

Reconstructing Masculinity in the Postcolonial World of Bessie Head

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A MAJOR CONCERN IN both of Bessie Head's short story collections—*The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales* (1977) and the posthumously published *Tales of Tenderness and Power* (1990)—is the reconstructing of masculinity in the postcolonial context of her adopted home, Botswana. This concern with reconstructing paradigms of African manhood is, of course, not unique to Head's short fiction. In her appealingly optimistic first novel *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969), Head offers one portrait of the new African male in Makhaya. In addition, the eponymous hero of *Maru* (1971), along with Maru's rival in love, Moleka, extends Head's gallery of new Africans. Finally, what can reasonably be termed a preoccupation with revising the masculine occurs outside her fiction in her study *Serowe: Village of Rain Wind* (1981).

In contrast to many other feminists who believe that women will never achieve total liberation until they separate themselves from their oppressors, Head was intent upon directing her fiction toward the reimagining of the masculine as a first step toward developing a new vision of relationships between women and men. She was committed to a mode of fiction that might transmit a new construction of the African male, or what occasionally seems a reconstruction of an older mode of masculinity. For Head the development of this new vision had a particular urgency for Botswana in 1966 because her adoptive homeland had just become an independent nation. As she surveyed the impact of generations of colonial domination on African men and the opportunism licensed by the postcolonial atmosphere in Botswana in the years following its independence, she was struck

by the evidence that colonialist oppression and postcolonial "freedom" have had equally devastating effects on Botswanan men and therefore on Botswanan women as well.

About one-third of the way into the title story of her collection *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales*, the narrator offers a brief history of the changes that men in Southern Africa have undergone in the century and a half since their traditional tribal culture came under the domination of European imperialism. This narrative contextualizing of the story helps to explain how men like Garesego, the husband of the viewpoint character Dikeledi, erupted onto the postcolonial scene as expressions of an especially exploitative construction of masculinity. Speaking of men like Garesego, the narrator indicates: "In the old days, before the colonial invasion of Africa, he was a man who lived by the traditions and taboos outlined for all the people by the forefathers of the tribe. He had little individual freedom to assess whether these traditions were compassionate or not." The narrator continues: "The colonial era and the period of migratory mining labour to South Africa . . . broke the hold of the ancestors. It broke the old, traditional form of family life and for long periods a man was separated from his wife and children while he worked for a pittance . . . to pay his British Colonial poll-tax." Accordingly, the African male moved from a status of primacy in the tribe to a status of both separateness and inferiority: "He then became 'the boy' of the white man and a machine-tool of the South African mines" (91-92).

The high hopes of independence in 1966 turned out to be yet another "affliction" for the postcolonial male, and even more so for the women he encountered. For the first time, African men were offered new and higher-paying jobs at home in Botswana. The reuniting of the family and a modest affluence offered the promise of reconstructing the family. However, as independence forced postcolonial women and men to fall back upon their own resources personally, many of these "new" men found themselves wanting. Decades of deracination frequently left the postcolonial man "a broken wreck with no inner resources at all." With the disappearance of restraints once imposed by long-lost tribal customs and later by colonialist rule,

men like Garesego experienced a "freedom" in their behaviour that often led to an even greater oppression for women, especially as many of the "new men" began to imitate the debauchery they had learned from their old colonialist masters: "It was as though he was hideous to himself and in an effort to flee his own inner emptiness, he spun away from himself in a dizzy kind of death dance of wild destruction and dissipation" (92).

As a visionary of what she hoped could be a genuinely New Africa in touch with its traditions, Head found much that was useful in Southern Africa's precolonialist past. Nowhere is that service of a tribal past clearer than in the first tale in the *Collector* collection. "The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration," as she entitles that first tale, is Head's attempt to give the Talaote tribe a history. As she indicates, they had "forgotten their origins and their original language" in their continuous migrations and had "merged and remerged with many other tribes" (1).

The Talaote came into being with the death of the chief Monemapee who had given his name to his tribe. Head focuses our attention on this matter of naming. As she tells us in the opening sentences of the story, the tribe takes its name from their chief: "Long ago when the land was only cattle tracks and footpaths, the people lived together like a deep river. In this deep river which was unruffled by conflict or movement forward, the people lived without faces, except for their chief, whose face was the face of all the people" (1). As Maxine Sample suggests, this phrase "without faces" implies "the collective identity and the sense of communalism that existed at an early period of the village's history" (313).

Monemapee's oldest son and successor, Sebembele, qualifies as Head's paradigm of precolonial masculinity through his demonstration of the superiority of tenderness over power. Incited by his envious brothers, one part of the tribe refuses to accept Sebembele as chief unless he relinquishes his father's young wife, Rankwana, with whom he has fallen in love and fathered a child. Rankwana stakes her claim on Sebembele's "tenderness," asserting that she and their son, Makobi, quite literally cannot live without Sebembele's acknowledging his loving responsibility for them.

