



Universidad
Zaragoza

Undergraduate Dissertation

Trabajo Fin de Grado

BESSIE HEAD'S *THE COLLECTOR OF TREASURES AND OTHER BOTSWANA VILLAGE TALES*:

QUESTIONING GENDER AND VIOLENCE

Author

M^a Pilar Álvarez Soriano

Supervisor

M^a Pilar Royo Grasa

Faculty of Arts / Degree in English Studies

2019

Table of contents

1. Introduction.....	3
2. Gender as Catalyst for Exile.....	6
3. Violence as Oppressive and Liberating Force for Women.....	15
4. Conclusion.....	21
5. Works cited.....	23

1. Introduction

In 1948 the National Party of South Africa implemented the apartheid system, which meant that the segregation that already existed between the different racial groups in the country was made legal. This also meant that a series of laws followed to reinforce that “separateness”: the 1949 Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act and the 1950 Immorality Amendment Act prohibited interracial marriages; the Group Areas Act of 1950 relocated the population, giving 80% of the land to whites—who only constituted about a 14% of the population. In like vein, the Separate Amenities Act of 1953 allotted public areas such as parks, or zoos for the whites only, and the Suppression Communism Act of 1950 suppressed any kind of dissent (Schaffer and Smith 57-58). Furthermore, the government controlled what was being published through censorship laws, such as the Newspaper and Imprint Registration Act of 1971 and the 1974 Publication Act (South African History Online). Regarding education, the Bantu Education Act in 1953 “further disempowered black South Africans by replacing mission schooling ... with a system of inferior education” through which they could only become labour force (Schaffer and Smith 58).

Bessie Head was born in 1937, in post-colonial South Africa and lived under the apartheid system until 1964. That year, due to the oppressive measures implemented by the government, she opted for the exile in Botswana where she remained for the rest of her life. Her condition as an exile determined her point of view towards life and towards her fellow human beings, which is reflected in her works. As is discussed in a BBC radio programme on Bessie Head’s work, her nature as an exile goes further back from her life in Botswana, since her exiled status came to her with her birth (McElvoy 00:22:40-00:23:00). As she was the daughter of an interracial marriage, she was exiled from South Africa’s society. She was never allowed to fully belong to them, as Farred

argues, “[f]or [the coloured] community, exile is a double-edged sword, the domestic and diasporic blades cutting equally with the sharpness of disempowerment” (78). This complex exiled identity is further examined by Huma Ibrahim’s analysis on gender as another exilic force.

“Exilic consciousness” is a term used by Ibrahim to describe the subversive sense of identity that develops out of the tension between one’s desire to belong, and yet, distance from one’s maternal country. In Ibrahim’s view, “[t]he state of exile is often imposed on a subjectivity torn between a sense of not belonging as well as a desire to belong to one’s gender, linguistic group, community, and nation. The consciousness arising out of this ambivalence is the basis of the exilic consciousness” (2). As she goes on to argue, this consciousness initiates a subversive resistance in the individual: it is not just a desire to belong, but also an urge to create a new identity outside the definitions assigned to you by society (Ibrahim 2). This idea becomes more complex when talking about women: “[b]eing a woman and a South African, Head was engaged in two kinds of exile: one from patriarchal institutions and the other from the apartheid state” (Ibrahim, 2). According to Ibrahim, Head’s exilic consciousness is essential in her narrative, as she often draws from personal experience to create her characters and stories.

Exile and race are intertwined for Bessie Head, and it is curious to see the approach she takes to race in her writings. “Racism can function as the exilic force that disrupts a sense of belonging,” Ibrahim claims (97), especially in the apartheid state, where every non-white was marginalised from society. Although race is present in Head’s works, it sometimes seems to be a slippery issue for her to discuss. As Ibrahim points out in relation to two of Head’s novels: “whereas she does not wish to deal with race as a problematic issue between Whites and Blacks in *When Rain Clouds Gather*,

she deals with Black on Black racism somewhat evasively in *Maru*” (110). Head seems to show a reserved disposition towards the subject. She left South Africa due to its unjust and rigid apartheid system to find in Botswana a similar kind of racial discrimination, but this time between blacks. The complexity of this situation might have caused her to adopt an uncomfortable attitude towards the subject of race.

