



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 9. Issue.2. 2022 (April-June)

ISSN INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

BESSIE HEAD ON MOVING FROM PASSIVITY TO AGENCY:  
“THE COLLECTOR OF TREASURES”

PRAGYA DHIMAN

Department of English  
University of Delhi

Email:dhimanpragya23@gmail.com



PRAGYA DHIMAN  
Article information

Received:03/05/2022  
Accepted: 09/06/2022  
Published online:14/06/2022  
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.9.2.111](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.9.2.111)

ABSTRACT

Deemed a social history, Bessie Head’s “The Collector of Treasures”, speaks of a resilient woman who seems to be searching for scraps of happiness in an otherwise, damned and insufferable world. This essay attempts to understand the significance of the title “The Collector of Treasures”, from different perspectives, and how Head has fictionalized a non-fictive account to narrate the tale of a woman who is supposedly deviant in nature, but on the contrary, is a true representative of a helpless POC-woman situated in a discriminatory, colored society.

Keywords: female community, individuality, possession, womanhood

INTRODUCTION

I would like to begin by firstly stating what the textbook definitions of the words “collector” and “treasures” are respectively. A collector is someone who is “a person who collects things of a specified type, professionally or as a hobby”<sup>1</sup> and treasures refers to “a quantity of precious metals, gems, or other valuable objects”<sup>2</sup>. Thus, one can infer that the “collector of treasures”, quite literally becomes an individual who is collecting objects of value in life. This is quite a surface-level introduction to the title, and one must definitely delve deeper into the roots of the issues that Head is attempting to dissect. Using the aforementioned as a starting point, I would like to breakdown the title into its subsequent parts and analyze each portion as a standalone entity, before concluding with the overall significance of the same.

THE COLLECTOR AS AN INDIVIDUAL

Beginning with the first term, “collector”, we can note how the word itself is gender neutral. Even though the story focuses on Dikledi Mokopi and her brutal, yet forgivable and understandable crime, the title doesn’t necessarily state that outright. At a first reading, one would not be able to guess the negative turn the short story would take – that of a premeditated and graphic murder. The act is violent and gruesome, in contrast to Dikledi’s natural expressions and mannerisms – it is a reverie, a sacrifice, a spiritual cleanse. She does not want

<sup>1</sup> From *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2021

<sup>2</sup> From *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2021

to deny the fact that she has killed her husband: she has killed him; it is almost a statement to the entire world – I am a woman and I am fearless.

This emphasis on the individual is something Head seems to consciously engage with, as Ruchi Sharma corroborates in “‘Humanism’ as a Political Method in Bessie Head’s ‘The Collector of Treasures’”: “What enables a character to challenge social convention in Head’s scheme is a strongly developed sense of individuality. These are the people who have the strength to risk public censure in order to follow their convictions.”

In the same vein however, the collector is not simply just a singular entity, but a representation of an entire group of women, as exemplified in the beginning of the short story. “You’ll be in good company. We have four other women here for the same crime” (Head 38). The crime which binds these women together is that they are all the collectors of the treasure of manhood. “I cut off all of his special parts with a knife...I did it with a razor” (Head 40). This notion shall be further discussed under the section referring to treasures.

Perhaps, one can even state how Dikledi is not far off from the protagonists of the novels *The Color Purple* and *Beloved*: Celie and Sethe. These women are all collectors of treasures in their own ways, whether the treasure is a sense of identity, reclamation of the past, the self, or formation and concretization of a strong female community. This opens up the conversation to how women of color are often left to fend for themselves and need to form strong bonds within their gendered group to reclaim their identities and individualities as women first and humans second; how a shift needs to take place, from becoming “collectors” to “possessors” of the treasures of life.

A collector, once more, is in quite a submissive position. An individual who is actively searching for and grabbing onto things of value. There is this generational passing down of orthodox, misogynistic ideas and stereotypes, like heirlooms almost, where women are roped into this system of being secondary, or only fit for domestic duties. This feeling is exemplified by a prominent female writer from the West Indies, Jamaica Kincaid, in her poem “Girl”: “you are not a boy, you know”<sup>3</sup> (Kincaid 88). Hence, the word collector for a woman, represents how she is placed in society, how she is a submissive individual, and the need for a shift to take place, where the woman imbibes within herself ideas of self-reliance and independence, to become a possessor of things she values and enjoys, rather than just a mere collector, becomes quite apparent.

#### **“SHE WAS THE COLLECTOR OF SUCH TREASURES” (Head 42)**

Diamonds form under hazardous conditions, and so do these treasures that Dikledi clutches to her bosom and beating heart. The first question one must ask in terms of the short story is, “what is meant by these treasures?”. One of the most apparent symbolizations that the word possesses in terms of Head’s work is the idea of reclaiming, finding or discovering valuable possessions, whether physical or abstract, which women, especially POC-women have been denied or forced to abandon due to societal pressures. Thus, these treasures include such things of value as female solidarity, love between female communities, female friendship, adoration and love.

