THE TROPE OF THE ABSENT FATHER IN BESSIE HEAD'S STORIES *LIFE* AND *THE COLLECTOR OF TREASURES*

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Abstract

This paper explores the notions of masculinity, paternity, and parentage in Bessie Head's short stories, *Life* and *The Collector of Treasures*. Our claim is that since all three terms and the way they relate to each other are historically produced, they imbricate in the stories to yield a Tswana father-figure that is at once profoundly appealing and disconcerting. The father-figure in the stories is appealing because he resonates with the reader's instinctive empathy with Bessie Head's early childhood as a child of an unknown father. But the figure of the father that comes across in these stories also instils dread. The attributes conventionally accepted as hallmarks of manhood in Botswana society which they embody in the stories, lead men to perform behaviours that make them unlikely choices by anyone desiring a father figure. The displaced, disinherited, and excluded female characters' unrequited unconscious yearning for a father figure in the stories, of course, can be read as reflecting what has been described as the female writer's culturally conditioned timidity about self-dramatization and dread of the patriarchal authority of literature. However, the paper uses a combination of Lacan's psychoanalysis and Fredric Jameson's critique of late capitalism, to also relate the protagonists' unrequited desire for a father figure to the broader issues of the articulation of power and the circulation of commodities under late capitalism. It reads the absent father in the stories as a metaphor of the subconscious lack that populist nationalism and mass production stoke and manipulate to perpetuate themselves even in the context of a postcolonial rural backwater depicted in the stories.

Keywords: Bessie Head, Lacan, Law of the father, paternity, Freudian representation

1. Introduction

The point of departure of this paper is the conventional assumption that there is an inherent and natural link between masculinity, genetic fathering, and the responsibility of fatherhood. This assumption is the basis of the cultural norm that a child belongs to its father and that children whose biological fathers are not known belong to no one (Barron, 2006). In psychoanalysis too, the father is accorded a privileged position, but it flows less from genetic paternity than from the performance of a masculine obligation that Lacan terms the 'paternal function' (Lacan, 2013, p. 53). The father, according to Lacan, is not only the protector, provider, and source of a grounded stable cultural identity ('protective function'), but he also lays the law and decides what is permissible to do and what is not ('the prohibitive function') (Lacan,

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2002, p. 309). Both functions are predicated on the assumption that the father must be male and the functions themselves can only be performed by a male with the power to not only procreate but to govern his household as a representative of society. The father is thus an existential imperative, in Sartre's sense of something necessary, to provide one with not only a heritage but also the ability to understand and relate to one's own humanity (Lambert, 1990).

However, in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, the everyday and taken-for–granted term 'father' does not necessarily imply that this role belongs to a biological father or even an adoptive male parent. Rather than referring to a genetic or biological father, psychoanalysis tends to use it to refer to a socially constructed ideal figure that embodies culturally accepted attributes of masculinity which alone qualify one to be a father. In *On the Names-of-the–Father,* Lacan states that since it is not immediately obvious who one's father is (hardly invisible to the naked eye), paternity is first and foremost determined by one's culture (Lacan, 2013). This is not a reference to the Tswana problem of contested paternity settled by the saying that a child's totem is only known by the mother. Nowadays, this can be settled by a DNA paternity test. The father Lacan talks about is rather a socially constructed ideal, an abstraction, which does not correspond to a real person. Nevertheless, the child becomes socialised to be aware of such an ideal father through the oedipal process. The process begins with the child becoming understanding that the parent of the same sex is not a beneficial caregiver or father but a deadly competitor for the love of the parent of the opposite sex. It is through this process that the child learns that 'father' does not refer to the man in the family he has been brought up to address as father but is the word for the enigmatic object of its mother's desire and has the power to deny or permit its own access to the mother. The label 'father' is thus the sign through which society subordinates its own personal sense of a father to a socially constructed ideal which reflects its laws and cultural norms. It has nothing to do with DNA paternity testing.

For the child, therefore, even where the biological father is present, the term father is not identified with him per se. It is rather identified with the ideal 'Other' who by definition does not exist but is experienced as an absence or lack in its life. 'Father' thus refers to he who is not there, but who performs the function of the mysterious law giver. This is why in the Oedipus complex the son kills the father, ostensibly to recover an uninterrupted access to the mother, but in reality, to make him the abstract, absent and therefore, infinitely powerful law giver that an actual father could never be (Boothby, 1991). The term 'father' therefore evokes a function which can only be performed by a dead or absent other in the name of the father but not a real person (Lacan, 2013). It is the desire of the father in such a sense that this paper explores in relation to Bessie Head's stories. In other words, even if Bessie Head had known her biological father, she would still have to reflect on how he measures up to the social ideal, which although relatively stable is

fluid and changes.

