

INTERSECTIONALITY OF GENDER AND ETHNICITY IN BESSIE HEAD'S MARU

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Abstract

The goal of an intersectional feminist literary analysis is to investigate how the lived experiences of marginalized people are influenced by overlapping oppressive systems, including those based on race, gender, class, and ethnicity. The study adopts feminist theory, with particular reference to intersectionality. The research examines Bessie Head's Maru. The findings reveal a deeper understanding of the damaging effects of patriarchal ideology on African communities, unravelling the social, cultural, and power dynamics perpetuating gender inequality and marginalization thereby paving the way for comprehensive social change and progress. Head addresses themes of empowerment through female solidarity when other women support Margaret's quest for acceptance: "In our shared pain lay our strength." This statement shows how collective experiences among women can foster togetherness against patriarchal structures while revealing their unique struggles shaped by intersecting identities. In conclusion, this study argues that social positioning within society takes a person's situatedness, explaining how a person's intersections affect how they navigate the world.

Keywords: Africa, Feminism, Intersectionality, Marginalization, Patriarchy.

DOI: 10.31039/bjir.v2i5.34

1. INTRODUCTION

An intersectional feminist reading of literature seeks to explore how overlapping systems of oppression such as race, gender, class, and ethnicity shape the lived experiences of marginalized individuals. Bessie Head's *Maru* (1971) provides a compelling framework for such an analysis, as it delves into the complexities of identity, discrimination, and societal hierarchies within a postcolonial African context. Set in Botswana, the novel centers on Margaret Cadmore, a young woman of Masarwa (Basarwa) heritage, who faces ostracism and prejudice due to her ethnicity and gender.

Through Margaret's narrative, Head critiques the intersection of patriarchal and racial oppression, highlighting how the dehumanization of the Masarwa people parallels the marginalization of women. At the same time, Head challenges these systems by portraying Margaret as a figure of quiet strength and resilience, whose education and dignity defy the expectations imposed upon her. An intersectional feminist approach to *Maru* not only illuminates the layered oppressions faced by marginalized women but also underscores the novel's broader critique of societal inequalities. By weaving together themes of love, identity, and resistance, Bessie Head crafts a powerful narrative that interrogates the intersections of race, gender, and power in a deeply divided society.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

An intersectional feminist theoretical framework provides a critical lens for analyzing the complex interplay of race, gender, class, and ethnicity in Bessie Head's *Maru*. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality highlights how overlapping systems of oppression create unique experiences of marginalization. Applying this framework to *Maru* enables an examination of how Head critiques the intertwined structures of patriarchal and racial hierarchies within the postcolonial context of Botswana.

Margaret Cadmore, the novel's protagonist, embodies the intersection of gendered and racial oppression as a Masarwa (Basarwa) woman in a society that dehumanizes her both as a woman and as a member of a marginalized ethnic group. Through Margaret's experiences, Head critiques the systemic inequalities perpetuated by colonial and patriarchal power structures while exploring how these forces intersect to silence and alienate marginalized

individuals. Intersectional feminism also allows for an exploration of resistance and empowerment in *Maru*, as Margaret's dignity, education, and agency challenge the oppressive forces that seek to confine her. This framework situates *Maru* within broader feminist and postcolonial discourses, emphasizing its interrogation of societal power dynamics and its call for a more inclusive and equitable vision of humanity.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study takes a text-centered approach, focusing on Bessie Head's *Maru* to analyze its thematic exploration of intersecting feminist issues. By engaging with a wide array of critical resources including scholarly works, journal articles, book reviews, and online materials it aims to shed light on how the novel challenges and reimagines traditional narratives surrounding gender, identity, and systemic oppression.

4. SYNOPSIS OF BESSIE HEAD'S *MARU*

Margaret Cadmore, a young and intelligent Masarwa girl, grows up under the care of a white missionary woman who educates her and instills in her a sense of self-worth. Despite being from a marginalized community that is stigmatized and oppressed by the Batswana people, Margaret excels academically and becomes a teacher.

When Margaret is posted to teach in the village of Dilepe, her arrival sparks a quiet revolution. The villagers, deeply rooted in their prejudices, are shocked by her presence as a Masarwa woman in a position of authority. Yet Margaret's grace, intelligence, and kindness gradually challenge their biases.

Two prominent men, **Maru** and **Moleka**, are central to the unfolding drama. Both are powerful figures in the village and become captivated by Margaret. Moleka, a charismatic and passionate man, falls deeply in love with her but is hesitant to act due to the stigma attached to her ethnicity. Maru, a cunning and enigmatic leader, also loves Margaret but is more strategic in pursuing her. Maru envisions a future where their union challenges and dismantles societal prejudices. In a dramatic twist, Maru orchestrates events to marry Margaret, defying the expectations of his people and taking a significant stand against the entrenched racism of his society. Their marriage becomes a symbol of hope for a more inclusive and equitable future.

5. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

5.1. Intersectionality in Gender and Ethnicity

In the opening part of the novel, Bessie knottily textures a narrative that shows the multifaceted struggles faced by women, particularly through Miss Cadmore's mother. This introduction sets and showcases critical dilemma and investigation of identity, gender and ethnicity, which is often fraught with challenges within the society. The predicament and calamity experienced by women are not merely personal struggles; they echo societal issues that echo across different, tribes, cultures and historical contexts. Godwin mentions that "the complexities of intersectionality in women's psychology are often overlooked, especially in relation to the varied racial and economic realities women face globally" (13). This is clear evidence of intersectionality of gender and ethnicity as illustrated in the novel.

True enough, the woman who gave birth to a child on the outskirts of a remote village had the same thin, Masarwa stick legs and wore the same Masarwa ankle-length, loose shift dress which smelt strongly of urine and the smoke of outdoor fires. She had died during the night but the child was still alive and crying feebly when a passer-by noticed the corpse. When no one wanted to bury a dead body, they called the missionaries; not that the missionaries really liked to be involved with mankind, but they had been known to go into queer places because of their occupation. They would do that but they did not often like you to (Head, 8)

Bessie introduces readers to a world where women are often caught in a web of expectations and limitations imposed by patriarchal structures. Margert's mother's corpse embodies this struggle, as her lifeless body faces family and societal discrimination. Her experiences serve as a yardstick for understanding how women's identities are shaped by external pressures, including economic hardship, social norms and familial obligations. According to Tajfel and Turner "Social identity theory provides a framework for analyzing how race, class, and gender influence the dynamics of intergroup behavior, shaping the interactions and power structures within society" (278). The depiction of Miss Cadmore's mother's life, illustrates the emotional turmoil that arises from these constraints, showing feelings of inadequacy and exclusion of Masarwa tribe. Mrs. Margaret Cadmore the missionary resound how the Masarwa were neglected as she says;

As when no one wanted to bury a dead body, they called the missionaries; not that the missionaries really liked to be involved with mankind, but they had been known to go into queer places because of their occupation. They would do that but they did not often like you to (8).

Arguably, the exclusion and avoidance of Miss Cadmore mother's lifeless body exemplify the intersectionality at play. This is evidence as the calamities faced by Miss Cadmore's mother further complicate her identity. These calamities can be understood as both personal tragedies such as loss or betrayal and systemic injustices that limit women's fold. Bessie uses these elements to show how such experiences not only gender can lead to an internal conflict regarding self-worth and identity. Crenshaw argues that monistic definitions of discrimination, which define sex and race as mutually exclusive categories, render the simultaneous experience of gendered racism invisible and legal claims of 'compound' discrimination inadmissible (139). She argues that legal concepts of discrimination must be revised if they are to serve as remedies to historical and structural oppression. Discrimination must be reconceptualized in terms of the concrete experiences of Black women (1250).

On this occasion her thoughts involved her. She kept her eyes screwed up reflectively as she absent-mindedly bottle-fed the baby of the dead woman. A number of things had happened all at once. Margaret Cadmore was not the kind of woman to speculate on how any artistic observation of human suffering arouses infinite compassion. She put the notes down on her sketch pad. One sketch captured the expressions of disgust on the faces of the Batswana nurses as they washed the dead woman's body for burial. She scrawled a note under the sketch (10).

The foregoing shows a clear view of intersectional theory as it vividly illustrated through the experiences of the Masarwa tribe. This is so because gender, ethnicity, and racial discrimination intertwine to shape their social realities. The Masarwa people, often marginalized due to their ethnic identity as a group historically viewed as inferior or "unclean," face systemic discrimination that exacerbates their socio-economic struggles. Within this context, women from the Masarwa tribe experience compounded oppression; they not only contend with the societal stigma attached to their ethnicity but also grapple with gender-based discrimination that limits their autonomy and access to resources. To further illustrate the

climax of racial discrimination, Bessie Head reveals the transitions of discrimination from the life of Miss Cadmore's mother to her child. Mrs. Margaret Cadmore, the white missionary asserted that "These are not decent people". Quite unconscious of the oddness of her behavior, Mrs. Margaret Cadmore walked to several angles of the room, studying the dead woman's expression (10). Though, Mrs. Margaret Cadmore admitted that "She looks like a Goddess." (10).

As the child growth she used to watch things all with serious eyes. There was nothing she could ask for, only take what was given, aware that she was there for a special purpose because now and then Margaret Cadmore would say: "One day, you will help your people." It was never said as though it were a big issue (11).

