

Using the Heart: The Symbolism of Individual Change in Bessie Head's *Maru*

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Bessie Head's commentary in *Maru* (1971) is delivered at the personal level, though it purports a solution to the racism suffered by the Masarwa people. The novel traces the symbolic change of Dilepe village (Botswana) and, by extension, that of Africa, effected by a single Masarwa woman who can read and write. The young Margaret Cadmore enters the scene with the expectation of "one day" helping her "people."¹ She is shy. She has an awkward manner. She is not personable. This has led some critics to misunderstand Head's vision and call it a failed one. Huma Ibrahim, for instance, believes "that Margaret Cadmore remains the perfect victim of racism and sexism throughout th[e] novel."² For Ibrahim, Margaret is only the passive recipient of good will: "surely the nexus of Masarwa struggle is not to accept charity but to enter consciously into the new definition of a nation."³ It is true that Margaret never enters the national discourse of racism as a political leader or even makes her purpose known. But Head has the unassuming Margaret single-handedly change the course of that community's history.

Head realizes that racism, no matter what its origin, is perpetuated by individuals, and individuals can decide to reject any measure that runs counter to what they consider right. There is many a travesty, after all, to which the human race could subscribe for its economic viability (feeding our bad students to the better ones, for instance) but that our humanity prevents us from considering. In Dilepe village, where wealth is hoarded and resources distributed inefficiently, racism has created a subordinate caste, the Masarwa, to carry the burden of this inefficiency. But this is not humane. Head seems to suggest in *Maru* that human beings are capable of racism because over time their hearts have come to live separately from themselves. Just as Moleka, a main character, has "taken his heart out of his body and hidden it in some secret place" (26), these people, without hearts to guide them, can believe ideas without considering their inhuman implications. If one could reunite head with heart in these people, perhaps promoting racism would seem as unreasonable as eating students. *Maru* is the story of racism being overcome in this way, at an individual level, related symbolically by a

quartet of characters: the men, Moleka and Maru, and the women, Margaret and Dikeledi.

I shall show that before Margaret appears in Dilepe, Moleka and Maru represent two parts of a single individual. Moleka represents the self without the heart and Maru represents the missing heart. Through a well-developed metaphor in the text, we come to think of Moleka as a sun, powerful on its own, and as a thunderstorm, but one that needs a cloud from which to draw rain. The cloud is Maru, who represents the heart that Moleka lacks. If Moleka had a cloud, a heart, of his own, he would be complete he could combine sunshine with rainfall and produce a rainbow.

Early in the story, during Moleka's first interaction with Margaret, Moleka gains a heart for the first time by falling in love with her. Maru, noticing himself displaced in Moleka's life, acts as a jealous lover and does all he can to ruin Moleka's new connection to Margaret. But as Maru finds out, Margaret has not replaced Maru as Moleka's heart, but given Moleka a heart of his own. Finding himself tragically useless, Maru begins to dream of escaping from the society for which he has always felt contempt. He recognizes Margaret, who despite falling in love with Moleka keeps herself away from him, as a soul mate. Margaret and Maru, not in love but both suffering because of their love for Moleka, escape together, to a setting rife with imagery alluding to Moleka. Moleka's love for Margaret is, in the end, transferred to Dikeledi, or at least the text gives us every hope that it will be: after he marries Dikeledi, and after Maru marries and disappears with Margaret, Moleka "laughed and laughed. Everything else went smoothly for Dikeledi" (125). Moleka and Dikeledi become the unprejudiced chiefs of the Dilepe Tribal Administration. Institutionalized racism will no longer be tolerated.

The situation of the Masarwa is improved, and it is Margaret who becomes the impetus for change in two decisive ways: first, by symbolically reuniting Moleka with his heart; second, by withholding herself from him so that he can unite with the efficient, unprejudiced, and leader-bound Dikeledi. That Margaret is not forceful in her methods, even that she is unaware of them, does not diminish the symbolism of her being the catalyst for change. That she is unconscious of her role perhaps even speaks to the inevitability of the effected change. By her efforts, "the wind of freedom" (126) enters the space of the Masarwa tribe, the "dark airless room in which their souls had been shut for a long time" (126).

Before going any further, Maru's representation as cloud must be considered as it relates to the possibility that Maru and Moleka represent two parts of the same character before Margaret's appearance: Maru representing the heart, Moleka representing the self without the heart.

