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Feminist Perspectives in the Oral Tradition: An Analysis of Bessie Head's The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration

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Abstract

Aims: The following study aims at examining the theme of the individual versus society in *The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration*, a short story by the South African woman writer, Bessie Head. The analysis also aims at shedding light on the feminist perspectives that the author conveys through her social criticism and didacticism.

Methodology: The study uses qualitative textual analysis and a triple theoretical framework that relies on some key ideas from new historicism, feminism, and psychoanalysis. It relies on the centrality of the following key issues in the three theories: history and culture in interpreting literature for new historicism, analysis of patriarchal cultural values in feminism, and psychological conflict and trauma in psychoanalysis.

Findings: The results reveal that: the conflict that opposes the individual to the society is an age-old issue that exists in oral literature; there are traces of feminism in the oral tradition; critics and philosophers are re-assessing the role of communalism in African cultures.

Key Words: the individual, community, orality, new historicism, psychoanalysis, feminist perspectives

I. Introduction

Generally, literary studies on African women writers focus on the colonial and post-colonial periods. But in her story, *The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration,* BessieHead deals with ancient time as the title of the work indicates. The following study focuses on how the South African author, deals with the woman question through the theme of the individual versus the community, an age-old topic, in her short story. As the author deals with ancient time, the oral tradition is at the core of the short story.

The significance and influence of oral art inanglophone African literature is so evident that it does not need to be argued, as one can see how prominent African authors are influenced by this verbal art. Among them one there is Chinua Achebe in his canonic novel Things Fall Apart, Amos Tutuola with the Palm Wine Drinkard, Ama Ata Aidoo with her play Anowa, Flora Nwapa with Efuru, and Ngugi WaThiongo in A Grain of Wheat, to name only a few. Bessie Head is no exception to the rule, with her short story *The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration,* a title that clearly states that it is going to be a story about ancient time and consequently history passed on orally.

Verbal art and oral history are still highly valued in many African cultures. They help in the conditioning and socialization of community members across cultures, and this conditioning reveals cultural values of African communities. Bessie head's short story is evidence of how people are socialized through various themes in the oral tradition. Among the themes one can list the conflict of the individual and society, the marginalization of women, the woman's struggle for a sense of self and agency. The following study sheds light on the oral dimension of the piece and examines the feminist perspectives conveyed by the author through the theme of the individual versus community.

II. Synopsis of the story

In a nutshell, *The Deep River: a Story of Ancient Tribe Migration* is about a unified communalist society, the Monemapee community, living in peace and harmony until the death of the king. In his lifetime, the latter had three wives. At his death, his oldest son who has taken the throne, declares that the last child, namedMakobi, and who is the son of the king's third and youngest wife, is his own and not his father's. This is a serious problem that has involved the elders of the community who must find a way to stifle the problem between Sebembele and his brothers. The latter claim that if the childMakobi, is Sebembele's, then he will surpass them in seniority, and that they cannot accept. Therefore, the solution to the problem is that Sebembele must renounce the woman and child if he wants to keep the throne or leave the community if he decides to keep his lover and child. A new husband is chosen for the woman Rankwana by the elders. But in the end, the prince renounces the throne and leaves the community with

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his followers to go and form a new home elsewhere. The story ends with a disruption of the old harmony of the Monomapee people.

III. Theoretical framework

The study examines the above-mentioned theme through the triple theoretical framework of new historicism, feminism, and psychoanalysis. New historicism is appropriate for the study because of its emphasis on the recognition of history and culture in the interpretation of literature. In fact,

> new historicists argue that any knowledge of the past is necessarily mediated by the current authorities and history is textual in many respects. New historicists pay more attention to the conflict and contradiction in suspense and they take the marginal events and figures the same way with the mainstream. (Lyu 1076).

It is the centrality of knowledge of the past and its relationship with latent conflict, authority and marginality that are interesting for the above study. The latter probes at the interconnection of history, power, ideology, patriarchy and conflict in ancient time through the oral tradition. The objective is to examine the relationship between all these parameters in Bessie Head's short story.

As for the second theoretical framework, feminism, it is appropriate because the study focuses on the struggle of the main female character in a patriarchal setting. Elaine Showalter points out that feminist criticism is an "historically grounded inquiry which probes the ideological assumptions of literary phenomena" (Showalter, 128). Through her short story, and more precisely with the conflict between the individual and society, Bessie Head unveils various patriarchal assumptions and values of her culture.

As stated above, the study also relies on psychoanalysis,because of the centrality of the psychological conflict and trauma that the main character faces: choosing between what is deemed good for, and in the community, and what is considered as wrong or not acceptable. According to the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, the mind has three components which are in constant conflict: the id which operates at the unconscious level, the ego which works as a filter for the id, and the superego which is the conscience or locus of morality and the socially acceptable behavior. (Nash, np.). Head's main character of the short story finds himself in a situation where he has to face the conflicting components of his id, ego and superego. Obviously at one point, his ego-filter has failed him because he has had a love affair with his father's wife, an unacceptable behavior according the rules of the community. And after the deed is revealed, he finds himself in a very difficult psychological dilemma. All this happens in the story, in ancient time, when orality was very important and kept through words of the mouth, as the Talaote people have passed their story from generation to generation.