2. Orphan young women and powerful men pairings in Bessie Head's fiction

The theme of desire for the father looms large in Bessie Head's *oeuvre*. It is evident in the ubiquitous pairing of the orphan girl-child with an adult male figure. In *The Cardinals* (1993) Mouse's relationship with the cynical fellow reporter, Johnny, does not salve the pangs of longing for a father and lover fomented by her loveless solitude. In *When Rain Clouds Gather* (2008), Paulina is drawn to Makhaya because she lives in a country of fatherless children where a love affair resulting in pregnancy was one sure way of driving a man away. But Makhaya is different because he still seems to care for children (Head, 2008, p. 124). In *Maru,* Margaret's acquiescence to a marriage with Maru can only be explained in terms of a forlorn orphan girl's longing for a protector in a country in which "protection for women had broken down and was replaced by nothing" (Head, 2008, p. 124). In *A Question of Power* (1974), Elizabeth, her soul stretched tautly between Sello and Dan, wants to combine the two into a composite father figure to break her collapse into insanity. In the pairings, the male figures occupy the problematic space between a possible lover and a father. As lover and father, of course, the father figures torn between her own personal sense of what 'father' should mean and the kind of fatherhood that society demand responsible masculinity to provide as a cultural ideal.

In all cases, the male figure fails to live up to the women's expectations of the father they desire. Instead, the man becomes only a symbol or a reminder of that which he cannot be to them. The reason for these failures of fatherhood lies in the fact that even though the father figures embody attributes that are associated with revered manhood in the culture, they express them in ways that clash violently with the women's repressed individual sense of a desirable father.

In *Life,* the pairing of the eponymous character, Life, and Lesego is a case in point. So is the pair of Dikeledi and Garesego in *The Collector of Treasures*. In both cases, the women are younger than the men. The women's earlier lives as orphans are marked by experiences of wistful longing for the absent father. So, it is reasonable to assume that they expect in their relationships the men would in part function as surrogate fathers. However, the women prove themselves profoundly threatening because they engage in capricious use of power, insistent on their unquestionable authority and demand absolute loyalty (Lacanian "prohibitive function"). Consequently, the male figures, in the two stories (and in her *oeuvre* generally) represent men who are meant to fill the place of absent father but fail to do so. The absent father in Bessie Head's stories, therefore, must be grasped as at once a regrettable loss and also as a blessing in disguise because of the dreaded patriarchal excesses the men in the pairings represent (Jones, 2008).

We are mindful of the fact that the pairings also lend themselves amenable

to interpretation as reflecting something of a female writer's anxieties in a male dominated literary tradition. The protagonists' insecurities in a deadly patriarchal society seem to mirror the female writer's vulnerability in a male dominated literary culture as recognised by Showalter (2000). But this is not our present focus. Similarly, we acknowledge that there is a strong sense in which Bessie Head's *oeuvre* beckons towards analyses that foreground the mother-daughter relationship. The elephant in the room is the absent mother in this respect because even though Bessie Head knew her mother, she experienced her largely as an absence. In the stories under discussion, as well as in the examples from the rest of her *oeuvre* cited above, the orphan girl character has no mother or has a problematic mother figure. In *Maru,* for instance, Bessie Head does not seem to make the absent mother an issue even though the fact that the missionary, Margaret Cadmore, retrieves the baby she subsequently christens 'Margaret' after her own name, literally from the body of its dead mother and substitutes for her in a sense. Yet, if the young women in her stories come across as displaced, disinherited and excluded, one would expect them not only to seek protective father-figures but, equally to seek solidarity with a supportive mother-figure (Chodorow, 1999). From a psychoanalytical point of view, while a boy learns his gender identity negatively from not being like his mother, the girl's core identity is positive and is built on sameness, continuity, and identification with the mother (Showalter, 1981).

However, we do not find in depictions of the younger women's relationship with other women sustained intimations of desire for a parental figure as we do in depictions of their relationships with older men. It is for this reason that, the focus of this paper is on relationship between the girl-child and an older man. We see the pairings depicted in her works as a device that enables Bessie Head to explore the mythology of the father in Botswana and its tragic paradoxes for women (and women's writing). Her exploration reveals that "father" is a fluid social construct caught up in an unequal contestation between men and women over the kind of male parent the girl child wants, and the male parent society offers her. Both are unattainable illusions. So, they cancel each other out in a violent collision which only reproduces the uneven power relations that engender a sense of the absent father in the first place (Sarat, 2000).