By associating Maru with the cloud that needs a force to produce water, and Moleka with the force that needs a substance, the cloud, a relationship of dependence is emphasized between the two characters. V. S. Menager-Everson notes that "in Setswana *maru* means 'cloud'," ⁴ and that in the story, Maru is "indeed that banking of clouds" that is unable to "release its beneficial downpour." ⁵ Johnson also sees Maru as a cloud, and that "a comparison is implied between the cloud that fails to produce rain and the chief who fails to relieve the distress of his people," namely, Maru. ⁶ Moleka is representative of water from torrential rains. According to Johnson, Moleka is explicitly linked with the vitality of a thunderstorm. ⁷ When Moleka spoke, "his voice had such projection and power that the room vibrated" (27). Moleka's vitality is also suggested in a strong association with the sun. "Comparisons of Moleka with the sun are explicit," ⁸ says Johnson, and Menager-Everson agrees that "Moleka is 'sun'." ⁹ Head's narrator tells us explicitly about Moleka's "body that felt like a living pulsating sun" (31); that "Moleka was a sun around which spun a billion satellites" (58); that his eyes were "two yellow orbs of light" (57); that he "felt the sun in his own heart" (76). But Moleka is incomplete. From the first page, "bright cloudless skies hold no promise," ¹⁰ notes Joyce Johnson, and it is a "soft steady rain" ¹¹ that people long for. Moleka has the ability to draw it as from a well, but the source of water lies with the cloud. Maru is the source with whom Moleka must negotiate to combine his sun with water.

Other aspects of the text confirm that, before Margaret arrives, Moleka is incomplete without Maru. Moleka is "split in two" (58) and "only half the statement of his kingdom" (58). He has grown "accustomed to having a shadow next to him" (33). This "shadow" is introduced as another part of him that keeps "shyly" silent while Moleka maneuvers his way into a woman's bed (33). It is only upon hearing Moleka address this shadow that we learn what he calls this part of himself: "of course Maru" (33).

Before Margaret appears, Maru's and Moleka's relations with women follow divergent patterns. Moleka's behavior is consistent with him having no heart. He is interested in the physical only. He intellectualizes sex, knows everything "about the female anatomy" (35), and needs to find more and more "horrible sensations" (35) in order to keep his affairs interesting. He uses women, gives them no love, ruins them emotionally, and dumps them, all the while remaining "unhurt, smiling" (35). Juxtaposed with this behavior is Maru's love life. He gives too much love, so much so that "the weakest" of his women "went insane, and walked about the village muttering to themselves" (35). This love is described as a "nameless terror" (35), indicating that Moleka and Maru belong to "opposing kingdoms" (34). Maru "always fell in love" (76). He loves all his women and is himself broken by each one, "taking to bed" with a "deep sorrow" (35).

While Moleka is "a living dynamo" (70), future king "of the African continent" (70), this way of being is unfathomable to Maru, "as though shut behind a heavy iron door" (34). Maru is shy and quiet and has only five friends, that is, two "shadows" (37), one spy (59), a sister, and Moleka, "in a village of over fifty thousand people" (37). Maru is "not the kind of personality to rule the masses" (50) but one whose sole purpose is to "love" (35), and be loved intensely, like a heart. Yet Maru is the greatest manipulator in the novel, acting rashly, selfishly, and even cruelly. How does one explain this paradox in Head's description?

To understand Maru's character, I think, we must understand the novel's symbolism. The pivotal moment in the novel's symbolic movement, the unification of self and heart in Moleka, comes directly after Moleka and Margaret meet for the first time, at the old library where Moleka has arranged for Margaret to stay.

"It was a long single room" which was "covered in layers of dust and cobwebs" (29): the place they are entering has remained unused for some time. We notice an immediate change in the rhythm of the narrative as they enter the library, from the preceding scene of "goats and people" jumping and vans swooping up hills (28) to Moleka's strange brooding. Margaret does not understand what he is doing, all of a sudden "deep in thought" (29), and decides he must be "retrieving his breath" (29), though he has not exerted himself. He is "slowly" pacing "up and down" (29), his movement paralleled by "a big black scorpion" which scuttles "across the room" (29). Moleka's "head [is] bent" (29) toward the ground and the scorpion, as though he were in consultation with the animal. The scorpion seems to be placed as a metaphor for the unwitting Maru, who is being replaced as the heart of Moleka. The scorpion is "disturbed at their entry" (29).