IV. The Oral Dimension of the story

According to the critic Diby Keita, "Oral traditions are a cornerstone of African cultural identity, serving as vehicles for transmitting history,values, and collective memory"(Keita,12). The short story under study is a perfect illustration for the critic's argument. By writing *The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration*, Bessie Head demonstrates traces of orality in her short story.In fact, at the end of the story, she clearly acknowledges that the source is the oral tradition: "The story is an entirely romanticized and fictionalized version of the history of the Botalaote tribe. Some historical data was given to me by the old men of the tribe, but it was unreliable as their memories had tended to fail them" (6).

In the story, the author emphasizes a core element of the oral tradition which is memory. People's history is retained and retold through memory: "They remembered that Monemapee ruled the tribe for many years as the hairs on his head were already saying white" (1). Bessie Head retells the story of the people, how they used to live economically, socially and politically. The Botalaote community used to live according to a certain communalism or togetherness, a system in which the individual does not picture himself or herself as a separable person from the general community. According to the story, all the individuals have agreed to live "without faces, except for their chief's, whose face was the face of all the people" (1). This means that the whole community has accepted to give up their individuality for togetherness. So, although people have their own land, all the activities, from ploughing to harvesting and thanksgiving, are done under the order of their chief. The philosopher Asiegbu refers to this type of ruling system as afro-communalism which he defines "as a system in which individuals attain meaningfulness from the point of view of the community" (31).

According to the oral tradition, the community people "accepted this regimental levelling down of their individual souls, but on the day of dispute or when strife and conflict and greed blew stormy winds over their deep river, the people

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awoke and showed their individual faces" (2). This is what has broken the communal harmony.According to the oral tradition, the king Monemapee had three wives and five sons. The last child, named Makobi, was the son of his third,youngest and beautiful wife, Rankwana whom he married in his late years. The senior son of the king fell in love with the young and beautiful Rankwana with whom he had a secret love affair. When the king died, his first son named Sebembele, was installed chief of the community. Right after his installment, Sebembele, the son of the first wife, declared that Makobi is his son, not the son of his late father. This was the origin of the internal conflict that divided the community. The image of the deep river,used as a metaphor by the author, has thus revealed its true nature by showing the dangers that lie within its depth.

The king's other children and the elders advised Sebembele to renounce Makobi and his mother, in order to stay in power or keep them and leave the community. The community was thus divided into: those who supported Sebembele in his desire to keep Rankwana and her son and leave both throne and land, and those who thought he should renounce to keeping his lover and son and stay in power. At the end of the story, Sebembele decided to leave the throne and the land. Thus, he left with his supporters. They went far away southwards to continue their lives. This is why as the story goes, "the Talaote tribe have forgotten their origins and their original language during their journey southwards" (1). "The old men there keep on giving confused and contradictory accounts of their origins, but they say they lost their place of birth over a woman. They shake their heads and say women have always caused a lot of trouble in the world (6).

The quotations above reflect well the dynamics involved in the oral tradition. Stories are subjects to change and missing details, as elders' memories might fail them. This is exactly what happened to the Talaote tribe in their journey through history. The Deep River represents a reconstruction of the Talaote history. In retelling the story of the Talaote people, Head engages in a feminist didacticism. She denounces patriarchal practices and reveals some more positive aspects of the oral traditions regarding the woman question.

V. Feminist didacticism through the conflict individual versus community

Much has been written about feminism being a Western import in written African literature. In her short story, Head demonstrates that some of the themes that are recurrent in works tagged as feminist, are present in the oral tradition as the study shows. The first theme is that of the conflict between the individual and his/her society. This theme is also seen as a new phenomenon that came with the advent of colonialism and the clash of cultures. In fact, Indangasi argues that

> "Pre-colonial oral literary genres: oral narratives, myths, legends and poetry do not deal with the relation between the individual and society. Epic heroes such as Shaka, Sundiata or Ozidi do not in any way challenge the moral foundations of the societies they live in, they embody the values of their societies" (Indangasi, 2).

The oral traces of Head's story are evidence that the individual facing the community is an age-old issue that has existed even before colonialism unlike what Indangasi argues. In the Zarma-Songhoy tradition it is reflected when a king had to sacrifice his beloved niece (daughter of his sister) to the spirit of the waters to save the community from drought and starvation. In the legend the King did sacrifice his niece but he had to suffer the psychological trauma, the same way Okonkwo suffers in Things Fall Apart for the killing of his beloved Ikemefuna. Thus, even the epic heroes that Ingangasi mentioned had to go through the terrible psychological internal conflict of personal interest versus communal good. And most of the time, it is the societal pressure and psychological weakness that push the heroes and heroines to renounce their personal fulfilment. But in The Deep River, Bessie Head characterizes two characters, Sebembele and Rankwana, who are strong enough to pursue their personal aspirations.