An overview of the argument we make in this paper in relation to these stories is perhaps best summarised by briefly extrapolating it to the more familiar *Maru*. The pairing in *Maru* is between Margaret, a young female orphan, who is in an ambiguous father-lover relationship with the eponymous male character, Maru. It is noteworthy from the point of view of the argument we advance in the present paper that Bessie Head followed the advice from her publishers to recast *Maru* as a children's story instead of the romance that she had intended (Ibrahim, 1996). This detail is relevant here because children's stories generally work like lullabies by fulfilling in fantasy children's real desires. In *Maru,* the fairy tale ending when Maru and

Margaret leave the village to live happily ever after in a world of their own, is a tell-tale sign that the novel was indeed written with a shrewd eye for a juvenile audience (p. 89). Therefore, it is also possible that Bessie Head set out in the daughter-father pairings in these stories to produce fairy tale-like or lullaby-like stories to assuage popular culture's juvenile yearnings for a collective ideal father trope. Daymond (1993) seems to agree that there is indeed this aspect to Bessie Head's stories. In introductory remarks on the *Cardinals*, Bessie Head's first book-length work of fiction, she says, "the love plot of *the cardinal*s rests on a cliché: handsome, worldly man meets and loves a shrinking violet" (xii). And explains:

> This was the basis of many of the escapist romances Bessie Head had handled each week at *Golden City Post*. They were fodder offered in compensation for the subjection that women suffered (xii).

Considering the inclination towards the fairy tale genre noted above, there is something dystopic about *Maru* and the stories we discuss here. They do not, like the father in the lullaby *Mockingbird,* depict situations in which when a promise fails, it is easily replaced by another promise of something bigger and better. In the lullaby, the father promises his child a mockingbird that sings, but will replace it with something even better, a diamond ring, if it does not. Growing up, this seems to amount to the process of developing the capacity to cheerfully replace one object of desire by another when it proves unattainable. There is no hint in the lullaby that daddy standing in the eyes of the child is at all compromised by the successive failures of his promises. In the child's mind, the father's role, it would appear, is to function as the ever-present reassuring maker of promises when the ones made previously fail. He would become irrelevant the moment one of his promises comes true.

In contrast to *Maru* in the stories *Life* and *The Collector of Treasures*, there is hardly any sense of the fairy tale ending, with the lovers living happily ever after the initial setbacks. In the stories when the object of desire is not attained, when the promise is not fulfilled, the child is devastated and does not survive to hope for its replacement. Neither Life nor Dikeledi gets a bigger and better man when their original respective lovers get caught up in enacting the dreadful prerogatives of a patriarchal father figure. Life is butchered by her husband while Dikeledi serves a life sentence in prison for murdering her husband. What Bessie Head demonstrates when the father-figures, promised by the optimistic pairings in the stories, turn out to be nightmarish deviants from the ideal they desired, is that control of what father should mean is exclusively a prerogative of men. It is men who decide what the term 'father' should mean and, if any, what its boundaries are. Lesego determines the punishment for Life's rebellion against his cultural ideal of masculinity, while Garesego decides he alone can set the boundaries of what he can and cannot do as a man.

Patriarchal power is articulated through its arbitrary control of the relationship between the signifier 'father' and its signified. Thus, if there

seems to be a sundering of the signifier 'father' into the repressed lover the girl child privately desires, on the one hand, and the oppressive law giver society has constructed for her, on the other, it is because men dominate cultures signifying practices. This is why the innocuously familiar, every day and taken-for-granted word 'father' is implicated in the reproduction of asymmetries, not only of gender relations but also of power relations and economic exchange (Lane, 2006).

3. Ideology of the flawed father-figure

In presenting the reader with male characters that come across as fatally flawed father figures for young vulnerable women raised without their fathers, Bessie Head makes the father a shifting signifier (Hall, 1997). According to Stuart Hall in the discourse of signification, a floating signifier is a sign that cannot be reduced to a singular meaning but continually generates multiple understandings that are partially overlapping and partially contradictory so that its meaning seems to disappear with each attempt to pin it down. The meaning or signified is said to continually slide beneath the signifier as an elusive other that can only be grasped as a perpetual absence.

The construction of the father as an absence that can never be adequately filled points us to the Lacanian concept of 'lack' which is always related to desire (Lacan, 2013). Without going into the technicalities of Lacan's psychoanalysis, it will suffice to simply propose here that the absent father of Bessie Head's stories could be read in Lacanian terms as a metaphor or symbol of the gap between desire and its satiation. According to Lacan there is always a gap between what the subject (in this case, the female protagonists) wants for a father and what society offers her. Rooted in the subconscious through the oedipal processes and embedded in the language, the father the child wants is its long-lost absent father of the Imaginary stage (corresponding to the Freudian Id) in which the child made no distinction between the self and the external world or the Other. The child enjoyed an ideal relationship with the mother uninterrupted by a father. However, the father that society offers is the idealised father constructed during the Symbolic stage (corresponding roughly with the Freudian Ego stage) which really is an embodiment of the culture's ideals of fatherhood.

