreting the handling of questions of differences between people in *Maru*, Bessie Head herself states in a letter she wrote to Vigne in 1971 that "the major theme is racial oppression" and that she has taken a hard look at it in *Maru*" (Vigne 136). Again speaking of *Maru* in a 1983 interview Head underlined her point when she explicitly stated that " It definitely tackles the question of racialism because the language used to exploit Basarwa people, the methods used to exploit them, the juxtaposition between white and black in South Africa and black and Baswara in Botswana is so exact" (Mackenzie and Clayton 11).

Bessie Head is in a strong position to speak with authority on this subject because of her own racial background, which led to her suffering from racial prejudice in South Africa and Botswana. She was, as a writer, caught up in what Clingman calls the inevitability of "writing in a fractured society" (Starfield 2). Starfield also notes that laws pertaining to residential and social segregation plus

the various censorship acts that made it virtually impossible for a writer to write as anything other than a member of an enforced racial group. Therefore, it is only reasonable to expect that if Head writes, this must remain for her an abiding context. In an interview with Abrahams, Bessie Head expresses the same concern on the question of racial identity:

> Here were people with various shades of brown. Those who looked white, those who looked brown, and those who looked like Indians, and those who looked like Africans. A newcomer to the Cape, I thought I had found the ideal place for my mixed-race soul. But quickly and painfully I learned that if you were not fully grounded in the colour brown, you would have to be excluded from the community's business and be ready to endure insult …. (Abrahams 4)

The thematic development in *Maru* provides a unique version of the politics of race and gender in a postcolonial society and the role of the postcolonial woman in shaping the destiny of her culture. Bessie Head condemns all forms of racial prejudice leading to racial oppression. She recognizes that this evil existed in Africa before the white man started practicing it against people of other "races": "Before the white man became universally disliked for his mental outlook, it was there" (*Maru* 11).

In order to understand more fully Bessie Head's representations of the effect of racial conflict on the identities of the oppressor and the oppressed, it is important to begin with the story of the character that sets in motion: A Maswara (Bushman) gives birth to a girl and then dies. A white missionary's wife Margart Cadmore, is called to the hospital to supervise the dead woman's burial because nobody there wants to handle a Maswara. She sketches the dead woman, and being childless herself, impulsively decides to take the baby and rear her; she intends to prove that environment (the social and the cultural conditions) plays a bigger role in human development than heredity. She gives her own name to the orphan and brings her up to become a teacher and artist like herself. When Margaret qualifies as a teacher, the older woman leaves for England. Margaret goes to the village of Dilepe to take up a teaching post at the school there. During all this time, Margaret suffers from the prejudice the majority feels and express towards her, once she has publically admitted she is Maswara, not a coloured, as everyone imagined.

In order for the younger Margaret Cadmore to achieve the theoretical possibility of a universal identity, "a type of personality that would be unable to fit into a definition as narrow as a tribe or race or nation" (*Maru* 15-16), she has to feel the degradation of belonging to a despised group without, as Olaussen notes, the possibility of rejecting this negative identity (Olaussen 85).

"Maswara" is a derogatory term having the same meaning as "nigger" or "kaffir" in other cultures. According to Bessie Head, this "is a term of contempt which means, obliquely, a low, filthy nation" (*Maru* 31). Racial prejudice can spring from superficial differences, "You just have to look different from them, then seemingly anything can be said and done to you as your outer appearance reduces you to the status of a non-human being" (*Maru* 11).

In the context of *Maru*, difference in physical appearance is of importance. The Masarwa or Bushmen were also abhorred by the Batswana because "they hardly looked African, but Chinese." Because their facial feature looked different, the Masarwa are reduced to the status of a non-human being and could be institutionally declared slaves by the dominant Batswana. The focus on physical appearances becomes socialized into signs used to negate their humanity. The Batswana's understanding of the configuration of difference between people can, perhaps, best be illuminated by Thompson, who in his book entitled *The Political Mythology of Apartheid* (1985), writes, "… the core assumption is that races possess inherently different cultural as well as physical qualities" (69).