While she seems to be tentative when dealing with race and racism in her works—or at least she places it in the background—she is certainly interested in gender matters. Head’s female protagonists struggle to belong to their societies and communities in different ways. She brilliantly explores the relations women have with other women, men, money, and the like, in *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales* (1977). This collection of short stories compiles instances of village life in Botswana in which women face different kinds of discrimination and violence. This dissertation seeks to analyse how this discrimination and violence exile women from society, physically and emotionally. For this purpose, this dissertation will offer a comparative analysis of the narrative and stylistic devices used in three short stories in the collection, namely: “Snapshots of a Wedding”, “The Special One”, and “The Collector of Treasures”.

2. Gender as Catalyst for Exile

According to Ibrahim, “if you belong to a minority you are exiled from national and gender discourses” (122), and this is what Head explores in her short stories. She deals with women’s situation as a minority group within their communities, and how their gender determines the discrimination they suffer. This is the centre of “Snapshots of a Wedding” and “The Special One”, in which the female protagonists have to face the consequences of their social position as women in an oppressive system. Gender oppression and exile are related to one another by issues of unbelonging to the dominant group, since both the oppressed and exile become aware of their status as outsiders (Ibrahim 90). In these short stories, this awareness awakens on women a tension they have to fight between their desire to belong and their desire to re-define themselves.

“Snapshots of a Wedding” tells the story of Neo, a modern woman within a traditional community that judges her for being different. She is going to marry Kegoletile, a man who has got both Neo and her rival Mathata pregnant. The latter is Neo’s counterpart: she is traditional and attends to what is expected from her. Both women are compared by different members of their community, favouring Mathata over Neo. As Osei-Nyame Jnr discusses, modernity is a source of uneasiness for the community when it comes from women, and this short story seeks to question those traditional conceptions about women’s morality used against Neo (5). Her values are rejected by her community, and it is for this reason that they try to re-introduce her into society—and therefore its values—through the ceremonies of the wedding. At the end, Neo becomes Kegoletile’s wife and seems to renounce to her distinct character in favour of tradition and belonging.

The ominous atmosphere created at the very beginning foreshadows the ending of the short story for Neo after she marries: “Wedding days always started at the haunting, magical hour of early dawn when there was only a pale crack of light in the horizon ... The cool and damp of the night slowly arose in shimmering waves like water” (Head 76). The scene depicted is hostile, cold, almost threatening: the hour when the wedding is going to take place seems to “hunt” the couple who is going to be united; especially the bride. The dark of night is replaced by “a crack of light” which is insufficient for her to see her future clearly. The rest of the paragraph is likewise filled with unwelcoming phrases, such as: “distorted fluid forms”, “fluid, watery forms” and “dim light”. This is backed by an indirect comparison made by the narrator between an ox “who was a rather stupid fellow and unaware of his sudden and impending ending as meat for the wedding feast, [which] bellowed casually”, and “the beautiful ululating” of the female relatives of the bride, Neo (Head 76). Like the ox, they are unaware of the bleak future that awaits Neo once they hand her over to her husband.

In this short story the issue of gender is mainly dealt with through the figures of two women, Neo and Mathata, set in opposition to each other. Mathata is everything their society expects from a woman, up to the point that the families of the marrying couple wants Kegoletile to marry her instead of Neo. They detest Neo because having an education has made her arrogant and inconsiderate towards others. As her education is her greatest gift—since it allows her to get a husband as well as a job as a secretary: “[she] had endless opportunities” (Head 77)—her feeling of superiority is her greatest fault. That is why her family is “anxious to be rid of her” (Head 77). “Botswanan society,” Osei-Nyame Jnr observes, “ is one in which men are generally permitted to be more sociable and public, while women are domesticated and restricted to the home or so-called women’s duties” (5). As Neo deviates from this norm due to her education—

she leaves the domestic sphere—she is the target of everybody’s criticism and disdain. Therefore, being an educated woman, the short story suggests, is what alienates her from her kin, and what metaphorically exiles her.