The child becomes aware of this culturally constructed father when it becomes aware of itself as a separate entity from the rest of the world and finds his/her privileged access to the mother's love interrupted by the looming presence of this socially imposed threatening construct going by the name of the father. It is for this reason that Lacan distinguishes between the father an individual desires and the father he/she wants. The two will never be on the same place at the same time because the father the individual desires is the absent father of his infancy that did not interrupt his fantasy of an ideal bond with its mother, while the father he wants from society is an impossible embodiment of the cultural ideal of masculinity that will perform the paternal function without frustrating the child's desire for unity with the

Other, especially of the mother.

Wielding Lacanian psychoanalysis before Bessie Head's simple tales set in the postcolonial backwater of rural Botswana may appear gratuitous. However, it is our contention that the Lacanian account of desire and its impossible satiation helps illuminate the significance of the absent father as evidenced by his avatars in the form of father figures depicted in the stories. It enables us to relate the stories to Fredric Jameson's cultural logic of late capitalism (1984). According to Fredric Jameson, the leading critic of the processes of globalization, the key driver of the circulation of commodities and political power in the present era which he has called 'late capitalism' is the sense of a gap between desire and its satiation. In a formulation that is coterminous with Lacan's, Jameson's desire cannot be satisfied by mass production of consumer goods and populist politics which are designed to feed it in much the same way that the cultural construct 'father' does not satisfy the desire for the Other that Lacan postulates it is intended to satiate. In both cases desire does not exist to be satisfied, but exists only to keep desire going, only for its own sake. In the first case Lacan's desire cannot be satisfied because it justifies the illusion of the father in whose name the individual's desires are subordinated to the sway of culture and in whose name society itself is run. Similarly, in Jameson's case the sense of lack that unsatisfied desire engenders is necessary because it becomes the pretext for mass production of consumer goods and populist political ideologies which are purported to feed it under late capitalism (Jameson, 1984).

To relate Bessie Head's absent father to Jameson's idea that the circulation of commodities and exercise of political power under capitalism is driven by desire whose satisfaction depends on but cannot be met by mass production of commodities and populist ideologies we must turn to Lacan. The absent father from a Lacanian perspective is not a real or natural phenomenon. He is a myth planted in the individual's consciousness through the oedipal process during childhood so that every child grows up longing for a father, whether or not the child has a biological father. Thus, the desired father is a fantasy that does not replace but signals the absence of a father. In this sense the absent father is analogous to the political ideologies that promise an eternally elusive social justice. The father similarly serves as an analogy of the cravings that mass production of commodities seeks to satisfy. This is what Fredric Jameson has in mind when he says that postmodernism did not produce President Trump but explains him. Trump's power arose from populist politics and America First economic policies that both appeal to this sense of lack in the post-modern American psyche. Populist political rhetoric and the mass production of objects are both presented as answers to political passions and economic needs they stoke in the first place.

The fact that the term 'father' is a social construct through which the adult hopes to reconcile the unlimited effortless pleasures of infancy and the responsibilities of adult life makes it what Stuart Hall calls "a floating signifier." A floating signifier, as he famously defines it, is a signifier whose

meaning "cannot be finally fixed but is subject to the constant process of redefinition and appropriation" (Hall, 1997). As floating signifiers, the father-figures in the stories are caught up in the slippages between the signifier and the signified. They do not assuage the longing for a father that the female protagonists desire because to do so would be incommensurable with their paternal function as representatives of the social order.

Bessie Head says something uncannily reminiscent of these ideas in her reflection on a man she creates in her fiction. She states that beginning with *The Cardinals* she creates a mythical man who has since appeared everywhere in her work, and yet he is not a flesh and blood reality. She says:

> I write about him all the time - yet he is not a flesh and blood reality. But every time I need to say something about love - he is always there - He gets better and better, but how can I write about a non-existent person? I can't understand this phenomenon (Daymond, 1993: xv).

Clearly the man is a fantasy that she reactivates each time she has pangs of desire for the absent father. According to Lacan the father as an object of desire is infinitely regressive because a return to the bliss of childhood is an illusion which, however, can be exploited politically and economically. Bessie Head's mythical man red flags the existence in the postmodern psyche of the father whose absence is implicated in processes of the circulation of commodities and in the mobilization of political passions. Childish yearnings for the absent father can be stoked and redirected towards political and economic ends.