Another treasure, that one must not ignore, is that of a good man in a woman’s life; a man such as Paul Theobolo. In sharp contrast with other exploitative and disgusting men, as situated within the story, epitomized in Dikledi’s husband, Paul Theobolo becomes a beacon of light and love in Makopi’s life. He is another valuable addition to her existence as a single, abandoned woman in her community and this relationship is Head’s interpretation of a female-male bond to be treasured and valued: “Aware of the fact that black women often got a raw deal in their relations with men, Head despairs ‘[N]o one seems to know what the right sort of relationship between men and women should be, that would be sacred and of mutual benefit’” (“Humanism” as a Political Method, Sharma). The kind words that Paul Theobolo speaks to Dikledi, “You are a very good

<sup>3</sup> From Department of English Textbook Committee. *The Individual and Society: Poems, Essays and Stories*. Pearson India Education Services Pvt. Ltd, 2005.

---

woman, Mma-Banabotho, '...only men like Paul Theobolo could offer such gifts. She took it and stored another *treasure* in her heart [italicization by me]" (Head 50), serves to validate Dikledi's individual identity.

It shall be a lie to state that the opinions of the male sex do not hold their weight in gold, as one cannot turn a blind eye to opposite sex relationships, whether of an intimate nature, or platonic. The idea of the ideal man versus the evil man, then becomes a point of discussion in the POC woman's discourse as well; where one is a treasure to be valued, the other serving to make the aforementioned shine brighter, being stark in contrast.

To continue on with this thread, the other treasure one needs to expound upon is the treasure of female friendship and community. Firstly, one may speak of the same in terms of Paul Theobolo himself, as Kenalepe, his wife, offers him to Dikledi as an act of complete kindness and love, "I can loan Paul to you if you like... I would do it because I have never had a friend like you in my life before whom I trust so much" (Head 48). This is an extreme act of kindness on Kenalepe's part; as a woman she is sharing her husband, her life partner, with another, just so the latter can know what the treasure of a fulfilling intimate relationship feels like, what female pleasure feels like.

The central treasure that one must focus on is that of fruitful relationships between women throughout the story. From the beginning itself, one can note that female solidarity is of importance as the imprisoned women share an inextricable bond; the bond of freeing themselves of an abusive and loveless marriage or relationship with a thankless man. Her relationship with Kebonye is another female bond which was to make the third phase of Dikledi's life bearable in prison, or at least, in the bare minimum, a faint reflection of the second phase which was "one of the most prosperous and happy periods of her life" (Head 45), as she seeped herself into the treasures she shared with the Theobolo family. The idea of a strong community is quite central to African women's narratives, as desertation by their husbands or male partners is a common occurrence, which leaves these women to fend for themselves, alone in a world constructed and rigged to subjugate and oppress them.

"Her life had become holy to her during all those years she had struggled to maintain herself and the children. She had filled her life with treasures of kindness and love she had gathered from others and it was all this that she wanted to protect from defilement by an evil man" (Head 54). The castration process of Garesgo is a brutal and graphic act, which is very significant, especially when it comes to the title of the short story. Dikledi Makopi has collected her selfish and obscene husband's manhood – the ultimate treasure one could possess as a woman in this world, the collection of a phallus. Not only has she collected it, but possessed it for her own, as one can see how she claims the act with a serene look and even asks her eldest son to "go and call the police". This is the very essence of "The Collector of Treasures" – the individual woman boldly declaring her independence from her male counterpart, from a male entity.

#### **WHAT IS THE LINK BETWEEN ALL THESE TREASURES?**

Another question that one may speak of, when analyzing the title is, what is the link between all these treasures? Are they an eclectic mix of objects and ideals that act as beacons of hope, or are they comforting memories and notions? The crux of the answer, I believe, lies at the center of Dikledi herself, by which she is able to strengthen her self and individual identity, via her collection of priceless "treasures."

"Dikledi whose name means 'tears'..." suffered the loss of a mother, thus being stripped of any female companionship since she was young, or even a feminine guiding light. Brought up by her uncle, Mokopi surely did not have a strong female community with whom she would have been able to share, receive and build any form of relationships. Hence, automatically, the idea of having a community of women for support, life support almost, becomes vital, and one can note the same in other POC discourses, such as Morrison's *Beloved* and Walker's *The Color Purple*.

Another treasure, which we cannot sideline, is that of education. In fact, the intense desire to secure her son's future with a proper education is what initially prompts Mokopi to approach Garesgo, and the short story even ends on the same note, with Paul affirming to Dikledi, "You don't have to worry about the children, Mma-Banabotho. I'll take them as my own and give them all a secondary school education" (Head 57). That's all Dikledi

truly wanted; her children were the most important aspect of her life, to be treasured and adored: "I am satisfied I have children. They are a blessing to me" (Head 46).

