

# Dikeledi's revenge: A reading of Bessie Head's "The collector of treasures"<sup>1</sup>

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That's not where I am cut.  
– John Wayne Bobbitt

## Abstract

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*This essay focuses on the title story of Bessie Head's collection **The collector of treasures** and pays particular attention to the role of the phallus in the text. The female protagonist's cutting off of her husband's genitals is seen as a de(con)struction of phallographic society. The subsequent incarceration of Dikeledi is an attempt by patriarchy to reaffirm its control over her.*

## 1. Introduction

On the morning of June 23, 1991 Lorena Bobbitt entered the bedroom where her husband, John Wayne Bobbitt, was sleeping. She then took his penis and cut it off with one quick slash of an eight-inch carving knife. She ran out of the apartment and tossed the severed appendage out of the window of her car. This deed is described by Kim Masters (1993:118) as "perhaps the ultimate, escalation in the battle between the sexes". Lorena Bobbitt's conduct is also seen as "an act of perfect vengeance against an oppressor". The main reason for having committed this deed was "marital sexual assault", although Lorena Bobbitt afterwards said to Masters (1993:149) that she "can't say exactly why she cut John the way she did" and that it has now turned into a nightmare for her.

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1 This article is based on research undertaken for my Ph.D.: "The feminised hero – feminist perspectives on men in the novels of Bessie Head".

Following the court case and the subsequent acquittal of Lorena Bobbitt Camille Paglia (1994:419) describes the deed as "a cruel and barbarous act, and a cowardly one, by attacking her husband while he was asleep". Yet, she also regards this deed equivalent to the revolutionary act committed by Charlotte Corday when she killed Marat in the bath. Paglia (1994:420) draws the conclusion that this deed is "a wonderful demonstration of the darkness, irrationality and turbulence of sex relations and the inadequacy of the normal victimization rhetoric of feminism". There is a lack of understanding the complex, psychological relationships between the sexes, something which the Feminist movement does not want to admit and that is why Paglia calls it "a love-hate relationship of ambivalence".

In 1977 the South African writer Bessie Head published her first collection of short stories called *The collector of treasures* – prior to this she had published three novels: *When rain clouds gather* (1966), *Maru* (1971) and *A question of power* (1973). Arthur Ravenscroft (1976:175) has remarked that the three novels form a trilogy because they are "very closely related to one another, and the third in many ways helps to explicate the first and second". Craig MacKenzie (1989:19) describes Head's novels as "intensely private, remarkable works" and all her works of fiction "are fashioned in some way from the author's experiences". Whereas the first three works are attempts to come to terms with her position as an alien in Botswana society, the collection of short stories is a definite attempt to focus on the community at large, a period described by MacKenzie (1989:35) as her "socially-oriented period".

The title story, "The collector of treasures", deals with a situation very closely related to the saga of John and Lorena Bobbitt. The story is set in post-colonial Botswana and deals with the life of Dikeledi Mokopi and her estranged husband Garesego Mokopi. He has left her and their three children and she has to take care of them, while he has set off in his pursuit of sexual gratification with other women. Dikeledi gets on very well with her neighbours Paul and Kenalepe Thobolo. Garesego, however, is jealous of the relationship between Paul and Dikeledi. When Dikeledi is in need of money to pay for their eldest child's school fees, she invites Garesego over to her house to discuss it. He is under the impression that she wants to have sexual intercourse. Dikeledi, however, takes a kitchen knife and cuts off his genitals. For this deed she is imprisoned for life. In jail she befriends three other women who have committed the same offence.

Taiwo (1984:198-9) summarises the essence of *The collector of treasures* as follows: (1) a woman plays the leading role in each of the stories, (2) it focuses on the status of women in a modern African society and (3) the village becomes a microcosm of traditional Africa at large. Femi Ojo-Ade (1990:81) examines

the collection and concludes that the male-female relationship is primary in the text because "the community cherishes life and the continuity of the race ... Bessie Head takes sides with the woman, the silent partner whose story must be told". Concomitant to that Craig MacKenzie (1989:16) describes "the hardship women of the village experience" as the main focus of the stories.