Those who want to reclaim Sebembele from what they consider the debilitating effects of tenderness speak for a construction of masculinity whose devastation Head documents in *Serowe*.¹ His councillors, who seem most responsible for a conservative construction of masculinity, speak out against Sebembele's love for Rankwana, "saying that he was unmanly; that he was unfit to be a ruler." Even those who are still sympathetic² to him ask: "Why are you worrying yourself like this over a woman, Sebembele? There are no limits to the amount of wives a chief may have, but you cannot have that woman and that child" (4). Because they see their chief as "paralysed" the tribe forcibly remove Rankwana along with Makobi from Sebembele's house and return her to her father so that she can be quickly married to another man. Rankwana's father reminds her of the trouble she has caused him and adds: "Women never know their own minds and once this has passed away and you have many children you will wonder what all the fuss was about" (4).

By valuing the love of Rankwana and their son above the power and privilege of his father's position, Sebembele reconstructs himself as Head's paradigm of the New Man, the male who places the tenderness conventionally associated with the feminine *above* the power conventionally associated with the masculine. As Craig Mackenzie reminds us, Sebembele's decision to leave the tribe, if that is the only way he can keep his wife and son, has consequences for those who choose to follow him (36-37). To return to Head's statements in the opening paragraph, Sebembele initiates "a movement forward" forcing the people who follow him to discover their own faces as individuals. In this context, the "deep river" of collective consciousness is "ruffled" into a temporary individuality by conflict arising from a man's love for a woman.³

That Sebembele was a vision of the future for which the tribal past was not yet ready becomes clear in the closing sentences of the story, where the narrator defines the word "Talaote" as "you can go." "Talaote" is the word Sebembele was told when he said one last time "Makobi is my child." The word is virtually all that Sebembele's tribe knows of its origins. Sebembele becomes for these stories an "ancestor," a forerunner of the New Man Head envisions, a man who forms a new tribe to learn from his commitment to "tenderness."

The ending of this tale which opens *The Collector of Treasures* collection credits Sebembele as an almost incredible paragon of compassionate masculinity in ancient Africa. Head herself was well aware of the temptation to "romanticize" that tribal past, perhaps in large part because it was the original Africa that colonialism sought to displace. In her footnote to "Deep River," she indicates that the "story is an entirely romanticized and fictionalized version of the Botlaote tribe" (6). At the same time, Sebembele is not unique, and elsewhere among the tales we find further expressions of Head's attempts to construct masculine paradigms within that tribal past.

"A Power Struggle," for example, constructs a political context dramatically similar to the conflict between Sebembele and his two younger brothers. This "Power Struggle" pits another younger brother, Baeli, against their father's heir Davhana. It is interesting that, like Sebembele, Davhana seems "destined to rule." His father acknowledged that Davhana was heir apparent by turning over to his older son the "sacred rain-making apparatus." More important, Davhana is tall, lithe, strong, handsome, and good-humoured. With such qualifications, he clearly merits the otherwise humorous titles of "Beautiful One" and "Great Lion" that his people give him. The malicious and devious Baeli, on the other hand, seems to have been dwarfed by living in his brother's shadow and is determined to supplant his father's choice before his brother can be installed as chief. Thus, Baeli astounds the entire tribe, but particularly Davhana, by stepping forward at their father's grave to turn the first sod, a right reserved to Davhana as a confirmation of his right to rule.

The "Power Struggle" that ensues from Baeli's startling usurpation of his brother's rights and responsibilities plays itself out in large part as Head's depiction of radically different constructions of masculinity. As she indicates, the tribe has no real power in the settlement of the dispute. That power resides with the inner circle of the dead chief's family and councillors. Much as Davhana may have been the previous chief's heir, the tribe as whole is content to allow the power struggle to produce the stronger candidate for chief, the man with the greater passion to lead. In this context, Baeli, despite the suggestions that he might

prove to be an evil leader, clearly seems to *want* the power more than his brother does.

The narrative dramatizes Davhana's growing recognition of his difference, as he experiences the pain of lost innocence.

His personality radiated outwards, always reaching towards love and friendship. His brother's personality turned inwards into a whirlpool of darkness. He felt himself being dragged down into that whirlpool and instinctively he turned and walked off in his own direction.

(74)

Davhana's dilemma is perhaps the oldest moral conflict ever confronted: how to deal with evil without oneself becoming evil. Head seems also to be rehearsing Hamlet's conflicts, especially as Hamlet turns Fortinbras into a paragon of conventional masculinity—the ideal leader who acts decisively by foregoing Hamlet's obsessive concern with discovering the best alternative. Borrowing from the title of the collection in which this tale appears, Davhana as potential leader seems the less likely of the brothers to succeed because he has too much “tenderness” to survive the impending life-or-death struggle with a “brother” whose naked and cynical pursuit of power will destroy Davhana morally, if it does not first destroy him physically.