4. The unthinkable black paternity in the racist South Africa of Bessie Head's early life

Bessie Head's preoccupation with father figures has its basis in the circumstances of her birth and early childhood. Her famous account of paternal parentage by her family's black stable hand has not been authentically corroborated. Neither has the assertion that her mother had been sent to a mental asylum because her family had considered her mad to have had a sexual relationship with a black man (Holtzinger, 2008). Nevertheless, it is well-known, that she was born to a white mother and a black father whom she never knew and who to this day remains unidentified. When her grandparents realised that she was not white but of mixed race they gave her up for adoption to a 'coloured family' (means a person of mixed race and could not be classified as black or white and formed a racial category of their own in apartheid South Africa). While it is true that her mother was in and out of hospital for a chronic mental health issue this was apparently unrelated to the circumstances of Bessie Head's parentage (Holzinger, 2008). In some accounts Bessie Head attributes her mother's commitment to the asylum to the fact that at the time white South Africa thought that a white woman who has sexual relations with a black man was insane (Eilerstein, 1995.) At the age of twelve Bessie Head discovered that the 'coloured" family

with whom she lived were not her biological parents as she was passed on to another foster home. This was followed by further traumatic transfers to foster homes and boarding schools. Bessie Head thus lived under the shadow of an absent father because she did not know her father and had no idea what he would be like, except that he was a black man.

Although she seldom explicitly wrote about it, her fiction indicates that she had a lifelong curiosity about family life with biological parents and was intrigued by questions about what it is like to have a father. She wondered what sort of man that father would look like and how she would react to his love or his authority. This is so much the case that when she was emerging into womanhood her contemplated sexual relationships with black men were notably haunted by fear of incest because any of the eligible black men, she considered could be a sibling or even her unknown father (Mackenzie, 2004, p. 82). Langwadt (2008) is only one among many who have remarked on how extensively concerns with her origins and identity find their way into both her autobiographical writing as well as her fiction. Langwadt attests to her anxieties about a lack, an unfulfillable desire, centered round questions of who she really was. In *The Cardinals* for instance, to agree with Langwadt, Bessie Head has the female protagonist say: "Not now, nor ever shall I be complete. […] me as the thing of nothing from nowhere? Nothing I am, of no tribe or race (141).

But the imbrication of the notions of masculinity, paternity, and fatherhood was especially poignant for Bessie Head's efforts to imagine a viable fatherhood in the lives of the black men who lived in the conditions of racist South Africa. In those conditions South African black men usually had their masculinity confirmed in their tribal groups through various means, such as initiation ceremonies, at the end of which the initiate would declare, 'I am a man' (*Ngi yi ndoda*) (Mandela, 1994, p. 49). This normally gave him the right to paternity, i. e. to marry and have children. This was also predicated on the assumption that he was now able to provide a protective function as well as prohibitive function (lay down the law) to his offspring. However, in the conditions of South Africa, the migrant labour system meant that black men were usually removed from their tribal communities by the pressure to go to the towns to find work, where they were generally treated in ways that detracted from their newly found status as men, to be called 'boys'.

Migration also compromised their ability to provide protection and prohibition to their children since they were generally not permitted to bring their families with them to the city. Furthermore, wages they received were a mockery of the duty of care they had to their children who called them ''father". In other words, in South African society there were no resources for imagining black masculinity, paternity or fatherhood simply because these were privileges not granted to black people. Models of family life and responsible paternity offered by the dominant white culture were a far cry from their own realities. Sex and sexuality for instance, were dissociated from parental and matrimonial responsibility. Men engaged in sex to pursue

brief moments of ecstasy in drunken sprees or in sex without responsibility with prostitutes. The absent father in black lives was largely a product of the racist social system in South Africa. Incidentally, it is not clear how the Freudian and Lacanian oedipal schemes work in a society in which the image and roles of an ideal father promoted by the dominant culture (a superego) are not possible for a man the child must call father (i.e., a black man).

Considering these facts, it is understandable that Bessie Head found in Botswana a congenial place of exile, so that even later in life when she had opportunities to go elsewhere, she was reluctant to leave. One reason why Botswana appealed to her was that she believed that traditional African life in Botswana had not yet been disrupted by westernisation which had torn into shreds the fabric of tradition in her native South Africa. She hoped to find in Botswana, pristine black African masculinity, paternity, and fatherhood that would be viable resources from which she could construct ideas of a possible black fatherhood, not necessarily for herself personally, but as a general concept. She could not fashion one from the images and lives of black men "castrated" by the conditions of apartheid South Africa. In one of her early stories in the collection, *The Cardinals* which she wrote before she left South Africa, she describes black men as "eunuchs".