If one looks at these treasures quite objectively, they seem to be quite every-day, ordinary objects or ideas - the kind we sometimes take for granted. However, it is as Ruchi Sharma has put it, Head seems to be rediscovering the ordinary in "The Collector of Treasures"; "...there was a gradual 'feminization of poverty' in Botswana... female sexuality had earlier been tightly governed by tribal courtship and marital norms of pre-colonial norms simultaneously guaranteed a degree of security to women." ("Humanism" as a Political Method, Sharma). Therefore, it seems as if these women collect as many "treasures" as they can find for there is a sense of deprivation of essentialities which brings value to the ordinary. Hence, "The Collector of Treasures [the collection] abounds in female characters learning to survive the emotional, sexual and psychological violence built into the everydayness of life in a patriarchal society." ("Humanism" as a Political Method, Sharma).

The link, thus, between all these treasures, is that they strengthen the female individual, as stated earlier.

#### DOES THE COLLECTOR EVER BECOME THE TREASURE ITSELF?

Carole Boyce Davies states in "Some notes on African Feminism" that of "the many burdens bearing down on African women, the most important is *herself*... Women are shackled by their own negative self-image, by centuries of interiorization of the ideologies of patriarchy and gender hierarchy...she reacts with fear, dependency complexes and attitudes to please and cajole where more self-assertive actions are needed..."

However, contrary to this popular self-lineation of African women in oppressive societies, there is this bejeweled spirit, a self-affirming spark within Dikledi, where her self-reliance manifests itself in the form of a jewel which she proudly proclaims to be her own – her skills as a woman in "weaving, knitting and sewing". She is proud of being known as "the woman whose thatch doesn't leak" (Head 41). Sharma has stated, "Dikledi's pride in herself remains unscathed through her turmoil because she doesn't define herself merely in terms of the misfortunes of her personal life but in fact views her work and self-reliance as equally central to her identity." Hence, the self or as Head tends to focus on, the **individual** becomes the treasure to be valued. The collector thus becomes the treasure itself in this instance.

#### "THE COLLECTOR OF TREASURES" AND THE ORAL TRADITION

"The very title of the collection *The Collector of Treasures: and other Botswana Village Tales* signals Head's concern to engage with the oral culture of the village." ("Humanism" as a Political Method, Sharma).

The title and content of the story itself is also a treasure collected by Head while she lived in the heart of Botswanan village life, where orality and gossip constructed the daily narrative of the times. The short story, "The Collector of Treasures" is part of a collection, titled the same, and an important point to note is, as Head has stated, "This particular story ["The Collector of Treasures"] I got to know because the dead man had relatives in Serowe." As Ruchi Sharma has commented, "It is from this piece of village gossip that Head constructs her story 'The Collector of Treasures'". Therefore, when one analyzes the title in this light, the collector can be stated to be Head herself and the story becomes a treasure of sorts. Serowe's "precariously oral past"<sup>4</sup> increases the value of its history and Head's immortalization of this village gossip, destroys its ephemerality and gives substance to the treasure to be collected by various readers around the world, most importantly women.

#### CONCLUSION

"The Collector of Treasures" from its title to its content did not attempt to assimilate with ubiquitous "formulaic fiction"<sup>5</sup>. The title is quite masterfully crafted, denoting a plethora of ideas in a single phrase. In this essay, I have analyzed the title from various perspectives and have attempted to understand the true significance

<sup>4</sup> From MacKenzie, Craig. "Short Fiction in the Making: The Case of Bessie Head." *A Warble of Postcolonial Voices* (2015): 92-101.

<sup>5</sup> Njabulo Ndebele defines formulaic fiction to be "plots that abounded in victim-figures and sell-outs...formulaic fiction did disservice to the cause of a more equal society by failing to *individualize* its characters...failed to 'clarify the tragic human experience of oppression.'"

behind it. "The Collector of Treasures", is a story that every POC woman can relate to, in some capacity – the absent father, husband, lover, the need and beauty of female-female relationships, the essentiality of a strong community of loving women and the idea of being an individual with a defined identity. We, as readers, collect the treasure of the masterful weaving of words, that Head has to offer to our souls, and that is the most important treasure to collect of all.

**References**

Edited by Sati, Someshwar. *A Warble of Postcolonial Voices*. Delhi: Worldview Publications, 2015

Department of English Textbook Committee. *The Individual and Society: Poems, Essays and Stories*. Pearson India Education Services Pvt. Ltd, 2005.

*OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2021, [www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/11125](http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/11125). Accessed 1 March 2022

Sharma, Ruchi. "'Humanism' as a Political Method." *A Warble of Postcolonial Voices* (2015): 1-36

MacKenzie, Craig. "Short Fiction in the Making: The Case of Bessie Head." *A Warble of Postcolonial Voices* (2015): 92-101