Head complicates her construction of masculinity by staging the encounter between her hero Davhana and the old wise man who tells Davhana that he is indeed a “Beautiful One” in his acts of tenderness toward others. “These very gifts can be a calamity in a ruler” (75), the sage tells him, because no ruler can succeed without looking into the darkness of the human heart and understanding, at least intellectually, the “jealousy” of those with fewer “natural gifts.” The old man's final word is a message toward which the tale is moving: “You will soon find out the rules of life, Beautiful One,” the sage concludes. “You will have to kill or be killed” (76). Davhana proves the sage wrong—for the time being, of course—when he escapes his brother's assassination attempt and becoming a refugee. He achieves power without relinquishing his tenderness when his tribe “votes with their feet” to join him and leave Baeli with few followers.

Head had made clear at the outset that this tale was to be a political fable. The narrative credits the “beautiful dream” of a

time when "the law of the jungle or the survival of the fittest" might give way to a universal wish for "the power to make evil irrelevant." The opening paragraph of "A Power Struggle" ends with these assertions of faith:

All the people of Southern Africa had lived out this dream before the dawn of the colonial era. Time and again it shed its beam of light on their affairs although the same patterns of horror would arise like dark engulfing waves. (72)

The last paragraph stresses the insight dramatized by the tale:

With the dawn of the colonial era this history was subdued. A new order was imposed on life. People's kings rapidly faded from memory and became myths of the past. No choices were left between what was good and what was evil. There was only slavery and exploitation. (77)

Davhana is central to Head's myth of a precolonial past, for he represents her aspiration to believe in the irrelevance of evil as part of a revisioning of what turns out to be an ancient construction of masculinity. Refusing the sage's options of kill or be killed, Davhana, like Sebembele, offers Head's clearest expression of faith in a manhood constructed from grace, generosity, kindness, and caring—in short, the "tenderness" of her title. Yet another tale of tenderness in the face of a malicious abuse of power is apparent in "A Period of Darkness."

Head contextualizes the events in this "Period of Darkness" by indicating that the end of this "Period" was 1823, the year the reign of Chief Motswasele II came to an end. The narrator offers what amounts to a brief lesson in precolonial political history: "Although people were always prepared to make obeisance to a hereditary ruler, the tradition of rulership and its relationship to the people was a sacred one. It was regarded that a ruler only existed because there were people to rule" (78). In one sense, Head is providing a gloss on "A Power Struggle," the story which Gillian Stead Eilersen, the editor of *Tales of Tenderness and Power*, positioned just before "A Period of Darkness." The narrator goes on to explain that within this pre-colonial political structure the role of the chief was "that of a father governing a vast family with many problems, so that in reality a chief had to be born with a heart which bleeds or invent one along the way as every human

problem or difficulty was placed before him" (78-79). As in her depiction of Davhana in the earlier story, Head seems intent here on emphasizing the context of traditionalist, precolonial Africa for her construction of masculinity. Indeed, "A Period of Darkness" exists as a story because like literature in general it finds its material in a deviation from the story-less stretch of generally enlightened rulership, interrupted by the ugly tyranny of a Motswasele. "He was the sort of ruler people had rarely encountered and initially a phenomenon almost impossible to deal with" (79).

That difficulty results from the chief's exploitation of his "fatherly" role. We are told that "in tradition people regarded themselves as the property of the chief" (79). Just as historical periods other than this "period of darkness" generated no stories, the "darkness" of this story is made ominous by the concealment of horror, that is, hysteria and mad laughter reign over the community because the menace of imminent death has moved Motswasele's increasingly brazen depredations into the realm of the "unspeakable." All the people sense that their ruler is a murderer, a thief, and a defiler of their homes; however, these "unspeakable" evils persist because no one knows quite how to speak out against them.

The story focuses on one man, Leungo, who finds a grimly eloquent means of speaking the unspeakable. The Chief has developed an attraction to the perverse pleasure in the "unspeakable" appropriation of other men's wives—a perverse pleasure because it depends on the husband's impotent acknowledgment that his home has been "defiled." When Leungo's friends attempt to send messengers to warn him not to return from a hunting trip until the Chief has completed his defilement, the maniacal Motswasele intercepts the messengers so that it falls to Leungo's wife Keeme to warn him upon his return, "You cannot come in! The Chief is here!" This is exactly what Motswasele has come for: "the Chief experienced an immense pleasure at that point." Everyone expects Leungo simply to "disappear" into some nearby village along with other husbands with whom the Chief has had his "immense pleasure," husbands who have "faded their lives into a quiet oblivion" (80). Leungo, as every-

one knows, was not like all the others, however, and his "retreat" was the shorter route of suicide.

