



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## The Collector Of Treasures: A Tale Of Oppression And Resilience

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**Abstract:** Bessie Emery Head was an African writer. She has contributed numerous short stories and novels to African Literature. Through her writings, she has described both pre- and post-colonial African society. She has portrayed the struggling lives of the African people, particularly the women. *The Collector of Treasures, and Other Botswana Village Tales* (1977) is a volume of thirteen short stories. The stories focus on the place of women and the value and significance of traditional religious belief of the tribal people. Dikeledi Mokopi is the central character in the story *The Collector of Treasures* whose suffering has been described in the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods. Head has portrayed her character against the injustice and inequality. The present article tries to show the oppression that Dikeledi had to undergo and at the same time how she withstands the obstacle with her resilience.

**Keywords:** Bessie Head, Dikeledi, oppression, resilience.

### Introduction:

Bessie Emery Head was an African writer. She was born in a mental hospital in Pietermaritzburg. Her mother was a white lady, and her father was a black person. Later, she was handed over to foster parents who took care of her until she was thirteen years old. Head was sent to a mission orphanage. There, she earned a high school diploma and was trained to be a teacher. She taught in an elementary school and later wrote for the African magazine *Drum*. Bessie was married to Harold Head, who was a journalist. But unfortunately, the marriage did not last long, and they got separated. She was then posted to a teaching job in Botswana. At the time of her departure from South Africa, she had to lose her citizenship. But Govt. of Botswana granted her citizenship. At the age of 49, she died of hepatitis.

Bessie Head has contributed numerous short stories and novels to African Literature. Through her writings, she has described both pre- and post-colonial African society. Themes of identity, exile, and social injustice are frequently seen in her writings. Her experiences are well-focused through her writings. She has portrayed the struggling lives of the African people, particularly women. *The Collector of Treasures, and Other Botswana Village Tales* (1977) is a volume of thirteen short stories. Here, Bessie Head has narrated the traditional village life of Botswana. She has also narrated the patriarchal society of Botswana. The stories focus on the place of women and the value and significance of the traditional beliefs of the tribal people. In her writings, she has tried to highlight the issues related to racism and male chauvinism.

### Discussion:

The literary works of Bessie Head focus on the third world women and their lives, particularly during and after colonization. Head has portrayed her characters against the injustices and inequality. Dikeledi Mokopi is such a character in the story *The Collector of Treasures* whose suffering has been described in the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods. Bessie Head says:

“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 congenial sense, as being an inferior form of human life” (Head, 1977, p.92)

Amidst her sufferings, Bessie Head represents Dikeledi as an independent, powerful, and resilient woman. Dikeledi Mokopi lived with her three sons in a village called Puleng in South Africa. The story *The Collector of Treasures* starts with the journey of the female protagonist, Dikeledi Mokopi to the prison. She was imprisoned for the crime of murdering her husband. After her arrival in the prison, she got acquainted with other women who were also imprisoned for the same crime of murdering their husbands. Kebonye was among the women with whom Dikeledi grew her intimacy. The conversation between Kebonye and Dikeledi reflects the pain and agony that the women had to undergo:

“ ‘And what may your crime be?’

I have killed my husband.’

‘We are all here for the same crime,’

Kebonye said, then asked: ‘Do you feel

Any sorrow about the crime?’

‘Not really,’ the other woman replied.

‘How did you kill him?’

‘I cut off his special parts with a knife,’

Dikeledi said.

‘I did it with a razor,’ Kebonye said.” (Head, 1977, p. 89)

The treatment of women by their male counterparts is again reflected in the story told by Kebonye:

“Our men do not think that we need tenderness and care. You know, my husband used to kick me between the legs when he wanted that. I once aborted with a child, due to this treatment.” (Head, 1977, p. 89)

The oppression that women had to undergo is reflected in these conversations. But still, Dikeledi was positive in her outlook. She understood that she was not alone. She tried to cherish the moments with her association with those companions in prison:

“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 treasures.” (Head, 1977)

Dikeledi stored all the good things happened to her as treasures and celebrated her life amidst hardship.

In prison, Dikeledi recounted her life. She narrated how she had to get married to Garesego Mokopi who was a knave. He was neither a good husband nor a good father. He got Dikeledi pregnant three times in four years and then left her. After leaving them, he stayed in that village but never took any responsibility either for Dikeledi or for his sons. But Dikeledi was a brave lady who never approached Garesego and tried her best to take care of her children. In fact, she felt proud that she was able to arrange food and clothes for her children. She engaged herself day and night in sewing, knitting, and thatch making.

Dikeledi's life was full of tragedy since her childhood. Her name ‘Dikeledi’ which means ‘tears’ itself signifies it. She had lost her parents at an early stage and was brought up by her uncle. Her uncle was a very self-centred person. His children also treated Dikeledi not as their cousin but as a servant. He even did not want her to be educated. Once her uncle said, “You are just hanging around here like a chain on my neck.” (Head, 1977, p. 95) He just wanted to get rid of Dikeledi. It was due to her uncle she was forced to marry Garesego who was his friend. But at that time, Dikeledi wanted to come out of the clutches of her uncle. Therefore, she easily agreed to marry Garesego. She came to learn about the real character of Garesego after the marriage. Garesego had no responsibility towards his family. While describing the character of Garesego, Bessie Head narrates the consequences of national liberation and African Independence. She writes:

“For four years prior to independence, he (Garesego) had worked as a clerk in the district administration service, at a steady salary of Rs. 50.00 a month. Soon after independence his

salary shot up to Rs. 200.00 per month. Even during his lean days, he had a taste for womanising and drink; now he had the resources for a real spree. He was not seen at his home again and lived and slept around the village, from woman to woman. He left his wife and three sons--- Banabotho, the eldest, aged four, Inalame, aged three; and the youngest, Motsomi, aged one--- to their own route. Perhaps he did so because she was the boring, semi-literate traditional sort, and there were a lot of exciting new women around. Independence produced marvels indeed. (Head, 1977, p. 92)

By showing the irresponsible behaviour of Garesego, Bessie Head tries to insist on the importance of strong family relationships and connections. Bessie Head herself was a single mother, and she knew well the struggles of a single mother.

