

## **The collector of treasures**

### **Bessie Head**

Bessie Head was a South African writer who has finally entered the great canon of Southern African literatures written in English. Her life experience of suffering, her search for a new life in a new environment and country – Botswana, her balanced but disturbing ideas, her interest in women's experience and the high quality of her writing are some of the unavoidable points of interest when dealing with her work. *The Collector of Treasures* can be regarded as both an intelligent and a very emotive text. In other words, it involves Gender Studies, African identities and Translation and Intercultural Studies at play as well as the travelling of a peripheral text to a set of different European Centres.

In 1977 the South African writer Bessie Head published her first collection of short stories called *The collector of treasures*. The collection of short stories is a definite attempt to focus on the community at large, a period described by MacKenzie (1989:35) as her “socially-oriented period”.

**The plot of the story:** The title story, “The collector of treasures”, is set in post-colonial Botswana and deals with the life of **Dikeledi Mokopi (the female protagonist) and her estranged (separated) husband Garesego Mokopi (the husband of the central character)**. He has left her and their three children and she has to take care of them, while he has set off in his pursuit of sexual gratification with other women. (The husband is unmindful of the upbringing of his children and never supported his wife and children financially. Dikeldi gets frustrated with her family life, specially at the pessimism of her husband). Dikeledi gets on very well with her neighbours Paul and Kenalepe Thobolo. Garesego, however, is jealous of the relationship between Paul and Dikeledi. When Dikeledi is in need of money to pay for their eldest child's school fees, she invites Garesego over to her house to discuss it. He is under the impression that she wants to have sexual intercourse (the husband makes a deal with Dikeldi that he first he will have to be sexually gratified if she needed money) Dikeledi, however, takes a kitchen knife and cuts off his genitals. For this deed she is imprisoned for life. In jail she befriends three other women who have committed the same offence. With this the story comes to an end.

**The story, “The collector of treasures” has revealed the following essence:**

- (1) A woman plays the leading role in each of the stories,
- (2) It focuses on the status of women in a modern African society
- (3) The village becomes a microcosm of traditional Africa at large.

**Quotations:**

1. Craig MacKenzie describes “the hardship women of the village experience” as the main focus of the stories.
2. Susan Gardner opines “has a discernible feminist content” because it focuses on “the insistence that women have suffered systematic social injustice because of their sex”.

Garesego Mokopi represents the patriarchy of the African society. The act of cutting off the genital of Dikeledi Mokopi, is actually a way to deconstructs African phallocracy by dismembering her husband. Paul Thebolo signifies the Other, the liberated man.

**The story as a social document** It is a scathing (scornful) indictment of Botswanan men and their treatment of the women in their lives. The story revolves around the central character Dikeledi and her relationship with her husband, Garesego, which is a stark contrast to the marriage of their neighbors, Kenalepe and Paul. Garesego impregnates Dikeledi four times in the course of three years, but he does not live with his wife and children, and he offers them no support, financial or otherwise. In talking with Kenalepe, Dikeledi discovers that not all men behave like Garesego, that some men—Paul, for instance—are loving and devoted husbands, who live with and support their wives and children. Inspired by this newfound knowledge, Dikeledi asks Garesego to help her pay for their oldest son's schooling. Without explicitly saying so, Garesego expects sex from Dikeledi in return for his financial contribution. He goes to her house with the goal of having sex with her, and she fully realizes that only after she gives in will he then even consider giving her the money. No longer able to live with this untenable relationship, she gets a butcher knife and severs his "special parts." As she's hauled off to jail, Paul vows to raise her children. Dikeledi now faces a grand paradox: She will go to prison, but she will also be free for the first time in her life.