Head dramatizes the aftermath of Motswasele's latest act of tyranny by allowing Leungo's hanging body to be discovered by a shepherd-boy whose hysteria "shattered the nervous system of the village." Leungo's mute response to the unspeakable horror perpetrated against his home is the more powerful because, as the narrator informs us, suicide was virtually unknown among this people. When Keeme joins her husband in suicide, and their children disappear overnight, the household is swept clean of its possessions by the Chief and his sycophantic supporters. Leungo and Keeme become icons of nobility martyred by the Chief's depravity. Indeed, the people lovingly endow Leungo's hunting bag with the power of his nobility, making it a fetish for heroic resistance to the unspeakable. Furthermore, the dead man and woman are mutely celebrated for what Motswasele has destroyed in his people: "The home of the man, Leungo, and his wife, Keeme, was renowned for its warmth, peace and order. Due to the contentment in the home both husband and wife often had an abstracted look in their eyes. They wanted nothing beyond what they had" (81). Once again, Head centers values in the couple, whose nurturing love for each other and for their children is made possible through this older construction of masculinity in which the man has power only because of his tenderness. It is the "courage of his tenderness," to rephrase D. H. Lawrence,⁴ that allows a Leungo to establish the limits of what a man can live with—or without.

Head's desire to reconstruct masculinity within the context of a precolonialist past reshaped by her admittedly romantic imagination is evident in other "Tales of Tenderness and Power." In one hauntingly beautiful tale "The Lovers," Head takes her readers back to "those dim dark days when young men and women did not have love affairs," or, to be more precise, when the young had their spouses chosen for them by their families. When "the lovers" discover each other, Tselane is attracted to Keaja because his speech represents the combination of tenderness and power central to Head's construction of masculinity.

Indeed, it is through his speaking, not his acts, that Keaja draws Tselane away from the paths sanctioned by their people.

His is a variety of the "unspeakable" diametrically opposed to Motswasele's. Keaja violates the tribal taboo against children's discussing their elders under whose absolute control they live until their marriages have been arranged. The narrative reveals the conflict in Keaja between a traditional past in which the tribe represents one's elders, or "parents," on the one hand, and Head's own forward-looking notion of individuality. As in "Deep River," Head emphasizes the alien quality of individuality within the group consciousness supported by tradition: "There was no way in which he could voice a protest against his society because the individual was completely smothered by communal and social demands. He was a young man possessed by individual longings and passions . . ." (92). The narrator attempts to play fair to both sides of this conflict, reminding her contemporary readers that these lovers operate in a traditional, religious context where sexuality had to be regulated by the group because of its belief in the interconnections of human sexuality and fertility in the natural world: "Failure to observe the taboos could bring harm to animal life, crops and the community." She continues: "It could be seen then that the community held no place for people wildly carried away by their passions, that there was logic and order in the carefully arranged sterile emotional and physical relationships between men and women" (93). Thus, the lovers must remove themselves by dying, or perhaps figuratively "dying" to the community which cannot support such "individuality" without radically reorganizing itself. Once again, however, it is Keaja's unconventional construction of masculinity which surfaces in his love for Tselane, a love which urges him to abandon home and community in yet another variation on Head's notion of "retreat" to save oneself and the loved one.

From these stories set in Southern Africa's colonist period, Head moves closer to the present. One story from the last days of colonial rule, "Property," makes another substantial contribution to Head's reconstruction of masculinity. In one sense, "Property" revisits issues in "The Lovers." In "Property" traditional concepts of marriage are disrupted when a new husband refuses to treat his bride as property. This unnamed, "modern" husband is Keaja's heir in his desire to be his wife's "lover." To the new wife,

this behaviour represents deviation from the conventional construction of masculinity, a mystery she can explain only as madness or, more surprisingly, as a "womanliness" in her husband which she blames on his mother who coddled him.

The new wife fears that she will disappoint her father's expectations of her as a married daughter. If conventional husbands abuse their wives flagrantly enough, custom permits the wives to seek refuge in their former homes; in order to get their wives back the husbands must pay reparations—the standard price being "one beast." What is the new wife to do when her husband does not beat but instead asks her if she is tired from her labour. How is she to "provoke the necessary quarrel with this soft, unmanly man?" The narrative even flirts with a conventional "Freudian" analysis of the husband: he has grown up under the influence of his mother, the men in his family having gone off to the big cities to work and to get themselves killed off. As a result, the new husband has accumulated much "property" in the form of cattle he has inherited from dying relatives.

When the wife succeeds in provoking the "necessary quarrel" by laughing derisively at "his odd gentle fashion" of tenderness, the husband's new, more positive construction of masculinity can be understood by the wife only as a radical *lack* of masculinity. The plot moves dangerously close to farce when the husband indicates he has no desire to have her back and the strategy of seeking reparations by plotting a separation almost backfires on the wife's family. Only the news of her pregnancy facilitates a reconciliation. But having to pretend to be a "proper," conventional husband eventually overburdens the man who escapes to the city where he too is killed.

The paradigm of male "tenderness" is not lost, however, for the second half of the story offers a kind of magical restoration of the man in the form of his son Mbuya, whose name means "he-has-come-back." The name is apt, for Mbuya represents not only his father who "has-come-back" but also Sebembele, Keaja, and all the other forerunners who valued tenderness over power. Even before he confronts his own version of his father's marriage problem, Mbuya asserts his individuality by informing his family he is intent on gaining an education, an outrageous notion

because he has all the wealth his father's cattle represent. Mbuya must threaten to impoverish himself, and his family, by slaughtering all the cattle so that he will *need* an education, before he has his way. Education only delays the confrontation with having to marry, however, for when he returns at age twenty-six his family has already arranged his marriage. Mbuya is his father's son, however, and he asserts his intention to choose his own wife, a woman who will not be his "property." Choosing his own wife is so vital to Mbuya that he would gladly abandon the power inherent in property, thus qualifying himself as Sebembele's heir.