In her discussion of *The collector of treasures* Susan Gardner (1989:231) alludes that this collection "has a discernible feminist content" because it focuses on "the insistence that women have suffered systematic social injustice because of their sex". Following a discussion of Dikeledi's deed Bessie Head mentioned towards Susan Gardner (1989:14) that the story was so shocking to hear: "I've never heard of a man being murdered by his genitals being slit off. But it showed the deep psychological trauma the woman had lived with".

The question of whether Bessie Head is a feminist writer is somehow problematic. She herself refuted the claim that she is a feminist writer. The problem of a definition of feminism is also discomfiting. Cecily Lockett (1993:330) delineates the following as the common denominator of *any* feminist project.

The common denominator is the concept of gender: women are subject to control and the oppression on the basis of their gender. This is something that functions to unite women across divisions of race or religion; the common experience of oppression: based on gender identity.

Mohanty (1991:4) contemplates the relation between feminism and the Third World and concludes:

The very notion of addressing what are often internally conflictual histories of Third World women's feminisms under a single rubric ... may seem ludicrous – especially since the very meaning of the term *feminism* is continually contested. For, it can be argued, there are no simple ways of representing these diverse struggles and histories.

A central metaphor within psychoanalytic and feminist literary criticism is the phallus and concomitant to that are words such as "phallic", "phallocratic" and "phallogocentric". Toril Moi (1985: 179n) explains *phallogocentrism* as "a system that privileges the phallus as the symbol or source of power". Following Lacan one should always realise that "phallus" does not merely refer to the penis itself but it is also a symbolic construct signifying male dominance in society. Jones (1985:83) points out that since women lack the phallus, which she regards as "the positive symbol of gender, self-possession and worldly authority", they not only occupy a negative position in society but also within man-made language.

Masculine desire dominates speech and men as the phallus-bearers thus also dominate language and discursive utterances.

Teresa Dovey (1988:373) makes the point that there is an absence of the phallus in women and as a result of that men "project their own sense of loss, or lack, onto women, who become 'negatives' in relation to the positives constituted by men, symbols of absence providing proof of men's absence". Men feel that there is this constant lack in the lives of women because the latter do not possess the transcendental signifier of masculine superiority.

The following theses inform my reading of the title story from Bessie Head's *The collection of treasures*:

- Garesego Mokopi represents the phallocratic misogynist.
- Dikeledi Mokopi deconstructs African phallocracy by dismembering her husband.
- Paul Thebolo signifies the Other, the liberated man.

Other aspects of the text will also come under scrutiny but these are the three main theses under discussion. Central to the contemporary reading process is the notion of multiple readings and therefore this analysis ought to be regarded as *one* possible reading of the text which definitely does not aim to be the final reading of it. My interpretation is open to new readings of the text.

## **2. Discussion**

### **2.1 Garesego**

Garesego Mokopi is the representative of the phallocratic supremacy of men in society. He is also one of the men described by the narrator as "evil" and similar to a dog who "imagined he was the only penis in the world and that there had to be a scramble for it" (p. 91). Femi Ojo-Ade (1990:82) describes these men as the worst in Head's stories because they "make babies like machines and turn their backs upon the poor women". Ojo-Ade (1990:83) regards Garesego as someone who has "all the essentials to feed his hunger for sex and alcohol".

The narrator in the text blames this on both the colonial system and the code of conduct amongst the ancestors. Because the colonial system never prepared the people for independence and the administration of the country, the post-colonial man becomes "a broken wreck with no inner resources" and the women become "an inferior form of human life" (p.92).

In pre-colonial societies women played an important role as “an agricultural producer within her husband’s homestead; ‘fertility’ meant that she had to produce children whose labour would, in time, be used for the benefit of the homestead” (Guy, 1990:39). During the colonial period everything changed and men often had to perform domestic chores in the colonial homes – tasks that were usually that of the women. De Marigny (1990:18) finds that African male writers often betray in their writing “a yearning for the pre-colonial patriarchal past where he was definitely king as father, husband and ruler ...”. Within contemporary white society black women often play the role of substitute mother and within their own communities the sons who are supposed to fend for the household have either been killed in detention or are in exile. De Marigny (1990:72) thus describes the role of modern African women as follows: “Modern African women are thus obliged to take over traditionally male roles in the present even when men do not credit them with so doing”.