Head reveals the lengths to which a dominant, bigoted culture can use its power to define a different, and in the context of *Maru*, a despised racial group as having no point of entry into the dominant culture. Sampson's reference to one of the most insidious forms of domination and oppression-one that is rooted in language and ideology is relevant here. Like the Foucauldian notions of "force relations" and "discursive practices," this kind of domination does not use brute force to accomplish its ends. Rather, domination is accomplished through the construction of the word, "through the very frameworks by which self and other are experienced, subjectivity and self-understandings made known" (Sampson 3). Sampson argues that the distinction between words/ideology and real practice holds for those in positions of power but not for subordinate groups:

> Dominant groups have the material power to make reality fit their ideas:
>
> less dominant groups become the reality the idea suggests. In other words,
>
> for the dominated groups, the idea is the reality. What is said and thought
>
> about them becomes the reality of their lives, because those who have the

> power to say and think also have the power to construct the world in that image. (27)

Indeed, for the Basarwa, the reality that is constructed is one of "castification." Trueba describes castification as "fundamentally an institutionalized way of exploiting one social group … thus reducing this group to the status of a lower caste that cannot enjoy the same rights and obligations possessed by other groups" (30). This castification, marginalization and oppression of subordinate groups is maintained in the power of language which in the dominant public discourse embodies the ideologies of cultural domination and racism.

In the Batswana discourse, the word "Masarwa" more than anything else conjures up a degenerate physical type. Bessie Head claims that the prejudice against "Bushmen" is so strong that it is not unusual to find the Masarwa grouped with wild animals rather than other human races, "In Botswana they say: Zebras, Lions, Buffalo and Bushmen live in the Kalahari Desert" (*Maru* 11).

Bessie Head chooses to make the heroine of the novel a Masarwa, the lowest of the low in Botswana society, in order to reveal how irrational, hurtful and even criminal such prejudice can be. Margaret was born a Masarwa but Margaret Cadmore, a well-educated, cultured white woman who passed on her culture and knowledge to the younger Margaret, adopted her, at birth. Margaret's foster mother's giving the younger Margaret her own English name can be read as a kind of colonization but also as a way of removing the child from the stigmatized position. Through this removal the younger Margaret can be given a new identity and with the proof of her humanity she is then reintroduced as a Masarwa in order to elevate the group as a whole. However, an arbitrary twist of fate-the fact of her being Masarwa by descent prevents the younger Margaret from gaining social approval. Even her education does not save her from the power of racialism and from being ostracized. Pete, the school principal, explains the problem facing him to Seth, the education supervisor:

> I have a Masarwa on my staff. The man Seth whistled softly. It's the Margaret Cadmore woman? He said looking serious. God, this is going raise hell among the Totems here. They're going to blame me, he said. I only look at qualifications. She was top of the class the whole way through …. (*Maru* 41)

Obviously it was Margaret's outstanding educational qualifications that got her the job in the first place. However, in the eyes of Seth and Pete these are less important than Margaret's Masarwa origins. Since racism is a function of power, Pete's attitude to Margaret is, "She can be shoved out" (*Maru* 41).

Certainly there is no place for a Masarwa teacher in Motabeng, where most destinies particularly those of Masarwa were known to everybody and seemed to go without saying. In the eyes of the Motabeng community Margaret is the "wrong" person to be a teacher. As a teacher and artist she disrupts the historically constructed master/slave dialectic of the Motabeng society by effacing their constructed stereotype of the Masarwa as "filthy," "low breed," "slaves who scrubbed other peoples' floors and looked after cattle" (*Maru* 59). For the dominant group, as Driver points out that "identity depends on the definition of the other as subordinate and loathed" (45). Consequently, the children in Margaret's class are immediately coached by her school principal to react with the sense of loathing that is operative in the community's response to her:

> Pete coached a fourteen-year-old boy, and by early Monday morning the Whole class of the Masarwa teacher was prepared for what was to take Place. The only sign they gave of their preparedness, was nervous giggles As they filed into the classroom … they all stared at her with fascination And attention … from a distance their voices sounded like a confused roar: "you are a Bushman," they chanted, "you are a Bushman." It froze the whole school. (Maru 45-46)

This racist attitude is diagnosed accurately by recalling some of Frantz Fanon's ideas on racism in *Black Skin, White Masks*, "It is in his corporality that the Negro is attacked. It is as a concrete personality that he is lynched. It is as an actual being that he is a threat" (Fanon 163).