Once again, Head reconstructs a masculine paradigm from a tribal past as yet untainted by colonialist denigration of African manhood and from a notion of individuality that cannot accord with a kind of communal consciousness steeped in custom and tradition.⁵ This model of manhood offers a rare combination of tenderness and power for men in conventional heterosexist contexts. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that *real* power is synonymous with tenderness. If a woman such as Mbuya's mother cannot free her sensibility of the past to value her husband's power of tenderness as something other than the "unmanliness" defined by patriarchy it is *she* who loses the opportunity to transcend outworn constructions of masculinity *and* of femininity as well. In the end, Mbuya's mother—perhaps three decades too late—recognizes that her son's smile in imagining "a magic life [the elders] would never know" may be replicating her husband's smile when he watched her as a young "woman who walked like the grass swaying in the summer wind."

Several stories are set in the years just before and after Botswana gained its independence. Head frames the powerful story "Life" within just that political context. The story opens: "In 1963, when the borders were first set up between Botswana and South Africa, pending Botswana's independence in 1966, all Botswana-born citizens had to return home" (37). Head chooses as her viewpoint character one of these returners, a young woman, ironically named Life, who moved with her parents to Johannesburg seventeen years earlier when she was ten. After their deaths, she stayed on supporting herself as "a singer, beauty queen, advertising model, and prostitute" (39). This catalogue

of her activities indicates quite clearly Head's perception of how the Westernized and patriarchal postcolonial nation of South Africa has engendered Life: to be a woman is to be an object to be consumed by male desire.

Life returns to the colony teetering on the brink of what Head represents elsewhere as a fall into an independent, postcolonial state. Obviously, Life has no prospects for supporting herself as a singer or model in her native village, and not surprisingly she becomes the village prostitute. The narrator scrupulously frames Life's activity, however, within the persistence of a precolonial past. This framing is crucial to the story and ultimately to the construction of masculinity as well as femininity in this soon-to-be postcolonial nation. "What caused a stir of amazement was that Life was the first and the only woman in the village to make a business out of selling herself. The men were willing to pay her for her services," we learn. The narrative proceeds to delineate how Life's victimization by colonial oppression establishes a difference in the community:

People's attitudes to sex were broad and generous—it was recognized 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).

In this way, the older culture's wisdom in legitimating sexual love outside socially authorized relationships is supplanted by an importation of Westernized commodification of sexuality. Masculinity has been reconstructed not only as the pursuit of sexual gratification but as the perverse power of participating in Westernized consumption of the woman's body as commodity. Life's sexuality has value because its purchase violates the notion that love cannot be bought.

Shortly after Life's return, another evidence of Botswana's movement toward an ambivalent "independence" is literally *constructed* in the village; it takes the form of its first hotel and pub. "It became Life's favourite business venue," we are told, but not for long because "one evening death walked quietly into the bar. It

was Lesego, the cattle-man" (41). Ezenwa-Ohaeto is correct in drawing our attention to the essentially tragic framework of Life's story when she asserts: "The relationship between the woman known as Life and the man Lesego has all the trappings of impending tragedy, for Lesego has the deadly aura of city gangsters" (125). The story, however, points us toward the sense that this is Lesego's tragedy as well as Life's.

Lesego is one type of the new African man, "respected and honoured" because of the wealth he has acquired as a businessman in the new consumer culture. "He was one of the most successful cattle-men with a balance of R7.000 in the bank"—a kind of parody of the "bottom-line" of Westernized constructions of masculinity. Unlike Garesego in "The Collector of Treasures," Lesego plays no villain's role; indeed, the narrator introduces him as "a kind and tender man." Similarly, the narrator makes clear that Life is not a "bad woman." Their problem is mutual misrecognition: "But they looked at each other from their own worlds and came to fatal conclusions—she saw in him the power and maleness of the gangsters [from the Johannesburg streets she recently left]; he saw the freshness and surprise of an entirely new kind of woman" (41-42). It is important to Head's construction of masculinity in Lesego that his description includes that key modifier "tender." Indeed, she seems to be moving toward a notion that such tenderness can operate only in the context of the "power and maleness" Life finds attractive in Lesego in contrast to the village men who "all had sheepish, inane-looking faces" (41).