A close comparative analysis of the two characters reveals that in reality, the stronger character is the woman Rankwana, because it is thanks to her that the prince manages to stick to his goal. In fact, when the pressure of the elders has become too strong on the prince, he tries to persuade Rankwana to renounce to their project of being together. But she stands firm on her position and even threatens to commit suicide if he forces her.

The new side of internal conflict that Bessie Head offers us is, the other side of oral narratives that remains untold, because it disturbs people when the protagonist chooses to challenge tradition and wins. And this is exactly what happens in The Deep River, with Sebembele and Rankwana challenging the patriarchal practice of allowing old kings to marry any young girl they want. As the elders say, a king may have any woman he desires. The young prince and the beautiful Rankwana fall in

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love with each other and they challenge traditions by having a secret love affair.

When the king dies the prince reveals the secret because he wants to claim Rankwana as his wife, now that the king is no more. In the story, the main character, Sebembele faces a serious internal psychological conflict which consists in choosing between love and power. At the beginning his supergo leads him when he tries to convince Rankwana to accept to lose him. But the torment that he faces reveals to the reader that the dilemma is not easy to solve. Bessie Head presents to the reader a ruler who values emotional relations more than power. In making the prince chose to leave the throne for his love, the author challenges the patriarchal thirst for power. The conservative elders consider Sebembele as a fool because for them his choice unreasonable.They argue thatSebembele is unmanly and "he must be mad. A man who is influenced by a woman is no ruler. He is like one who listens to a child (Head, 3). This reveals the sexist aspect of the conditioning of people.

Also, by having a relationship with the young and beautiful Rankwana, the author denounces how because of power and authority, a girl can be given to an old man as his bride. It is part of the feminist agenda of denouncing cultural practices that are unfair towards women. We see in the story how Rankwana is forced by the village elders and her father to be with a new husband, in order to solve the problem. She is taken by force to her new husband.

But the author characterizes her as a young woman with a strong sense of self and agency in a patriarchal environment. In fact, when her father claims that women do not know their minds, she responds by saying other women do not, but she, as a woman knows her mind very well. Thus, she uses her persuasive skills to make the prince make what she deems the right decision, that is to renounce the throne and leave the community with his supporters to go far and found a new community. The community is divided into those who think Sebembele should renounce Rankwana and her child and stay in power, and those who think he should leave with his child and lover. As he has chosen to leave, his people claim that they have lost their land over a dispute on a woman.

In making her hero chose love instead of power, the author sends a powerful message to readers about the right of the individual to challenge traditions when they go against the fulfilment of his/her desires. This might be a call to revisiting the way the conflict between the individual and community is considered. In fact, some philosophers even call for the abolition of the communal aspect of African societies because they claim that with the historical changes and the dynamic aspect of cultures, communalism as a denial of the individual's rights is unprogressive. In his article "The Community and the Individual: Revisiting the Relevance of Afro-Communalism", Martin F. Asiegbu argues:

> We think, however, that expanding one's positive possibilities even against the community's initial normative demands have always resulted in a more fulfilled life, with better contributions towards improved existence for one's community. We, therefore, view Afro-communalists' emphasis on the importance of the community in the life of individual African as somewhat exaggerated (Asiegbu, 40).

This is strong change from the common view, according to which, people think that the individual should conform rather than subvert the community's rules. In general, when the individual challenges the community, s/he is punished. The Deep River is no exception because Sebembele has had to leave with his supporters. As his initial community denies him the possibility of personal growth and happiness, he is forced to look for the latter elsewhere. The growth of the individual is a crucial preoccupation of Bessie Head who has personally experienced various oppressions right from her birth. As Ncube opines"the drama of human interactions and the prospect of individual growth and regeneration are Head's favorite topics. She considers society's balance and each individual's unique contributions" (Qt. in Asad Al-Ghalith et.al. 969). But Sebembele is ahead of his time, and his society is yet to reach that level of consciousness. People are not ready to accept such changes yet. But the prince forces them to do so by leaving them, and that has served as a lesson because they continue to pass the message that they have lost their initial land because of a woman. And as the culture is patriarchal, some elders "shake their heads and say that women have always caused a lot of trouble in the world." (Head, 6). Various sayings used by the elders reflect the misogynous aspect of the culture.

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VI. Conclusion

In The Deep River, a very short story, Bessie Head has demonstrated that the length of the genre does in no way prevent the author to fulfill condensation of meaning. Through the conflict of the individual and society, Bessie Head invites readers to reassess the common assumptions about communalism in African societies even in the past.

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One of those assumptions is to believe that the issue the conflict between the individual and the community came with colonialism and the advent of foreign values. Head conveys evidence of the clash even in ancient time.

In her didacticism, the author also questions whether individual aspirations are necessarily against common good. Sebembele's brothers are also pursuing their own interest in forcing him out of the land rather than protecting the community. Throughout characters interactions Head celebrates orality, but nevertheless, she denounces sexist aspects of herculture. As Bruntun rightly points out, "BessieHead'slegacyencompasses a celebration of African culture and values whileaddressingcomplex issues of discrimination and authority" (Bruntun, np).But the most important message is the author's portrayal and celebration of a woman who has a strong sense of self and agency. These characteristics allow Rankwanato win her battle.

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