5. Killing and dying in the name of the father in Bessie Head's stories

The obvious starting point in a discussion that couples the short stories *Life* and *The Collector of Treasures* together is that both stories depict a homicide. In the first, a man kills his wife while in the other it is the woman who kills her husband. The two people who die in the stories are both guilty of the same behaviour. Life dies in *Life* because she is a 'fuck about' according to the moral code of the village, while Garesego in *The Collector of Treasures* behaves like a dog and sleeps with as many women as his money can afford. Both are driven by money to break the village moral code - Life because she wants money and sleeps with men to get it, whereas Garesego has money and sleeps with women to spend it. He, like a mating dog, "imagined he was the only penis in the world" (91).

On the basis of these tragic stories, it is obvious that Botswana did not turn out as she had hoped, to be the flaccid river in whose gentle flow the tensions of her oedipal anxieties about her absent father would dissolve and be quietly washed away. The terrible and frightening question the stories of Garesego and Lesego raised for her was the extent to which they may be construed to represent the cryptic African manhood that she assumed also existed but lay suppressed under the encrustations of apartheid prohibitions back in South Africa. The desire for a viable father figure remains insatiable because even though putatively benign circumstances in Botswana too engender absent black fatherhood. Both Lesego and Garesego are constructed from attributes of masculinity which underlie cultural notions of acceptable paternity. Hence, it can be argued that Lesego kills while Garesego dies

enacting the Name- of-the-Father.

6. Life

Life in the story *Life,* the eponymous protagonist, is an obvious Bessie Head alter ego. There are many parallels in the lives of author and protagonist their peculiar respective circumstances notwithstanding. Like Bessie Head, Life is a woman alone in the village. Having lost both parents, she finds herself alone and having to live on her wits in a world that seems benign but could quickly turn deadly. The village to which Life returns and lives is her father's ancestral home. It is possible that by giving her such a return of the native slant, Bessie Head reflects her inner longing to identify with an African village where ancient tradition and custom remained intact. She could imagine such as the kind of village from which her unknown black father could easily have originated. Indeed, the warmth with which Life is initially welcomed into the community and helped to set up home in her family homestead tends to lend credence to such speculations about her idealistic hopes of an easy identification with an African village that she might have made settling in Serowe reminiscent of a return to an ancestral home.

The fact that Life resorts to prostitution bears no parallel to Bessie Head's life but must nevertheless be accounted for in terms of what role it may have meant to Bessie Head's artistic treatment of the theme of the absent father. The first thing to note in this regard is that the village does not turn Life into a prostitute. It is her choice. She simply practices a means of livelihood that she had learnt from her previous life in South Africa. In any case she finds opportunities for alternative sources of livelihood extremely limited in the village. Brewing and selling traditional beer which seems to be the only occupation available to women who did not wish, or did not get the chance, to be wives do not appeal to her. But Life may have turned to prostitution also because she shrewdly recognised behind the pastoral gentility of the men in the village the same suppressed yearning for release from the grip of grim oppression that she knew so well in the black men in apartheid South Africa. She discerned that a market for short moments of glory in sex with prostitutes existed in the village too.

The conventional stigma against prostitution notwithstanding, she represents the freedom and *joie de vivre* which society generally seeks to control, restrain, and eventually snuff out through narrow-minded moral codes. Even if she had not been doing it for money, her free-wheeling easy-come-easy-go lifestyle might still have earned her the epithet 'prostitute'. In the village, Life explodes into a joyful exuberance, and she is at home and happiest among the beer brewers who give expression to their free spirits in boisterous laughter, song, and dance. But although not as obvious as the brutal regimes of apartheid South Africa, the village exerts an equally deadly moral code which a young girl defies at great peril to her life.

It is also arguable whether Life's prostitution was simply a matter of money. In *When Rain Clouds Gather,* we get the impression that Bessie

Head has a sneak admiration for prostitutes as Makhaya, the protagonist in that novel, hints when he says:

> ...prostitutes were the best type of women you'll find among all black women unless a man wanted to be trapped for life by a dead thing. A prostitute laughed. She established her own equality with men...and was so used to the sex organs of men that she was more inclined to regard him as a bit more than a sex organ. Not so the dead thing most men married. Someone told that dead thing that a man was only his sex organs and functioned as such (p. 131).

It is true that the men she sleeps with for money do it for the same reasons as her previous clients in South Africa. They are men chaffing under the crush of a life-denying moral regime and are grateful for the short-lived glory and illusions of manhood she offers in sex for cash. There is at bottom no difference between these village men and the slick city clients she knew in South Africa. For both the moments of glory with prostitutes are really a cruel parody of the manhood they really seek. In South Africa the men's manhood is crushed by the regimes of the apartheid system which ensures that they cannot be fathers that provide and protect and lay down the law. In the village the men are stuck in the rut of culturally determined roles in which paternity is earned at the experience of freedom to love and live freely. In both cases the men who pay her for sex pay for moments of short-lived glory and illusions of manly potency, but in reality, what they experience is only a parody of the real manliness they crave.