In this part of the scene, Margaret wants Moleka to leave the table where it is, and Maru as the scorpion shows us by angry reactions that he wants Moleka to do the opposite, that is, to remove the table. We later see this chain of events repeated when Maru wants Moleka to retrieve a bed lent to Margaret, and Margaret, of course, wants to keep the bed to sleep on (64).

Moleka's body language leads us to believe that he converses symbolically with the scorpion upon first entering the room. Whatever is exchanged between them, Head states that the scorpion becomes "angry" (29), a strange description for a small creature ostensibly interested in self-protection, and threatening, "his tail alertly poised to strike" (29). The scorpion wants Moleka to remove the table similar to Maru, who later wants him to remove the bed. Moleka moves to raise the table "as though to fold its supports and remove it" (29). Margaret "hear[s]" (29) him and "bursts out nervously: 'please don't remove the table'" (29).

He keeps "his hands touching the table" (29), but refrains from lifting it. He stops to absorb the moment, using the table to steady himself. At that moment, Moleka feels compelled to do as Margaret asks, against Maru's wishes. "Why?" (29), he asks, but his tone, "deepened in a strange way," like "something sweet," like "a note of music," reveals that he already feels the answer (29). Something has changed his voice so dramatically that from one moment to the next, Margaret can "hardly recognize" it (29); something has changed him so dramatically that she suspects "magic" (29) is at play. "A moment ago he had been a hateful, arrogant man. Now, he had another face which made him seem the most beautiful person on earth" (30).

As mentioned earlier, Maru is associated with both cloud and heart, neither of which Moleka possesses before the scene in the library. Margaret is the first to notice the "cloud" around Moleka's eyes (27), as well as his sun, which "lit up" (26) the faces of people who looked at him. When Moleka chooses not to remove the table, Margaret sees this sun produce its first rainfall. What results is a "rainbow of dazzling light" (30). He no longer needs Maru's cloud to be complete. She overhears him thinking aloud: "first there was one of you. Now there are two of you" (30). She seems to think he is referring to being in love with her. But the statement could also refer to his realization of the change Margaret has effected in him: first there was only one, Maru, providing him with a heart. Now there are two, both Margaret and Maru. But unlike Maru, Margaret is not completing Moleka but giving Moleka his own heart. Moleka no longer needs Maru as his shadow. "The scorpion crossed his path and he quietly crushed it with his foot" (30). "Oh" (30), she says, and indicates what has changed in him by raising "her hand towards her heart" (30).

Moleka is in love for the first time, with Margaret, and Margaret is in love with him. Moleka changes his disposition toward everyone, and everyone notices Moleka's changed state of mind. He is the talk of the town when he invites Seth, the prejudiced education supervisor, to dinner and feeds a Masarwa "with the same fork" with which he feeds himself (53). Even Ranko notes that "Moleka is a changed man." Usually Moleka says: "hey, Ranko, you damn fool, come here." But later, it is: "Ranko, please fetch me a packet of cigarettes out of the shop" (5455). Indeed, from his experience with Margaret, Moleka gains not just love but the ability to love at various levels.

But as the story would have it, Margaret, the Masarwa, does not marry Moleka, soon to be chief of the Batswana. Moleka marries the princess of the tribe, Dikeledi, while Margaret marries Maru, a social hermit, albeit one of royal descent, who disappears with her so that rumors of his death start up immediately (126).

Why does Maru marry Margaret? From the time Maru first hears of Margaret, his language when speaking of her is the language of possession. She is "gold" and he will "steal" it because he has "grown tired of the straw" (84). She is the prize to a

contest for which he is ready to cheat in order to win: "report the minute she mentions the name of anyone who has taken her fancy and I shall mess everything up" (72). His plan is not to fall in love with her or even to convince her to fall in love with him. Instead he intends to threaten her: "if you do not agree to marry me, you will stare at the moon for the rest of your days" (72). When Maru first expresses interest in Margaret, he is not curious about who she is. There is no description of his being conflicted or impassioned as he is for Moleka. Never once do we see a personal connection between him and Margaret. He sets up her pictures not for what they are of her but for what they are of him: when a painting is sent to him to which he cannot relate, he sends it back: "you keep it. I don't like it" (116). Others he hangs up like mirrors about his room (105). Even when Maru says he loves Margaret, the context reduces his professed love to covetousness: "what will I do if she does not love me as much as I love her? ... Kill her" (111).