Bessie Head portrays another male character in the story. It is Paul Thebolo, husband of Kenalepe. Paul was opposite to Garesego. Paul and Kenalepe were leading a happy marriage. He loved his wife and, at the same time, showed his respect to her. He was educated. He was appointed as the Principal of a school in the village, Puleng. He became the neighbour of Dikeledi. She observed his attitude and behaviour, which were completely different from Garesego. He was surrounded by different groups of people:

“They had guests every evening; illiterate men who wanted him to fill in tax forms or write letters for them, or his own colleagues who wanted to debate the political issues of the day.” (Head, 1977, p.95)

Paul was an embodiment of kindness, compassion, and responsibility. In a patriarchal culture, Paul's attitude and behaviour were something different. In this connection, Sarah Chetin is of the opinion that Paul is perhaps named after the Christian St. Paul who was “a symbol of charity and visionary hope.” (Chetin, 1989, pp. 114-137) Paul's responsibility towards his family is very significant. He, even extended his helping hand towards Dikeledi at the time of her struggle. On the other hand, Garesego spent his money on alcohol. Due to his lustrous behaviour, he did not even hesitate to abandon his wife and children. His only concern was to gratify himself. But Paul spent his resources on his family. Head says:

“He turned his resources, both emotional and material, towards his family life and went on and on with his quiet rhythm like a river.” (Head, 1977, p.93)

In *The Collector of Treasures* (1977), Bessie Head describes the brief history about the South African society during the colonization period. She has described how the tribal society and their ancient tradition had changed during this period. In describing the character of Garesego Bessie Head writes:

“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” (Head, 1977, p.91).

Head further writes, “The post-colonial man evolves into a broken wreck with no inner resources,” and women become “an inferior form of human life” since the colonial system has never prepared the people for independence and national management (Head, 1977, p.92)

In most of her works, Bessie Head portrays the racial and gender discrimination. The women in South Africa struggled more than other African women because they were discriminated doubly-as black and as women. Head constantly tried to show these racial and gender discrimination through her writings. Though Head raised issues related to women, yet she denied herself as a feminist. In *Collector of Treasures*, she said:

“I am not a feminist.....in the sense that I do not  
View women in isolation from men.....I view my  
Own activity as a writer as a kind of participation  
In the thought of the whole world.....Writing is not  
A male/ female occupation....I do not have to be a  
Feminist. The world of the intellect is impersonal,  
Sexless. (in Eilerson, 238)

Head always focused on the universal struggle of human beings against oppression. She never liked to confine herself under a specific label, i.e, 'feminist', though she was engaged with the feminist discourse.

One day Dikeledi approached Garesego for some financial help. She asked for the money so that their son Banabotho could go to secondary school, which was more expensive than the primary school. She had already saved some money. But that was not sufficient to serve her purpose. But Garesego, instead of giving her money, accused her of having relationship with Paul, which was false. Garesego could never think that there could be a relationship between a male and a female without involving physical contact.

Garesego had only two passions—alcohol and sex. A few days later, he determined his mind to give the amount that Dikeledi asked, but with a condition that he did not mention. So, he wrote a letter to Dikeledi:

“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.” (Head, 1977, p. 101)

Garesego's intention was not to settle the differences but to have sex with Dikeledi. Dikeledi also replied his letter:

“Sir, I shall prepare everything as you have said. Dikeledi.” (Head, 1977, p. 101)

Here, the word 'prepare' means something different. 'Prepare' is used here ironically, which means the intention of Dikeledi. Dikeledi knew the intention of Garesego. Therefore, she had decided to end their relationship. Before the arrival of Garesego, she was sharpening a knife:

“Dikeledi used a large kitchen knife which is used to cut meat and she knelt at a grinding- stone and sharpened it slowly and methodically.” (Head, 1977, pp 101-102)

When Garesego came, he did not enquire about his children. He only took his meal. The anger that Dikeledi suppressed came to its peak. She decided to kill him. Due to his over drunken nature, Garesego fell asleep as soon as he went to bed. Dikeledi brought out the sharpened knife and cut his genitals into pieces. A painful scream was heard. “Dikeledi stood and watched his death anguish with an intent and brooding look. Missing not one detail of it.” (Head, 1977, p. 103) After a while, the elder son, Banabotho came and said “Mother, Didn't I hear father cry?” She said, “I have killed him. Then she added: “Banabotho, go and call the police.” (Head, 1977, p. 103)

Dikeledi's act of cutting the genitals of Garesego is nothing but an outburst of dominance and oppression.

### Conclusion:

Bessie Head has portrayed the character of Dikeledi whose resilience under any circumstance is something notable. She has learned to survive amidst her struggles and hardships. She always took satisfaction from small things. When she met Kenalepe and Paul and developed a friendship with them, it was a treasure in her life. Even in prison, when she met her fellow prisoners who had committed the same kind of crime, she thought that she was not alone in this journey. She always observed things minutely and stored the good things that happened to her as treasure, which gave her strength to move ahead. Since her childhood, she had to fight for her existence. But the most powerful weapon that she used to overcome the obstacles was her calmness and resilience. Her resilience helped her move on and on and on.

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