As Miss Cadmore grows, she faces double dissemination because of being a Masarwa and not only because she was a woman, McCall asserts that "The complexity of intersectionality requires a deeper understanding of how overlapping systems of oppression such as race, class, gender, and sexuality shape individuals' lived experiences" (1775). Her predicament was double especially when she started going to school. Bessie Head illustrates this as:

It was only when she started going to the mission school that she slowly became aware that something was wrong with her relationship to the world. She was the kind of child who was slyly pinched under the seat, and next to whom no one wanted to sit (11).

Miss Cadmore slowly becomes aware of the intersectionality pertains to gender, ethnicity, and racial discrimination faced by her tribe. The above passage from the novel especially the phrase "slyly pinched under the seat" shows not only a physical act of bullying but also reflects societal prejudices against her identity as a member of the marginalized Masarwa community. This experience is compounded not only by her gender; as a girl, she is subjected to additional segment of vulnerability and exclusion within both educational and social contexts. The mission school setting serves as a point where these intersecting identities collide Miss Cadmore's awareness of her "relationship to the world". This shows how systemic racism and sexism manifest in everyday interactions, leading to her isolation "next to whom

no one wanted to sit" (11). This demonstrates that her experiences cannot be understood solely in one way; rather, they are shaped by the interplay of her ethnic background as a Masarwa woman steering a predominantly oppressive environment. Thus, this ill-treatment from the novel exemplifies how intersectional theory reveals the multifaceted nature of discrimination that individuals like Miss Cadmore face in both communities.

5.2. Individual Struggles for Women's Autonomy

The protagonist Miss Cadmore faces numerous challenges due to her gender and ethnic background. Her journeys reflect the broader struggle of women to assert her identity. To further worsen the situation Bessie Head illustrates the racial complexities of identity through Margaret's journey.

It was odd, because she had a vantage point from which she could observe the behaviour of a persecutor. What did it really mean when another child walked up to her and, looking so angry, said: 'You are just a Bushman'? In their minds it meant so much. Half of it was that they were angry that she had the protection of a white woman who was also their principal. What was the other half? What was a Bushman supposed to do? She had no weapons of words or personality, only a permanent silence and a face which revealed no emotion, except that now and then an abrupt tear would splash down out of one eye. If a glob of spit (11)

In *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex*, Crenshaw demonstrates that 'boundaries of sex and race discrimination doctrine are defined respectively by white women's and Black men's experiences' (143). Crenshaw's analysis of three discrimination suits brought against corporate employers by Black women plaintiffs demonstrates that antidiscrimination laws protect Black women only to the extent that their experiences of discrimination 'coincide' with those of Black men or with those of white women. Thus, Miss Cadmore's discrimination captures and remedies black women's concrete experiences of discrimination. Crenshaw asks us to consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions.

5.3. Limited opportunities for women

The novel shows the restricted opportunities for women in both education and careers. After experiencing racial challenges and discrimination, Miss Cadmore returns to the society she thinks will accept her as Masarwa, but the same intersectional discrimination is still at play.

Seth, the principal said. There's been some chicanery. How so? the other queried. I have a Masarwa on my staff. The man Seth whistled softly. It's the Margaret Cadmore woman? he said, looking serious. God, this is going to raise hell among the Totems here. He grabbed some files and ran his eyes down the application list. There was no requirement for a person to define his tribe or race. He looked very annoyed (26).

The dialogue between Seth and the principal reveals a fundamental tension regarding Miss Cadmore's identity as a Masarwa not only as a woman the society. She used words such as "chicanery" to show that her presence on staff is viewed with suspicion and disdain. This shows how her ethnic background subjects her to scrutiny and prejudice. Seth's reaction whistling softly and expressing concern about potential backlash demonstrates the societal stigma attached to being Masarwa, which is compounded by her ethnicity and gender. The principal's annoyance at having a Masarwa on the staff indicates systemic barriers that women from marginalized communities face in professional settings. Furthermore, the absence of a requirement for individuals to disclose their tribe or race reveals how institutional standards attached to cultural factors can perpetuate discrimination; it implies that even when there are no formal barriers, societal perceptions still create significant obstacles for those like Miss Cadmore. This intersection of gender and ethnicity illustrates that entrenched biases affect individual lives within hierarchical social structures.

Gendered racism can be avoided through intersectionality from a multiple dimension standpoint. Intersections that a person possesses and how those intersections harm or benefit them in a situation or lived experience became a point of research and study (Crenshaw, 1989). An individual can hold multiple oppressions and privileges such as ethnicity, race, nationality, socioeconomic status, gender, sex, sexual orientation, age, (dis)ability, etc. This is evident in the life of Miss Cadmore.