Education, and, more particularly, women’s education, is one of the key subjects of the collection. Educated women could work as typists, book-keepers, or secretaries as is the case of Neo (Head 77). However, while she considers herself superior, her community and her own family talk behind her back, and her husband, Kegoletile, chooses her only because “[h]e thinks that since she is as educated as he is they will both get good jobs and be rich in no time” (Head 77). His marrying one woman and not the other has to do merely with money. Ironically, the narrator comments: “it didn’t pay a man these days to look too closely into his heart. They all wanted as wives, women who were big money-earners” (Head 78). In other words, women were regarded as prices, as mere objects to possess and from whom to benefit themselves.

Although both Neo and her husband have the same education, they are not judged under the same parameters, since she is nonetheless a woman. Education is only seen as a threat if it comes from women, since Kegoletile is not criticised as she is. Moreover, this point is especially strong because the harshest criticism comes from Neo’s own family. One of her aunts decides to scare her so she can correct “the familiar careless disrespect which went with her so-called, educated, status” (Head 78). The aunt tells Neo that everyone hates her, and doubts that “Kegoletile should marry mad-mannered rubbish like [her]” (Head 78). This is clearly seen in the comparison made by the narrator between Neo and Mathata: the latter is “a very pretty girl with black eyes like stars; she was always smiling and happy; immediately and always her own natural self. [Kegoletile] knew he was marrying –something quite the opposite” (Head 78).

Neo is the opposite of what a woman should be according to her family, but it is not until her aunt scares her that she seems to change her mind. At the beginning of the story she appears not to mind about other people's opinions, or care at all about belonging. In fact, her name is another element that sets her apart from the rest, since all of the characters' names in the short story are African except hers, which has a Greek origin and means 'new'. This is important because her figure is associated with modernity, her wedding is described as "modern" (Head 76), and she is constantly compared with Mathata who represents tradition. As was mentioned above, it is only after considering her aunt's words, and the possibility of losing Kegoletile, that she changes and acquires an exilic consciousness. Her exilic consciousness makes her aware of her unbelonging, at the same time that awakens on her a desire to belong which enters in conflict with her modern personality. Therefore, with this new desire to belong she reaches the climax of her struggle between belonging and defining herself against the current.

At the end of the short story, two girls start 'ululating' and dancing in front of the bride—as the tradition dictates—and is at this point that Neo seems to forget about her education and embraces the old above the new: "Neo, who had all this time been stiff, immobile, and rigid, bent forward and her shoulders shook with laughter" joining with the laughter of the rest of the guests (Head 80). Through this performance, Neo seems to have become one of them, and to have thus overcome her struggles. Nevertheless, this conclusion does not imply that tradition is favoured in the story, as there is certain ambiguity when Neo and Kegoletile's great-aunts bring to light the marital hierarchy that still prevails in society. They insist on her husband's superiority and on her consequent docility: "beware, that at all times, he is the owner of the house and must be obeyed" (Head 79).

The story significantly ends with one of Neo's aunts kneeling before her and repeating "[b]e a good wife! Be a good wife!" as she pounds the ground with her fists (Head 80). This ritual the aunt performs is an attempt to make Neo less "modern" and instil in her the importance of tradition. The fact that the aunt beats the ground with her fists following the rhythm of her chant, adds a violent and aggressive tone to the ending that recalls the sinister atmosphere of the beginning. She "pounded the ground hard with each clenched fist on either side of the bride's legs", entrapping Neo physically and symbolically (Head 80). Tradition, the short story suggests, acts as a tool of confinement for women, reinforcing their submission and inferiority. This ambivalence towards tradition, as something valuable, while also oppressive, has to do with Head's exile to Botswana. According to Ibrahim, when Head first arrived in Botswana she felt certain nostalgia for "Old Africa," what village life inspired on her, while at the same time she rejected tradition completely (7). To quote Ibrahim, "Head's desire to recapture 'Old Africa' was unexpected because she had always insisted on seeing "tribal" Africa as detrimental to the progress toward African 'modernity'" (16). Neo can be said to epitomise this contradiction, as she tries to fight tradition at the beginning of the short story, but finally is attracted to it.