But Life wants more than just money from a man. A close up of Lesego, the man she finally marries, clearly shows that alongside her commercially driven promiscuity, there is a deeper yearning for a man who would demonstrate the form of masculinity that chimes with her longing for a father figure. At face value, Lesego is material for the kind of father with whom she could be in a 'crazy-like-a- fool' Oedipal love. He is strong, hard-working, and rich and his word is law among other men, let alone among women and children. He is capable of paternity (being a male biological parent). He is competent to provide both the protective and prohibitive functions (lay the law) in his home and in the community. And Life is powerfully drawn to him. But he lives under the same regime of crushing moral code as the other men that exacts a very high price in freedom and happiness for masculinity. To be a man in his community, he spends months at the cattle post and only comes home occasionally. He has no social or family life or anything approaching the *joie de vivre* which is the element of Life's restless soul. He brooks little contradiction and demands absolute respect and obedience from his women and from his fellow men. It is not at all surprising that he demands that she stop prostitution when he marries her and tells her he would kill her if she slept with another man. There is no reason why they should not live happily ever after, but Life quickly resumes her life of prostitution and true to his word Lesego kills her.

There are at least two possible explanations why Bessie Head provides this kind of ending to the story. The first one may be that Life represents the possibilities and exuberant joy of living which is naturally stifled by moral codes. Her early demise at the hands of a man who is the paragon of his society's virtues is a symbol of the tragedy of what happens when life is subordinated to the dictates of a life denying moral code. It is a metaphor for the neurosis that Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents* says breaks out when people are forced to deny themselves for the sake of repressive order (Freud 2005). The other possible explanation for the sad ending of the story may be that Bessie Head wants to show how patriarchy like any other system tries to reconcile two contradictory functions of the father. As a provider and protector, Lesego is the father that Life craves, but as a prohibitionist or lawgiver, he is everything that Life dreads and would rather die than put up with. Her return to the life of prostitution is a symbol of defiance and an affirmation of life. Lesego's marriage with Life fails because it embodies the unresolvable oedipal contradiction that entails a search for a husband in a father or vice versa when, in fact, husband is not father.

In this respect, it is noteworthy that Lesego is sentenced to a mere five-year imprisonment for the murder of Life by a white judge who sympathetically adjudges it to be a crime of passion. The judge's sympathetic judgement, we read, is due to his admiration of Lesego as an embodiment of what he assumes are Botswana's ancient traditions and custom- the very traditions and customs that drew Bessie Head to Botswana in the first place. If Lesego embodies those traditions and customs, then clearly Bessie Head no longer regards them with her innocent original admiration. In fact, she attributes sinister and baleful aspects to them, especially to its notions of masculinity. But even if the judge's opinion is taken at face value, Life's death suggests that she was a foreign body that was a stain on the traditions and customs of an otherwise admirable culture that had to be removed and discarded. But in making this judgement, the white judge installs himself as a colonial super father figure, upon whose authority even tribal power rests.

To sum up then, Bessie Head reveals the impossibility of constructing a viable father figure from the resources of what she originally took to be a largely unadulterated African culture. However, the difficulty of constructing effective black father imaginaries both in her native South Africa and adoptive Botswana is not an individual or personal failing of Bessie Head's. Going back to the observations with which we began this paper, it is clear that the failure is her specific manifestation of the gap between desire and its satiation and all that follows from it about the circulation of power and commodities in society.

7. The Collector of treasures

The Collector of Treasures opens with the protagonist, Dikeledi, in prison at Gaborone to begin her life sentence for killing her husband, Garesego. She is the collector of treasures because of her capacity to reach out in love to other

people and treasure the gestures of goodness she receives from other people, even in prison. It is noteworthy that unlike Lesego in *Life* who gets away relatively lightly with a five-year sentence for the murder of his wife, Dikeledi gets a life sentence for the murder of her husband. But equally noteworthy is that in both stories it is the women that get to be removed from the village permanently. This is at first puzzling, but perhaps explainable from a point of the view that these women represent qualities that Bessie Head cherished but appeared even to her too fragile to survive in this world. Therefore, they are the treasures that must be grasped before they escape our grasp for ever. That is probably Bessie Head's idea in giving us their fleeting glimpses.

However, if we read *The Collector of Treasures* as yet another of Bessie Head's attempt to explore the imbrication of masculinity, paternity, and fatherhood in the construction of the father she never knew our focus should be on Garesego, Dikeledi's rascally husband and his foil, the good man Thebolo, a school teacher who offers to take care of Dikeledi's children when she goes to jail. In the story Botswana has recently acquired independence. It is a far - cry from a traditional African society still steeped in ancestral traditions and customs as she imagined it when she was still in South Africa. It had not been exposed to modernity and Western culture. The two men, Garesego and Thebolo, respond in diametrically opposite ways to this change. Garesego sticks to the privilege that traditional society granted to men in the past, partly because the system of checks and balances that regulated men's use of this privilege has collapsed, and because he now earns enough money to indulge his desires. Garesego turns out to be the worst specimen of manhood. He can father children, i. e. capable of biological paternity but will not assume the role of protector and provider to the children he fathers. In him Bessie Head sees no material for the construction of black fatherhood in relation to which the child could achieve a successful oedipal complex resolution.