One of the core tenets of intersectional feminism is the recognition that different forms of oppression do not merely add up; they interact in complex ways that can exacerbate one another. This means that marginalized individuals often face compounded disadvantages due to their intersecting identities. For instance, Miss Cadmore faces discrimination in relation to race, gender and societal challenges experience barriers related to both gender and racial discrimination, which limits her access to some basic amenities and employment despite her qualifications. This is evident in the text, especially when Moleka retrieve back his mattress from her and how Moleka treated the Masarwa slaves.

A glint of something dangerous, threatening, shot into Maru's eyes. "I'm not like you, Moleka," he said, with heavy sarcasm. "I still own the Masarwa as slaves. All my one hundred thousand cattle and fifty cattle posts are maintained by the Masarwa. They sleep on the ground, near outdoor fires. Their only blanket is the fire. When the fire warms them on one side, they turn around and warm themselves on the other side. I have seen this with my own eyes. What will they do when they hear that a certain Masarwa in my village is treated as an equal of the Batswana and given a bed from my office? Won't they want beds too, and where do I find all those beds, overnight? I want the bed you loaned to the Masarwa teacher returned, immediately (38).

Intersectional feminism emphasis on historical contexts surrounding various forms of oppression. The above words of Moleka reflects how historical injustices such as colonialism, slavery, and racism have shaped the inequality faced by the Masarwa people. Intersectional feminists argue that recognizing these historical roots allows for a more comprehensive understanding of present-day disparities in power and privilege.

Maru expresses a deep-seated conflict regarding the treatment of the Masarwa people in contrast to the Batswana. The tone is laden with sarcasm, indicating Maru's frustration and perhaps a sense of moral superiority over Moleka, who seems to represent a more traditional or oppressive viewpoint. Maru's statement reveals the stark socio-economic inequalities between the two groups. This shows that Moleka owns one hundred thousand cattle and relies on the Masarwa for labor, while they live in dire conditions sleeping on the ground, and using fire for warmth. This situation is an evidence of systemic inequality and it also raises questions

about social justice and human rights. Maru's concern about the implications of treating a Masarwa teacher as an equal to the Batswana reflects his fear of disrupting the status quo; he worries that such an act could incite demands for equality among all Masarwa, which he feels unprepared to accommodate. Moleka's request for the return of a bed loaned to a Masarwa teacher symbolizes his desire to maintain control over both his resources and societal hierarchies. This dialogue summarizes the themes of power dynamics, colonial legacies, and the struggle for dignity among the Masarwa people.

Moleka has been an enemy of society. He perpetuates the suffering faced by women in the community and uses women as a cover-up to achieve his goals. As is evident in the text, this leads to Maru over Moleka.

Maru was angry with Moleka because Moleka had taken his sister as his latest concubine. It was the kind of tangle and confusion of events Maru reveled in. Half-truths, outright lies, impossible rumors and sudden, explosive events were his stock in trade. He used them as a cover up for achieving his goals. People would thwart him otherwise and he never liked to be side-tracked. He never cared about the means towards the end and who got hurt (55).

It is evident from the novel that Moleka is a wicked being who perpetuates this atrocity of maltreating the Masarwa people. 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", and needs to find more and more "horrible sensations" (35) to keep his affairs interesting, 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". This love is described as a "nameless terror", 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).

However, this study argues further that Head's response to the problem of institutionalized racism is a battle call. 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 are distributed inefficiently, racism has created a subordinate caste, the Masarwa, to carry the burden of this inefficiency. But this is not humane. Hence, 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 to all. *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. 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. Miss Cadmore's experience shows how intersectionality complicates traditional feminist narratives that often center solely on gender without considering race or class implications. When she confronts prejudice from both black and white communities, it becomes evident that her position as a mixed-race woman places her at an intersection where multiple forms of discrimination converge.

Another significant aspect is Maru's internal conflict regarding his feelings for Margaret versus his obligations to uphold traditional norms within his community. He states, "To love someone like Margaret was to challenge everything I had been taught." (64) This reveals how Maru faces societal expectations tied to masculinity and leadership while simultaneously recognizing the value of love that transcends racial boundaries.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Head addresses themes of empowerment through female solidarity when other women support Margaret's quest for acceptance: "In our shared pain lay our strength." This statement shows how collective experiences among women can foster togetherness against patriarchal structures while revealing their unique struggles shaped by intersecting identities. As Brah and Phoenix argue, intersections are interrelated, though some can change over time such as marital status, socioeconomic status, age, etc, which changes a person's positionality within society. Therefore, this study argues that social positioning within society takes a person's situatedness, explaining how a person's intersections affect how they navigate the world.

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