"The Special One" is different from "Snapshots of a Wedding" in that the former is narrated in the first person singular whereas the latter is narrated in the third person singular. Here the narrator is also the protagonist of the story, which turns it into an autodiegetic narrator. She is a newcomer in the village who starts working as a teacher. This may lead to think that the story has some autobiographical references that have to do with Head's own experience as a teacher when she first arrived in Botswana as an exile. Evoking Head's experience, the autodiegetic narrator of the story states: "I was a newcomer to the village at that time and teaching at one of the primary schools" (Head

81). Significantly, the protagonist does not have a name, which might be taken as a symbol of her new identity yet to be constructed. Once settled, the protagonist meets Gaenametse, a woman who divorces her husband, and takes a young boy as her lover despite the community's disapproval. She becomes a pariah, until she decides to marry again at the end of the story. Even though it is the protagonist with whom the author shares the experience of being a newcomer, it is with Gaenametse with whom she shares her experience of being exiled.

In this story, women's situation is more openly discussed and criticised since it is not just the narrator commenting on it and leaving hints for the reader to gather, as was the case of "Snapshots of a Wedding," but it is the characters themselves who talk about it. In the very first and opening paragraphs, a teacher with whom the protagonist works, Mrs Maleboge, says to her that "women are just dogs in this society" (Head 81). She makes such a bitter comment due to the injustice she suffered when, after her husband's death, a court allowed her husband's brothers to take the cattle Mr Maleboge had left for her. Having no inheritance, she is forced to work as a teacher at the age of sixty, "when she should have been resting" (Head 81). Later on, when the protagonist meets Gaenametse and learns about her problems she states: "[s]he did not have to add that women are just dogs in this society. I believed her by then" (Head 83).

Gaenametse is the most interesting character of the story, and she is especially relevant since the title of the story refers to her: "I am his mosadi-rra.' 'What does that mean?' I asked. 'It means I am the special one,' she said" (Head 86). She is a friend of Mrs Malegobe and, like her, she has an "eternal problem" (Head 83). The problems both women face have to do and are caused by men. For Gaenametse, it is her husband who is unfaithful to her, and who is making her terribly miserable, as some of the descriptions the narrator makes imply: she has the "swaying footsteps of a drunk", "[s]o

acute was her misery that her whole body was shaken by sobs”, “[s]he’s at the point of breakdown” (Head 82-83). The story centres on her, and how at different points she is a victim of men. She embodies the repression of women: when a woman is married and her husband is unfaithful to her, it is her duty to accept it; when they divorce the woman is the one to be blamed for. When single and old she is not allowed to seek love, or at least not in the form of sex; and if a woman falls in love again it is to marry and start the cycle again.

Breaking this cycle is what exiles Gaenametse from her community. Nevertheless, although she is rejected by the rest, she still counts with the protagonist to be her friend, who as an outsider is not as prejudiced against her as everybody else is. In this way, female bonding is key in the story. Mrs Maleboge and Gaenametse are also very close and old friends, and the latter supports herself on the former. When both pray for their problems to be solved, there is a deep connection between them and, when they finish, they become “relax and calm” (Head 83). The narrator describes this scene by declaring how moved she is “by the kindness displayed” between them (Head 83). Furthermore, both women are united by a piece of clothing they share. At one point, when Gaenametse is already divorced from her husband, she starts wearing Mrs Maleboge’s white kerchief tied around her head, as her friend did, in an attempt to appear respectable.