Since the narrator has revealed at the outset that Lesego will literally be the death of Life, it comes as no surprise that their marriage ends in her murder. Marriage changes Lesego's life very little. As Head will make clear in "The Collector of Treasures," the usual construction of masculinity always privileges male over female whether the patriarchal structure is colonialist, postcolonialist, or even precolonialist. In "The Collector of Treasures," the narrator reminds us: "The 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." The narrator continues: "To this day [following Botswana's independence], women still suffered from all the calamities that befall an inferior form of human life" (92). Thus, when Lesego discovers that Life has returned to prostitution during his absence on business this "new man" feels he is justified in tracking her down and stabbing her to death while her "client" bears witness in horror to Life's murder. Because Lesego coolly executes Life and just as coolly waits in his house for the police, the village is convinced that the murderer will "hang by the neck." They tell him, "It's a serious crime to take a human life" (45). All are proved wrong, however, by the white judge who draws upon his own Westernized construction of masculinity to mitigate Lesego's offense. "This is a crime of passion," he judges "sympathetically." The "extenuating circumstances," however, cannot exonerate Lesego and he must pay for his crime with five years' imprisonment. What is obviously central here is the legacy of colonialism in the sexist notion of a "crime of passion," despite every evidence of the murderer's cool premeditation. As we shall see in "The Collector of Treasures," women cannot commit "crimes of passion" because such crimes are the province of men alone. In this context, women are too "irrational" as a matter of course to be overcome by "passion." Or, more tellingly, men are constructed as "owners" who have exclusive rights to their "property," including the right to destroy what they cannot hold onto.

Even if Head had not focused attention on "The Collector of Treasures" by using its title for the whole collection, there is little doubt that the story would have been its centerpiece. "The Collector of Treasures" is important because it brings together many issues with which Head has been preoccupied, especially the need for a new construction of masculinity as the basis for hope that women and men might build new relationships out of the destruction produced by colonialism. As Nigel Thomas points out, "the arrangement of the stories contributes to their meanings" (95). Indeed, by positioning "The Collector of Treasures" as the second-to-last story, Head ensures that this story gains impact as one to which the collection has been leading.

Like its forerunner "Life," "The Collector of Treasures" offers its reader no hope that the woman who is the viewpoint character

can escape a tragic end. Just as the first paragraph of the earlier story informs us in an almost matter-of-fact manner of the "murder of Life," "The Collector of Treasures" begins with Dikeledi's imprisonment. From the outset, Head makes clear that Dikeledi is one of many African women convicted of murdering their profligate husbands. What has pushed these women toward such desperate acts to free themselves from bad marriages is the recent deterioration of heterosexist relations in postcolonial Africa. Indeed, Dikeledi's tragedy was based on an actual story told to Head by the family of the emasculated husband, a story by which she was "profoundly shocked," according to Craig MacKenzie.⁶ From this one act of emasculation, Head generates a second for another character, Kebonye, and adds three other women who also killed their husbands in various undisclosed manners. Clearly she wants to insist that Garesego, whom Femi Ojo-Ade calls a "sex-maniac" who "deserved to die," is not a single, isolated individual but a type whose numbers are legion in independent Africa.

The story of Dikeledi's friend Kebonye serves as a prologue to Dikeledi's tragic tale. Hypocritically, Kebonye's husband, a school administrator, punished the male teachers for making sexual advances toward their female students, but he himself was guilty of impregnating schoolgirls. More important, he is guilty of spousal abuse. Kebonye tells Dikeledi that he "used to kick me between the legs when he wanted that. I once aborted with a child, due to that treatment" (89). Kebonye apparently can bear no more. When the parents of the very last girl he impregnated approached her for help, Kebonye decided it was time to find a more permanent solution to this community problem. By anticipating Dikeledi's story, Kebonye's less complicated tale of the rogue male supports Head's development of emasculation as a symbolic retribution for self-licensed sexual depredation. Tellingly, Kebonye begins her story with the assertion: "Our men do not think that we need tenderness and care" (89).

Dikeledi's tragedy is made the more moving because of the extensive narrative exposition focusing on the political roots of similar tragedies among women in Botswana. The Protectorate of Bechuanaland may be the independent nation of Botswana

now, but African men have unfortunately learned from their now-absent white masters how to be sexual outlaws. Men divide themselves, according to the narrator's analysis, into two categories. The first category comprises men who are loving mates and responsible fathers. Such men are like the Sebembele of "The Deep River" or the Leungo of "A Period of Darkness." Sad to say, such men represent the minority in contemporary Southern Africa. The majority are represented by the husbands of Kebonye and Dikeledi, who act like male dogs during sex because they have supplanted all competitors for the female in question, as though theirs was "the only penis in the world." To add to their sexual arrogance with their mates, a man of this ilk "accepted no responsibility for the young he procreated and like the dogs and bulls and donkeys, he also made females abort" (91).

Two characteristics of this new construction of masculinity need to be emphasized. First, Head focuses attention on the phallocentricity of this construction of masculinity, emphasizing that it is their mental or conscious preoccupation with the phallus that marks such men as the unfortunate heirs of Western notions of male sexuality. In this particularly modern and Western context, the phallus becomes a power tool, a weapon with a potential for violence against the powerless. The other characteristic is probably even more threatening: such men have devolved so far as to pose a threat to their own progeny.