Pete refuses to give Margaret credit for being honest: he feels she could have pretended that she was coloured, as Pete had assumed. His reaction when Margaret states simply and truthfully that "I am a Masarwa" (*Maru* 40) is one of shock, "The shock was so great that he almost jumped into the air. Almost immediately, Margaret was reduced to an "it." She was no longer a human being: "it" surely had all the appearance of a coloured" (Maru 40). Margaret's self-confirmatory assertion that she is a Masarwa is a conscious effort conceived not only to subvert the master narrative of social injustice but also to reinscribe the

meaning of who she is by redefining the meaning of the group to which she is attached through birth. What Margaret had to achieve was a total revolution in terms of identities firmly based on a hierarchy. Dorothy Driver astutely notes that although Margaret's assertion "I am Masarwa," is a proclamation of ethnic identity, and thus threatens to put her back in a world of labels and stereotypes, it in fact removes her from the chain of signification on which identity conventionally depends, for he does not add the clause used by other groups in their own self-identifications. "At least I am not a ..." (Driver 3). Margaret's acknowledgement of herself as a Masarwa not by positioning an "other" but by placing that "I" in its own space offers her a place beyond the stereotype.

Margaret's declaration of her true identity leads to a revolution in the village of Dilepe. Firstly, she does what the Masarwa are not known to be able to do "They don't look you in the face and say, 'I am a Masarwa'… who had ever said, I am a Masarwa" (*Maru* 44). Secondly, "The near perfect English accent and manners did not fit her looks …" (*Maru* 23). The revolutionary possibility also emerges through Dikeledi no longer accepting the view of the dominant group but taking the humanity of the Masarwa as a starting point. In her argument with her brother, Maru (a respected son of a chief and in line as a powerful leader to become paramount chief), Dikeledi states that "There's no such thing as Masarwa. There are only people" (*Maru* 65). She understands the subjective power of racial prejudice, "You know how stupid racial prejudice is. It can't think beyond its nose" (*Maru* 67).

Maru does have the courage to marry Margaret. He is expected to become paramount chief but he does not want to rule a society of "… petty human hatreds and petty human social codes and values" (*Maru* 67). Maru is committed to principles of equality. By accepting the chieftaincy he would in practice undo all his principles because he would be living as a superior, reinforcing the existing hierarchies. Maru's subversion of the status quo is characterized by his relinquishing of kingship and taking up a position outside of the order of domination. He now begins "secretly and quietly to undo the ties of his birth" (*Maru* 110). Maru's rejection of the power of his own royal class is borne out of his belief in a world "where the human soul roamed free in all its splendor and glory. No barriers of race or creed hindered its activity" (*Maru* 127).

Maru's marriage, which is against social customs, brings, on himself and Margaret, social scorn and exile. A diseased prostitute in Dilepe explained their attitude "fancy" she said. "He has married a Masarwa. They have no standards" (*Maru* 126). From the point of view of the dominant group he is now dead. But when the whole situation is studied from the point of view of the Masarwa it is

not a death but a new beginning, a door opening "on the small dark airless room in which their souls had been shut for a long time" (*Maru* 126).

The novel concludes on a hopeful note:

> People like the Botswana, who did not know that the wind of freedom had also reached the people of the Masarwa tribe, were in for an unpleasant surprise because it would no longer be possible to treat Masarwa people in an inhuman way without getting killed yourself. (*Maru* 127)

By ending the novel on a hopeful note, Bessie Head shows that she is no longer willing to accept racial difference as the instance which would facilitate admittance to universal humanity. Likewise Olaussen argues that "Instead she (Head) envisions a position where racial difference would no longer be significant but would be replaced or reinforced by sexual difference" (83).

The racial stereotypes reflect and are facilitated by power relations in a society. One group will create stereotype about another group in order to control them or justify their power over that group. Beliefs about racism are situated at the intersection of two issues: the social construction of gender and the role of power in structuring gender inequality. As Mohanty states that "Bessie Head's work resonates with the recognition that women writers and writings about women are inscribed in relations of power" (3). In the works of Bessie Head, the problems of racial oppression are not distinguishable from questions of gender oppression, either.

Some of the issues that engage Bessie head's imagination in her novel *Maru* are the ways in which racial, sexual, and class-based oppression are intractably linked within a culture, so that one kind of oppression often leads to another. Lauretis's observation that "black women experience racism not [only] as blacks but as black women" is pertinent here (135). For example, in *Maru*, Margaret suffers both as a member of a subject race and of a subject gender. As noted earlier, when Pete decides to get rid of Margaret, he tells Seth, "She can be shoved out … it's easy, she's a woman" (*Maru* 41).