Now that she is divorced, people in the village are talking about her. She has become such an outcast, that a gossipy neighbour warns the narrator against talking to her. Gaenametse’s husband is the one that ensures her bad reputation. He claims that she wanted to have sex with him while she was menstruating, and for the village people that is “a dangerous thing and against [their] custom”. They believe that “many women have killed men by sleeping with them during that time” (Head 84). That belief is so strong—

and the man's claim the only one valid—that “the court ruled that he'd better be parted from such a terrible woman” (Head 83-84). Yet, the protagonist is immune to these prejudices and remains loyal to her friend. Although the autodiegetic narrator comments that “all primitive societies have their holy fear of a woman's menstrual cycle; during that time she is dirty, and a source of death and danger to the surroundings in general”, she nonetheless ends up defending Gaenametse by saying that “where [she] come[s] from the men usually slept with the women when they were menstruating so it was all right for [her] to talk to Gaenametse” (Head 85). Through her ironic comments she both dismisses the community's beliefs as ridicule and defends her friend.

Despite the fact that Gaenametse is trying to readapt into society, or at least to appease those gossipy neighbours that are against her by wearing the white kerchief, she is quite content with her life: “she did not care a damn”, and she shows a “complacent smile” and talks about the “dead body of her marriage” (Head 84). The reason to this happiness is that she has sex with younger men, as most of old women do, because that is the age when women cannot get pregnant. This is a secret in that society, “[n]o one suspects, that is why they look so respectable in the day time,” Gaenametse says to her (Head 84). Here, the short story makes a strong comment against hypocrisy: women had to keep in secret their sexual desire because it was unrespectable, whereas men could have all the women they wanted, even if they were married. Gaenametse suffers the consequences of the dichotomy between public and private, and learns about how this social organisation excludes women from the public sphere and from its privileges (Osei-Nyame Jnr 5). As inhabitants of the private sphere, women's affairs are confined to the house and when they try to go public, as Gaenametse does, they are punished.

Gaenametse becomes aware of this situation when she meets a young man with whom she sleeps walking by the hand with a young girl. When he ignores her

completely, she realises that she is “only good enough to visit at night” (Head 85). It is at this moment that Gaenametse understands that his rejection mirrors the rejection of the rest of the community, and through this encounter she has an epiphany about how life really works within the oppressive society she lives in. In this way, she realises that she is exiled from her society and gains her exilic consciousness, which arouses within her the conflict created by her inner desire to be one of the group, and her desire to rebel and stand apart from the crowd. At the end, Gaenametse really opens her eyes to see that what she thought was happiness and freedom was only an illusion. She is after all an outcast and an exile to her society, and she is only recognised by men when they want sex.

Again, the only way to become an individual to the eyes of the society represented in Head’s story and to truly belong to them is by getting a new husband, that is to say, by assuming and following the norms allotted to her by the conventions. Therefore, as Neo in “Snapshots of a Wedding”, Gaenametse ends up surrendering to her desire of belonging. The very last comment the narrator makes at the end of the story might imply that Gaenametse is again where she was at the beginning of the story: i.e. married to a husband who is unfaithful to her. As is said in the story, “the old days of polygamy are gone and done with, but the men haven’t yet accepted that the women want them to be monogamists” (Head 86). However, in spite of the fact that Gaenametse and Neo decide to give up their true self in favour of being part of their communities, it should be born in mind that they are very strong women who, at some points of the stories, have become subversive characters through their actions. As Ibrahim points out, subversion and resistance occur when these women refuse to accept the identities given to them by society, and create their own (10).

3. Violence as Oppressive and Liberating Force for Women

Schaffer and Smith argue that “women experienced the everyday violence of the apartheid and the environment of resistance differently [from men]” (68). Although they talk about the apartheid in this specific case, the same situation can be extrapolated to any patriarchal system that regards women as inferior beings to justify their ill-treatment, to the extent that rape, sexual abuse and the like become tolerated. Through this kind of violence women are alienated in a brutal way, symbolically, emotionally and physically, by the mere fact of being women. As a result of this, Head creates a wide range of complex and traumatised women estranged from their social circles and family units. Her short story “The Collector of Treasures” explores the ambivalent function of violence. As will be further developed, it exiles its female characters when they are the victims, but liberates them emotionally when they become the perpetrators.