In post-colonial Botswana, the setting of Head’s short story, the men are confused because they are unfamiliar with the changes and responsibilities they have to adhere to. That explains why Ngugi wa (1993:90-91) describes post-colonial societies as perfect replicas of colonial practices. The new government is not used to a democratic culture and therefore only allows one viewpoint, that of “the ruling regime”.

Garesego’s life is to return home and have sexual intercourse with Dikeledi. That explains the reason for his letter:

Dear Mother, I am coming home again so that we may settle our differences.  
Will you prepare a meal for me and some hot water that I might take a bath.  
Gare.

Not only does he try to be affectionate (he calls himself “Gare”) but he plays on her emotions by calling her “Mother”. He immediately places her in the inferior position of a caring and supporting wife who will look after his needs. Dikeledi interprets the letter as an expression of his sexual desires, namely that he is “coming home for some sex” (p. 101). The only way in which he feels that he can manipulate Dikeledi is to act as if she is his maternal superior and he is like the prodigal son returning home. Perhaps he tries to force her into the position of an Oedipal mother; the strong maternal power.

In contrast to his “Mother” she opts for “Sir” when she answers his letter:

Sir, I shall prepare everything as you have said.  
Dikeledi.

From her letter it seems as if Dikeledi accepts his demand without questioning it. She is, however, aware of the real intention behind the words. “(P)repare”

is an ironic choice of words in this case, because she also plans her final act. The patriarchal association of women with the preparers of food in the kitchen is thus undermined. The castration of Garesego Mokopi was thus a premeditated deed of vengeance. Kenalepe had seen Dikeledi sharpen the knife on the afternoon prior to Garesego's arrival (pp. 101-102) and she detected "a final and tragic expression on the upturned face of her friend".

Chetin (1989:135) comments on the reasons why Dikeledi had decided not to leave her husband:

She couldn't walk away from her husband for she had children to care for, and the forced compromise she ends up with – a life in prison for murdering him – hardly suggests a solution ... Dikeledi, named after her mother's tears, symbolizes the struggle of a people who have a long way to go before the cycle of violence can be replaced by a spiral of peace.

The women suffer even more than the men in this new post-colonial society. The change in society and its structure has also brought about a false sense of liberation to the men. The new signs of masculine pride such as jobs in the administration, money and power have resulted in fickle anarchy. Men are like a proverbial pack of wolves on the prowl and women suffer because of this. This attitude fits Paglia's (1993:63) remark, namely that "male lust and male aggression are two uncontrollable forces of nature in society". Years of colonial repression now result in sexist bestiality. Garesego is an example to support this because he has substituted his marital relationship for a free-ranging, carefree chase of women.

Once he has entered Dikeledi's yard Garesego reaffirms his position as phallocratic man and he scans the environment for the presence of his rival, Paul Thebolo. There is no challenge of his phallic supremacy because Paul Thebolo is in his own yard. Garesego, however, feels that he could reaffirm his erstwhile position as the patriarch of the family when he enters his own yard.

The cutting off of Garesego's genitals is an attempt by the oppressed woman to deconstruct the phallocratic society in which beastlike men dominate. Garesego's anguished bellows are signifiers of his loss of phallic supremacy and the end of male rule. The beastlike cry substitutes language. He is no longer the supreme representative of the Law-of-the-Father and the language of patriarchal dominance.

Dikeledi does not want to miss "one detail of it" (p. 103) because she has to experience her newly-established position as phallic ruler – she is in possession of the substitute phallus (the kitchen knife). Her position emulates the same responses people had following the Bobbitt case: "It's a universal no-no"; "it

has to send a chill through every man in the world” and “Men feel emasculated by the story while women feel empowered” (Masters, 1993:118).