"One such man was Garesego Mokopi, the husband of Dikeledi." Thus begins the story's development of Garesego's role in Dikeledi's tragedy. Surely it is no coincidence that Garesego abandoned Dikeledi and their three sons in 1966, the same year Botswana achieved *its* independence. Once the "Protectorate" became a nation, a government clerk like Garesego could expect his wages to quadruple, licensing an already established "taste for womanising and drink" with a new "freedom" for self-debauchery. Garesego married Dikeledi because she was "semi-literate," and presumably submissive. Now that "independence" has arrived—for African *men*, Head reminds us—Garesego can become the sexual maverick he may have wanted to be during the Protectorate. Independent like his nation, Garesego feels no compunction about abandoning his family so

that he can pursue the "excitement" of educated women. Such women offer excitement because they far excel his wife in knowledge of sexual technique.

Since Dikeledi has suffered the consequences of an encounter with the evils of the postcolonial man in Southern Africa, it is a blessing that she also has the opportunity to meet a representative of the other construction of masculinity. The new paradigm for African manhood is Paul Thebolo: "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 tenderness" (93). Paul is the loving husband to Kenalepe, Dikeledi's neighbor and friend.

Head feels so strongly about her nation's need to turn to the ideal of masculinity in Paul that she has risked constructing him as "too good to be true." Perhaps because Garesego and his ilk fit the stereotype of the contemporary male in any country, not just Botswana, readers have readily accepted his "reality" and balked at believing in Paul's goodness. Although she is speaking to his admirable virtue when she calls him an "oasis of goodness" (129), Ezenwa-Ohaeto, for example, seems to suggest that he is too good to be true. More dramatically, MacKenzie sees Head as "proposing a solution . . . not grounded in social reality." MacKenzie explains: "Thebolo is idealised. He is not shown to have been shaped by the society the way Garesego has . . . [t]he power to redeem society is vested in idealised saviour-figures, and the thorough historical understanding that underpins the stories is suspended when a solution is imposed" (41). Granted MacKenzie may be shortsighted in overlooking the fact that he himself has "imposed" a need on Head's part to generate a "saviour" out of the men in the village. What is finally important is that Head has in fact a vision of how masculinity can be reconstructed.

MacKenzie and others who fault Head for offering an idealized new African male in Paul Thebolo apparently have less difficulty believing in the author's construction of femininity in Paul's mate, and counterpart, Kenalepe. One of Head's major contributions to this postcolonial discourse is her focus on mar-

riage as the foundation of productive constructions of both femininity and masculinity. Too little attention has been paid to Kenalepe's modest, but rather radical, proposal to her husband and to her friend. The idealization of Paul inheres in Kenalepe's idealization and in her celebration of marriage as a relationship stronger than most readers are prepared to confront.

When Kenalepe broaches the topic of female sexuality, she is allowed an awareness of a discrepancy between her own rich sexual bounty and Dikeledi's impoverishment. Dikeledi describes Garesego's sexual practice as "jump on and jump off." Unlike Garesego who blames Dikeledi for her lack of sexual sophistication, Paul demonstrates that it is the man who is responsible for being "sophisticated." Furthermore, in an analysis of male sexuality reminiscent of D. H. Lawrence's, especially in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Head suggests that male sexual technique is not something to be "learned"; it is instead the natural outgrowth of a man's tenderness and caring for a woman, the very masculinity Kebonye mourned the lack of in the husband she murdered. Kenalepe even "confesses" some anxiety that perhaps she might "enjoy that side of life too much."

The friendship of the two women has become "one of those deep, affectionate, sharing-everything kind of friendships that only women know how to have" (94). Because Dikeledi is such a special friend, Kenalepe offers to "loan" Paul as a lover to Dikeledi. Much as Dikeledi has become a "collector of treasures," or gestures of tenderness and love, Kenalepe's modest proposal is too precious a gift for her to accept.⁷ Kenalepe significantly tells her husband that she offered to share him Paul laughs at this surprising offer and then becomes mute, perhaps in humble response to his wife's trust in him and her regard for his manhood. Surprisingly it is Dikeledi who seems to know why Paul is silent: "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). That "conceit" provides an index of Paul's being something other than merely an "idealised" male; more important, it is Head's indication of Paul's at least partial participation in the construction of his own masculinity. He *knows* he is a good man. Furthermore, Paul knows that sexual gratification is based in

tenderness and genuine commitment not in the “excitement” of the nerves Garesego desperately pursues.