“The Collector of Treasures” tells the story of Dikeledi. Her husband abandoned her and their children for another woman, and as a single mother of three she struggles to make a living to maintain her family. She is repudiated by her relatives because they fear “that since her husband had left her she would become dependent on them for many things” (Head 93). She is already an exile from her own family, as well as from society. She has no real friends until the Thebollo family comes to the village. She creates a strong bond with the married couple, Paul and Kenalepe, especially with the wife. As is said in the short story, “[i]t was not long before the two women had going one of those deep, affectionate, sharing-everything kind of friendship that only women know how to have” (Head 94). One day, Garesego, Dikeledi’s husband, becomes jealous because he thinks Paul and Dikeledi are lovers, and decides to go back home to claim possession of her. Dikeledi foresees that he will get aggressive and violent with her, and, in a desperate attempt to remain free from him, she kills him. The short story begins with

Dikeledi's arrival to prison after the murder, and how she makes friends with other women who also killed their husbands, and it ends with the murder scene.

The title of the story refers to Dikeledi. Amidst the tragic events of her life she manages to find good friends whom she considers to be "treasures": "She had filled her life with treasures of kindness and love she had gathered from others" (Head 101), "she had always found gold amidst the ash, deep loves that had joined her heart to the hearts of others ... She was the collector of such treasures" (Head 91). Thus, similar to the female bonding portrayed in "The Special One", here Dikeledi has two essential friends that help her get through extremely hard situations. Both women save Dikeledi from exilic limbo and "adopt" her as one of their own, giving her a home where she is happy, both in the village and in prison. Kenalepe is there for her when no one else in the village does: "The two women did everything together ... they were forever together" (Head 94). Kenalepe even offers her to have sex with her husband, as if he were a gift one friend makes to the other: she says to Dikeledi, "I can loan Paul to you if you like." Dikeledi replies to Kenalepe's offer by saying: "I cannot accept such a gift from you" (Head 96-97). Moreover, when she is taken to prison, the couple takes her children as their own.

Once she is in prison, Dikeledi meets Kebonye who immediately makes her feel welcomed: "Dikeledi nodded to her new-found friend, Kebonye: 'Thank you for all your kindness to me,' she said softly. 'We must help each other,' Kebonye replied ... 'This is a terrible world. There is only misery here.'" When the wardress comments with irony "[s]o, you killed your husband, have you? ... You'll be in good company. We have four other women here for the same crime" (Head 88), what Dikeledi does not know yet is that, in fact, she is going to be in very good company with women who understand her. Ibrahim explores this issue of camaraderie referring to it as "women's

talk” or “women’s dialogue.” In Ibrahim’s words, this dialogue “is about their own exile identities and commences as a result of the emerging consciousness about the sociopolitical and historical spaces that women uninhabit” (Ibrahim 173), i.e. their exilic consciousness. Through this dialogue, women share their experiences in their society realising that they do not belong to it, while finding refuge in each other.

Dikeledi is a very interesting character, starting with her name. She was named after her mother’s tears when her husband died. As regards Dikeledi’s name, Kebonye remarks: “[h]ow is it that you have such a tragic name?” (Head 89). Indeed, her tragic name matches her tragic life. Six years after her father’s death, her mother died. She was raised by her uncle and was his and his children’s servant. She was mistreated and looked down by all of them. She thought that by getting married she would get away from her uncle, but her life after that was not happier. Nevertheless, she proves to be a very strong woman, because, although her husband abandons her, she manages to earn her own money and to become economically independent. She is very talented for crafting, and the members of her community approach her to buy the things she creates, no matter how much they disapprove of her. Kebonye admiringly praises her skills by saying that she is a “gifted person” (Head 90). As the narrator describes her, “[s]he had soft, caressing, almost boneless, hands of strange power.” As Dikeledi puts it, such were the hands with which she “fed and reared [her] children. [Her] husband left [her] after four years of marriage but [she] managed well enough to feed those mouths” (Head 90).