## **2.2 Paul Thebolo**

Paul Thebolo is in direct contrast to Garesego Mokopi. He is the mythical man in Head’s writing, the so-called new African man. Driver (1990:246) describes the new African community inhabited by men such as Paul Thebolo as one marked by “gentle, loving, responsible men, with the standard gendered role divisions otherwise unchanged”.

Sarah Chetin (1989:135) is of the opinion that Paul is perhaps named after the Christian St. Paul who was “a symbol of charity and visionary hope”.

Paul is responsible for taking care of Dikeledi and her family once they have been left alone by Garesego and he is also willing to take care of her family when she has to go to jail: “You don’t have to worry about the children, Mma-Banabotho. I’ll take them as my own and give them all a secondary school education” (p. 103).

As a male member of this patriarchal society Paul is also a bearer of the phallus and inevitably personifies phallic power and supremacy. He, however, differs from Garesego in that he does not oppress women in order to affirm his position; he is gentle, kind and caring. He impressed Dikeledi immediately when she met him. He was so “peaceful as a person that the sunlight and shadow played all kinds of tricks with his eyes” (p. 93). He is in the traditional role of patriarch who has to care for his family but not to such an extent as was the case with Garesego.

Apart from this Paul is also sexually liberated and innovative. The description of his sexual prowess and his ability to surprise his wife every night (p. 94) contrasts him to Garesego who has a totally different opinion about sex and the sexual satisfaction of women. For Paul Thebolo sexual intercourse means something pleasurable to be enjoyed by both husband and wife, whereas it is just the opposite with Garesego. He needs a different woman every night in order to satisfy his lust. He sees sex as a display of masculine power, domination and the oppression of women.

Kenalepe, Paul’s wife, is even willing to share him sexually with Dikeledi (p. 98). In this new idealised African community which Head tries to establish in her writing the man becomes a sexual object shared by women for sexual pleasures. Ezenwa-Ohaeto (1990:129) describes the female characters inappropriately as “strong women who attempt to redefine their lives, who break acceptable social codes of behaviour, become outcasts, and who are ultimately destroyed for this act of controlling their personal/biological selves”.

This perspective undermines the gist of Head's story. The women in this story are definitely not "destroyed" because they have gone against sexism in society. Ezenwa-Ohaeto's perspective in itself turns out to be sexist too. He does not want women to fight traditional assumptions about sex and sexuality.

According to Camille Paglia (1990:10) sexual objectification is "the highest human faculty": "Turning people into sex objects is one of the specialties of our species". This is a paradoxical statement because men turn women into sex objects merely to force them to ascribe to patriarchal notions of submission, control and sexist oppression. In the case of Kenalepe these assumptions are transferred onto the male body as a sex object and it is an example of the deconstruction of sexual objectification. The male body is gazed upon as a pleasurable object. Kenalepe gains phallic power because she is now also in possession of a substitute phallus, the glorified body of her husband which she wants to share with other women.

Paul is a liberator to Dikeledi. He is the one who has helped to rescue her from an existence "that had been ashen in its loneliness and unhappiness" (p. 91).

### 3. Conclusion

The final question, however, comes to mind: what significance would Dikeledi's imprisonment then have? One feels some sense of dissatisfaction similar to that at the end of *Thelma and Louise*. These two characters have also bravely fought against patriarchal dominance. At the end of the film they "commit suicide" to escape arrest. Was the whole enterprise a futile attempt at liberation? This is contended by Belling (1992:49) who writes:

What does one do with a female hero once she has discovered that her heroism is at odds with the social order that dictates happy endings? The monster killed by Thelma and Louise is a rapist, the rest of the film traces their exhilarating empowerment as outlaws, and the final freeze-frame confirms that ... no satisfactory resolution is available ... Their liberation remains imaginary.

In prison Dikeledi is once again the victim of another form of oppression. She finds herself walled in by the prisonhouse of language which silences her revolutionary deed. The prison serves as a metaphor for a society that does not tolerate a female phallic voice. Indeed: no satisfactory resolution is available.

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