When Garesego orbits back into Dikeledi’s life after eight years’ absence, Dikeledi is threatened along a range of fears. Along with the more obvious ones such as fear of spousal abuse—she cannot ban him from her bed since they are still married—it is easy to miss her fear that Paul’s construction of masculinity renders him vulnerable. For many readers, Dikeledi’s clearly planned emasculation of Garesego—perhaps she intended murder as well—puts conventional reader-empathy for an abused wife to the test. Once again, readers have not paid enough attention to Head’s investment of hope for the future in the figure of Paul. When Dikeledi pleads with her husband to help pay for their eldest son’s education, Garesego deliberately refuses in order to open a space in which he can besmirch the reputation of Paul. Garesego well knows that when he tells her to ask Paul for the money, adding: “Everyone knows he’s keeping two homes and that you are his spare” (99), he may succeed in provoking Paul into revealing himself as something less than the “idealised” male he has seemed. Like countless other virtuous figures in fiction—Melville’s Billy Budd, for example—Paul is in a no-win situation. When Garesego accuses him in public of being his estranged wife’s lover because he supplies her with food—“Men only do that for women they fuck!” (100)—Paul’s notion of “masculinity” devolves into something closer to that of his antagonist whose eye he blackens. With that badge of wounded “honor,” Garesego gains leverage in his campaign to destroy Paul’s reputation in the community. Tellingly, Garesego has little difficulty convincing some men in the neighborhood. These represent the “bottom rung of government,” the narrator indicates, in order to discredit their opinions of Paul. We are told: “They half liked the smear on Paul Thebolo: he was too good to be true” (100). When they go on to blame Garesego for abandoning a wife who has resorted to a lover, Garesego’s hand is forced, and he must move back into Dikeledi’s home to demonstrate his commitment to his wife. Her hand is forced in turn, not simply to pay back his abuse of her but also to wipe away the “smear on Paul” and to remove Garesego as the ascendant con-

struction of masculinity. After all, Dikeledi *is* the mother of three sons, one of whom is himself on the verge of manhood.

Dikeledi tragically sacrifices herself to sustain the hope that the paradigm of manhood Head has constructed in Paul can influence other men in the community but especially her sons whom Paul has promised to father and educate, almost as though the two activities were synonymous. In framing her life as something very much like literary tragedy, Dikeledi reaches out to her sister Life who would agree that life without the power of tenderness is not worth living. And Paul himself hearkens back to the earlier "idealised" male Sebembele who reminds us that Southern Africa has had a tradition of loving men long before the destructive interlude of British imperialism. Paul is, in the final analysis, not so much a construction of masculinity for our time; he is a *re*-construction of a line of male forebears whose stories testify to the fact that the Garesegos and the Lesegos are postcolonial aberrations, not the tradition for African manhood.

NOTES

- 1 In *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, Head includes a chapter called "The Breakdown of the Family" in which she documents how men in this independent Botswanan community have become "sexual outlaws." She writes: "Out of every one hundred children born in Serowe, three on the average are legitimate; the rest are illegitimate" (58). Head blames Christianity for the weakening of the African male as husband and father:

Marriage in church certainly struck the final death-blow to polygamy but the immense amount of change and strain people have endured seems unfortunately to have struck a death-blow to the male. He ceased to be the head of a family, and his place was taken by a gay, dizzy character on a permanent round of drink and women, full of shoddy values and without any sense of responsibility for the children he so haphazardly procreates. (60)

Head continues by quoting a passage from a story "Why Marry?" by a young Botswana writer whose main character asserts that there is no advantage "in buying a cow if he could get its milk free" (60).

- 2 Among those who have written about "The Deep River" Femi Ojo-Ade seems unique in her lack of sympathy for Sebembele, a character for whom "one might not wish to shed a tear" (83).
- 3 Maxine Sample generalizes that "the story ['Deep River'] contains a pattern that is characteristic of Head's researched histories and her fictionalized accounts of the Botswana people. That is the recurring schism between apparent heirs, often involving the leader's choice of woman, and the resulting split of the person with his supporters to another place" (314).
- 4 Cherry Wilhelm reminds us that Head chose an epigraph from D. H. Lawrence for her most important novel *A Question of Power* (11).

- ⁵ Cherry Clayton writes of Head: "Her unique position as a black woman historian in Southern Africa leads her to overturn a dominant settler mythology and to correct the harshness of the frontier spirit in favour of what she calls, in *The Collector of Treasures*, a 'compromise of tenderness' (10) between African tradition and Western influence" (65).
- ⁶ Craig MacKenzie seems intent on holding Head to a style of social realism consistent with the notion of her as an historian. He has difficulty with the "idealised" representation of masculinity in Paul Thebolo, who seems clearly to express Head's profound hope for the appearance of a new man as an alternative to the majority of Garesegos. MacKenzie's quibbling about Paul's not having his roots in postcolonial Botswana parallels his assertion that Head's feminism has no tradition in Head's adopted country. Surely if women like Head were to abandon their feminist aspirations or their hope for a new construction of masculinity simply because neither could be generated out of the postcolonial condition which spawned a generation of Garesegos the future would be as bleak as the present.
- ⁷ Dikeledi is only willing to acknowledge the *generosity* of her friend's offer. That is where the "treasure" lies, I think, not in any actual love-making, despite the claim of Femi Ojo-Ade that "indeed, Paul sleeps with her" (88). It's much more important that Dikeledi accepts the treasure of her friends' love without testing the marriage's harmony with Paul's "infidelity," even if sanctioned.

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