With the same powerful hands with which she creates things and with which she raised her kids, she kills her husband: “[w]ith the precision and skill of her hard-working hands, she grasped hold of his genitals and cut them off with one stroke” (Head 103). Special attention should be paid to the gesture she makes with her hand once she

has killed him: “‘I have killed him,’ she said, waving her hand in the air with a gesture that said-well, that’s that” (Head 103). In this scene, there is a reversal of the roles victim-victimiser, the dominant-the submissive: Dikeledi adopts a dominant and powerful attitude, the one of the victimizer—“[s]he stood and watched his death anguish with an intent and brooding look, missing not one detail of it” (Head 103)—, while Garesego becomes the victim. As is narrated in the story, he “lay, unguarded and defenceless, sprawled across the bed on his back ... still he slept on, lost to the world” (Head 102). This reversal of roles reflects a symbolic redemptive act from Dikeledi’s part, who manages to balance the uneven power relations between men and women existing in Botswana and which Garesego embodies through his attitude towards his wife (Osei-Nyame Jnr 6).

In fact, it is male oppression and their abusive behaviour towards women that makes them react in such a desperate way. As Ibrahim points out, “[p]erfectly sane and good women are driven to near insanity through mental and physical abuse. Abused women often take recourse in the most extreme way” (183), and of this Dikeledi and Kebonye are the best examples. Violence acts as yet another exilic force for women, since it positions them in a place of marginality; in the case of the female convicts, both as victims and as victimisers. Dikeledi’s exilic consciousness is raised when Garesego decides to go back home. She realises she cannot avoid encountering him: “If she wrote back, don’t you dare put foot in the yard I don’t want to see you, he would ignore it” (Head 101). She has to face the conflict between her desire to belong to her village’s community, and thus do as the rest of the women did—that is, submit to their husbands—or she can defend herself from him, risking total isolation from the world—not only emotional, but also physical—by being put into prison. She finally opts for the

second alternative: “[she] could find no way out except to face him ... At last, at peace with herself, she went into her hut and wrote a reply” (Head 101).

Their commitment of murder turns Dikeledi and her fellow prisoners into the outcasts of their community. They are carried away from the village life, marginalised and repudiated by everyone. The prison is “a whole day’s journey away from the villages of the northern part of the country”, and as they passed the village in the police truck “[t]he everyday world ... seemed indifferent to the hungry eyes of the prisoner who gazed out at them” (Head 87). Nevertheless, paradoxically, her imprisonment brings Dikeledi certain liberation. As Kebonye says and the narrator subsequently comments: “It’s not so bad here” (Head 90), “the day passed pleasantly enough with the chatter and work” (Head 91). Also, the narrator’s comment that “she had reached the end of her destination” (Head 88), may lead the reader to interpret this final destination as the place where she is finally going to belong, and where she will find her new and final home.

As Osei-Nyame Jnr argues, Dikeledi—together with the other female prisoners—is a subversive character that takes part of a “revolutionary project of political non-conformism” that seeks to redefine the conventional gender roles within that society (9). The reader tends to sympathise with Dikeledi, and wants her to break free from her husband and from the unfair system that allows things like this to happen to women. Therefore, by making us identify with Dikeledi, the narrator is making the reader question the meaning of justice. Not even the wardress that takes Dikeledi to her cell seems to judge her. She is getting used to women killing their husbands as, she claims, it is “becoming a fashion these days” (Head 88). Her tone is ironic and light, free from censure. Probably, the fact that she is also a woman makes her aware of the injustices suffered by women, and enables her to sympathise with Dikeledi.

Furthermore, her comment that it is becoming a “fashionable” thing may also signal an awakening on the part of women. This awakening seems to imply the end of women’s submission to men, and the beginning of their liberation from patriarchy and male oppression. To quote Ibrahim, their actions become “a collective message from the women to the men of the community” (184).