Thebolo on the other hand is an educated man and probably earns as much money in his job as Garesego, but it seems he has been able to combine his best traditional Africa (customs) and the new ways coming up with modernisation. He still embraces the traditional privileges accorded to men by tradition and custom by combining masculinity, paternity, and fatherhood. At the same time, he is an intellectual who spouts Marxism and revolution. When his wife suggests that he could have sex with their friend Dikeledi so that she too could experience the tenderness of lovemaking with a man who cares about the other person, he does not jump at the opportunity the way Garesego presumably would. While Garesego behaved like a mating dog and seemed to "indulge in a continuous spurt of orgasms, day and night until he was exhausted" (p. 91), Thebolo spends his time differently. He like his wife is attracted to a whole range of friends:

> "They had guests every evening; illiterate men who wanted him to fill in tax forms or write letters for them, or his colleagues who wanted to debate the political issues of the day" (p. 94).

He embodies a new masculinity. However, it seems to us that both Garesego's wickedness and Paul Thebolo's perfections are perhaps overstated so that both characters are not meant to represent real people but extremities on the spectrum of possible father figures. In effect, as far as Bessie Head is concerned Garesego is too evil as a father and Thebolo is too good to be true. So, *The Collector of Treasures* does not really help in providing us with a realistic father figure that would fill the space of the absent father. But then, the purpose or representation is only superficially to reveal the real. The purpose of representation is to signal that which it cannot reveal. So Thebolo, for all the lustre of his image as a father figure, is not a representation of what a good father is, he is merely an indication of a dream that is not attainable. Thus, when he installs himself as a father figure in the village, he takes advantage of the gap in the community between its desire for a father figure and the available role models. Whether he knows it or not, he is peddling a promise to satisfy the community's desire for a father figure which he knows he can only try but will not satisfy. This is not to suggest that he is a hypocrite opportunist. Rather what Bessie Head demonstrates through him is the Lacanian view that this gap between desire and its satiation is embedded in the language we use and wired in our consciousness. Both Garesego and Thebolo are simply signifiers who are the graspable representation of something that eludes representation.

The absent father then becomes a desire that spawns endless representations of the father all of which claims to but is, in fact, designed not to be the father of the desire they stoke. Politicians and the religious do the same. They excite hopes and dreams which they purport meet the desire they stoked in the first place. Traders exploit by circulating industrial commodities that are purported to assuage the desire created by the producers in the first place. Even though Bessie Head may have hoped to find in Botswana resources she could not find in her native South Africa out of which to construct a possible black father she was unable to do so in *Life* and in *The Collector of Treasures*.

8. Conclusion

Bessie Head was described by Lewis Nkosi, among others, as an apolitical writer (Nkosi, 1981, p. 99). Nkosi stated that "She is not a political writer in any sense that we can recognise". In one sense, this criticism is fair enough. Bessie Head did not set out to push, however delicately, the ideology of any political party or movement. Even about feminism, she was decidedly reluctant to espouse an unambiguous commitment.

This is what she said on the issue:

> The least I can ever say for myself is that I forcefully created for myself, under extremely hostile conditions, my ideal life. I took an obscure almost unknown village in the southern African bush and made it my own hallowed ground. Here in the steadiness of peace of my own mind, I could dream dreams a little ahead of the

> somewhat vicious clamour of revolution and the horrible stench of evil social systems (Head, 1990, p. 45).

The above statement suggests that in a sense, Nkosi's verdict is a superficial assessment. It does not recognise the depth of Bessie Head's political thought. To reject involvement in the politics of parties or movements, as she does, is itself a political position. Bessie Head's lack of interest in political organisation and movements is a political choice informed by deeper insights into the dynamics of power and privilege in such organizations and movements than her apparent apathy suggests. Indeed, the stories demonstrate a sensitivity to the way unequal power relations and the political asymmetrical economic exchanges are sustained and perpetuated in a culture through political discourses and practices which deploy the everyday and taken for granted, like the notion of the father.

We have demonstrated in this paper that her work is, therefore, political, in a sense that is important to recognise against the present backdrop of the twin pillars of late capitalism, namely populist nationalism and consumerism, which both manipulate and exploit the unconscious sense of the absent father in the modern mind.

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