Maru wants Margaret out of jealousy over Moleka. Before seeing Margaret for the first time, "something was violently agitating his heart" (55) when Ranko tells him how changed Moleka is by Margaret. Immediately Maru feels the ramifications of Moleka's new love: "I am so lonely" (56). "Moleka ... has a heart of gold" (56), Maru remembers, his heart growing "cold with fear" (57). He confronts Moleka, starting an argument smacking of a lovers' quarrel.

As the novel progresses, we see a change in Maru's relationship to Margaret. Symbolically, seeing that he has been replaced as the heart of Moleka, he begins to notice the connection he has with Margaret. Like Maru, Margaret has been an outcast. Maru is often described as a "God" (66) and Margaret has made Moleka into a god: "who else made a god overnight but a goddess?" (67), Maru reasons. Furthermore, they have both given to Moleka and are no longer needed: Maru, as the heart that has been replaced; Margaret, as the lover who will never be the wife. Because they both love Moleka, yet cannot be with him, they both have the same need and only each other to fill the void. Together they are more whole than they would be apart. Margaret warms to Maru's "torrential expressions of love" (8), a description reminiscent of Moleka, who has become the "thunder-cloud" (27) that carries with it the rain. They situate themselves where they can find comfort from the "low horizon where the storm brooded" (7), symbolic of Moleka as sun and thundercloud. They surround their house with "yellow daisies" (7), flowers of the sun and translated directly from Maru's dreams (7). We are told that Maru nurtures them so carefully because they "resembled the face of his wife and the sun of his love" (5), Moleka.

According to Menager-Everson, characters are "moisture deficient" when sad and absorb "fluid" as they grow happier.¹² Without Moleka, Maru lives in perpetual drought. "Didn't I tell you not to break up the clods?" he yells at Ranko, "they are for conserving moisture" (6). The "white grass" around the house is "parched" (7). Maru

can produce no moisture himself. The rains have not come, it is a "hot, dry summer" (5), and Maru, like "those black storm clouds," must live "in thick folds of brooding darkness" (5). He is in darkness because he has lost his sun, Moleka. He is dry because he has lost his thundershower, Moleka. In many ways the story is beautiful for its tragedy: Maru the heart sacrificed to the sun, the sun united with Maru's sister.

The dynamic of this last relationship between Moleka and Dikeledi unfolds as follows. In the scene in which Maru sees Margaret for the first time, Moleka sees her for the last time. From then on, the novel tells the story of Moleka privately understanding his new awareness of love, and the story of Maru maneuvering to steal away with Margaret. Maru, through Ranko, leads Moleka directly into Dikeledi's arms. Moleka, though in love with Margaret up to the end, and though understanding that "a pre-arranged trap had been set for him" (83), begins to feel love for Dikeledi. In Moleka's own words, "one woman set his heart aflame and he had turned around and put all that fire into another woman's keeping" (83). Dikeledi is a "living dynamo" (70), among the natural "queens of the African continent" (70). Once Moleka understands that he is no longer the old Moleka since meeting Margaret, but "Moleka, with something added" (80), as he puts it, he is able to put this "something," his heart, to use. As chief of the Tribal Administration, and with Dikeledi, he will change Dilepe and better the conditions of the Masarwa.

Head's response to the problem of institutionalized racism is not a battle call for the self-emancipation of the Masarwa. But it would be wrong to dismiss Head without understanding that, in effect, she is calling for the self-emancipation of humanity, which includes Masarwa emancipation. If everybody united head with heart as Moleka does, racism would dissolve as the people who believe in it would stop believing. Racism would simply cease. Although this vision is unrealistic, it is beautiful nonetheless. Individuals, together, would lead Africa out of its dark place and into the swelling sunlight, where temperate rains fall, and there are rainbows.

Notes

1. Bessie Head, *Maru* (Reading: Heinemann, 1995) 17. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text.

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2. Huma Ibrahim, *Bessie Head: Subversive Identities in Exile* (London: University of Virginia Press, 1996) 100.

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3. Ibrahim 101.

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4. V. S. Menager-Everson, "Maru by Bessie Head: The Dilepe Quartet from Drought to Beer," *Obsidian* II 3.3 (1988): 44.

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5. Menager-Everson 44.

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6. Joyce Johnson, "Structures of Meaning in the Novels of Bessie Head," *Kunapipi* 8.1 (1986): 61.

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7. Johnson 63.

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8. Johnson 63.

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9. Menager-Everson 45.

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10. Johnson 56.

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11. Johnson 56.

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12. Menager-Everson 45.

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