This message the characters of Head’s short story convey goes hand in hand with some of the critical comments the narrator does. In her way, she also challenges traditional gender roles and hierarchy very openly: “[t]he ancestors made so many errors and one of the most bitter-making things was that they relegated to men a superior position in the tribe, while women were regarded, in a congenital sense, as being an inferior form of human life” (Head 92). Through the use of this critique added to the identification with these female heroines, “Head is coming to terms with the exiled position that women inhabit and experience in most societies” (Ibrahim 172). Head presents, explores, and analyses women’s experience as they are exiled by patriarchal societies and as they try to fight them whilst, at the same time, they try to belong to them (Ibrahim 198).

4. Conclusion

Head's narrative style is very characteristic in that her position as narrator reflects her position as exile. She narrates from the outside, only to identify herself or sympathise with exiled characters within the story, as is the case with Neo, Gaenametse and Dikeledi. The three of them feel the consequences of exile as a disruptive force in their lives. The unsettlement they feel as a consequence of their exilic consciousness—they realise they do not belong to their societies—makes them struggle between their desire to belong, and their thriving propensity to rebel. Although the three women react in different ways to that struggle, in the process, they prove to be strong women who in their own way subvert the conventions and social norms of their communities.

In “Snapshots of a Wedding,” Neo is the only woman with an education, wanting to position herself on equal terms with her husband Kegoletile. She resists the social conventions that are allotted to her as a woman, until the moment the social pressure becomes too strong. In spite of the fact that she seems to surrender in favour of tradition, her education is something no one can take away from her, and education always means power. In a similar way, Gaenametse struggles with her community in “The Special One”. Gaenametse ends up marrying again a man who—the short story suggests—is unfaithful to her and, like Neo, she re-enters society and becomes part of her community again. Nevertheless, she was determined to divorce her first husband, even though she knew the consequences that decision would carry. Furthermore, once she was marginalised and exiled from her community, she allowed herself to enjoy her sexuality with younger men while living in a society that condemned precisely what she was doing. Finally, it is Dikeledi, the protagonist of “The Collector of Treasures”, the only character of the three who opts for exile rather than belonging. Dikeledi not only suffers for her condition as a woman, which exiles her for not following her society's

gender and social conventions, but she also suffers from her abusive husband. Her desperate circumstances make her take desperate measures, and although she is punished for it by being imprisoned, she liberates herself from the kind of oppression she most feared—that is, her husband’s possession of her.

As this dissertation has shown, through these main characters, Head explores women’s situation in Botswanan village life, and how gender and violence act as exilic forces for them. Gender and violence are questioned not only by the short stories’ narrators, but also by the characters themselves. This questioning seeks to awake those who read the stories, to make them aware of these issues, and to motivate them to change things without taking into consideration what society dictates. Although the short stories are located in the specific setting of Botswana, the themes the author explores can acquire a more universal meaning since this kind of injustice does not exclusively happen in Botswana, or South Africa—the places where Head witnessed and experienced this kind of oppression—but all over the world.

5. Works Cited

- Farred, Grant. "The Poetics of Partial Affiliation: Arthur Nortje and the Pain Origin". *Midfielder's Moment: Coloured Literature and Culture in Contemporary South Africa*. Westview P, 2000, pp. 55-80.
- Head, Bessie. *The Collector of Treasure and Other Botswana Village Tales*. Waveland P, Inc, 2014.
- Ibrahim, Huma. *Bessie Head. Subversive Identities in Exile*. Virginia UP, 1996.
- McElvoy, Anne. "Bessie Head. Rwanda Representation and Reality". *Free Thinking*. BBC Radio 3, 4 Dec. 2018. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m0001dt8> Accessed 6 Mar. 2019.
- Osei-Nyame Jnr, Kwadwo. "Writing Between 'Self' and 'Nation': Nationalism, (Wo)manhood and Modernity in Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales*." *Journal of the Short Story in English*, 2002. <https://journals.openedition.org/jsse/277> Accessed 16 Jun. 2019.
- Schaffer, Kay, and Sidonie Smith. "Truth, Reconciliation, and the Traumatic Past of South Africa". *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 53-84.
- South African History Online, Towards a People's History*. 2000. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/> Accessed 7 Mar. 2019