Embedded within this statement is an explicit male bias which ranges from aggrandizement of masculinity to overt misogyny. This kind of gendered language is deliberately and consciously aimed at keeping women out of the sites of power through the perpetuation of chauvinistic and sexist norms. When issues are posed in this manner, gender becomes socialized into sex differences and problems of sexist hierarchy and unequal power become obscured. Consequently,

the problems of sexual harassment, abuse and unequal access to resources remain unchallenged, marginal issues. Seth's reply is equally couched in the willful, entrenched patriarchal negation of women, "Her qualifications are good. She couldn't possibly have got there on her own brains. Someone was pushing her. We don't know who and they might be important" (*Maru* 41). Seth subtly implies that as a woman, Margaret is inherently an intellectual underling and cannot be expected to excel on her own except from the patronage of a man of influence or that she could have "climbed" into her position through submitting her body to some powerful man in the village.

Of course, men are expected to become Doctors, Engineers, Pilots or Teachers, but if a woman of Margaret's caliber consistently performs top in her class, she is met with disbelief as a freak and made insignificant because of her gender, Gendered racial prejudice thus affords a framework of meaning that forces the burden of proof regarding the ability and worthiness on the Masarwa woman. Margaret finds herself continually having to persuade her school principal and the village totems that she has "earned" her place; any perceived shortcomings on her part undercut not only her reputation but are considered to reflect upon her race and gender as a whole. By contrast, Moleka, an arrogant and philandering heir to chieftaincy is held accountable as an individual but never as a representative of maleness or Batswananess. Within this framework, racial difference is a key organizing principle, implicitly or explicitly preparing understanding for perceptions predicated on racial and gender contrasts.

Bessie Head herself has pointed out that "Black women have a certain history of oppression within African culture … [where] women's problems are rooted in custom and tradition" (Mackenzie and Clayton 15).What is certainly very clear here is that the male has a superior position to the female. In an article entitled "Nationalism and Gender Issues in South Africa," Patricia MacFadden offers the notion that "in all African societies, men … have tended to use their status and influence as social controllers, to gain access to women's bodies" (14). MacFadden argues that this assumption, which is deeply rooted in African patriarchal culture, defines women's bodies as the source of male pleasure as well as the vehicle for the reproduction of male virility.

In *Maru*, both Moleka and Maru perceive women as "prizes," to be acquired and privatized (as lovers and concubines). "They were notorious in Dilepe village for their love affairs" (*Maru* 35). "Their victims exploded like bombs" (*Maru* 35). Although Maru and Moleka are described as having different attitudes and expectations in their treatment of their women, whatever their differences, the result is the same: They emerge as exploitative and show a callous

indifference to the suffering that their philandering causes women, Moleka is "arrogant and violent" with women:

> There was nothing Moleka did not know about the female anatomy … no woman … could resist the impact of his permanently boiling bloodstream. But he outraged them, and horrible sensations were associated with the name of Moleka. Moleka and women were like a volcanic explosion in a dark tunnel. Moleka was the only one to emerge, on each occasion, unhurt, smiling. (*Maru* 35)

On the other hand, Maru, "… often took to his bed with some indefinable ailment. His victims, too, displayed alarming symptoms. The strongest fled as though they had seen a nameless terror. The weakest went insane and walked about the village muttering to themselves" (*Maru* 36).

To conclude, Bessie Head's *Maru* (1971) analyzes the politics of race, power and gender. A critical analysis of Bessie Head's *Maru* identifies the subordinating and the marginalizing tropes that result in silencing of female subjectivities in Bessie Head's protagonists. *Maru* examines the role of cultural and psychological forces in maintaining patriarchal hegemony, which is based upon hierarchy and domination of women rather than equality. Thus, it is between the abstract constructs and the concrete social experiences within which Bessie Head's literary imagination subsists. By using Foucault's theories, Besie Head's *Maru* shows the intersections between racism and sexism and how these constructs are implicated in the conception and construction of power. The present study argues that racial and sexual difference due to their arbitrary applications be viewed as dynamic and contested, rather than fixed.

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