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Masculinity in crisis, femininity in bloom: Decoding gender dynamics in Bessie Head's *The collector of treasures*

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Abstract

The term "gender dynamics" describes how gender shapes and influences interpersonal interactions, behaviours, relationships, positions, opportunities, and power structures within a community or society. It always shakes things up by challenging old norms and pushing for new ways of relating to each other. Gender dynamics also show a complex mix of power relationships between masculinity and femininity influenced by personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and historical contexts. It continues to evolve with cultural, social, and historical changes. Gender dynamics is about how men and women experience and express their identities in the convergence of race, class, sex and disability in society. In gender dynamics, masculinity and femininity are social constructs rather than biological commands. In postcolonial societies, masculinity describes how colonial histories and legacies shape gender roles and identities to hold power and identity. On the other hand, postcolonial femininity establishes the collective strength, resistance and solidarity to subvert the masculine power found in traditions and cultural practices. This gender dynamics focus on the masculine control over women to marginalise, suppress and oppress them, on the contrary, women strive to decolonize the double colonization executed by the colonial powers and the phallogocentric dominance in their own communities. In Africa, Bessie Head is a renowned feminist writer due to her exploration of gender, identity, and the struggles faced by women in her novels and stories. Her feminist writings critique patriarchal systems and their impact on women's lives across race, class and gender. Her female characters often challenge traditional gender roles to seek autonomy and self-definition. This research paper explores the discourses of gender dynamics to examine the hegemonic subversion of men and the solidarity of women in Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasures* (1977). It also focuses on how Bessie Head reproduces the character of Dikeledi Mokopi to challenge domestic violence, gender inequality, and patriarchal marginalization to solidify a strong bond of sisterhood and womanhood in African black society.

Keywords: Gender dynamics, postcolonialism, masculinity, femininity, phallogocentrism, hegemonic subversion, double colonisation, patriarchal marginalisation, sisterhood, womanhood

Introduction

African literature offers rich and complex portrayals of gender dynamics, often reflecting the cultural, social, and historical contexts of different African societies. It not only exposes the struggles of women and marginalized genders but also envisions possibilities for resistance and transformation. African feminism is shaped by the particular histories, cultures, and experiences of African women. It emphasizes not only gender equality but also addresses issues of colonialism, poverty, ethnic diversity, and the collective role of community, all of which influence the way African women perceive and challenge their realities. Writers such as Mariama Bâ in *So Long a Letter* (1979) and Tsitsi Dangarembga in *Nervous Conditions* (1988) capture how colonial legacies intertwine with traditional patriarchal structures to create complex challenges for African women. Besides, Writers like Buchi Emecheta in *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014) advocate for women's education and financial independence as foundational for challenging gender inequities. However, born into a mixed-race family in South Africa, Bessie Head is a renowned feminist writer due to her exploration of gender, identity, and the struggles faced by women in her novels and stories. Her feminist writings critique patriarchal systems and their impact on women's lives across race, class and gender.

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Her female characters often challenge traditional gender roles to seek autonomy and self-definition. Her writing and feminist viewpoints were significantly impacted by her experiences living abroad in South Africa during the apartheid era and then as a citizen of Botswana. Bessie Head's life, marked by racial and cultural diversity amidst a repressive apartheid regime, deeply influenced her literary works, making her voice uniquely compelling and insightful. Born in 1937 in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, to a white mother and a black father, Head was subjected to the intense racial prejudice and legal restrictions of apartheid South Africa. Growing up as a biracial child in this context, she faced social ostracism and internal conflict around her identity and belonging that are vividly mirrored in her storytelling. As a feminist author, she questioned established gender conventions and raised awareness of the difficulties experienced by women in patriarchal cultures.

In Bessie Head's story *The Collector of Treasures*, her portrayal of characters like Paul and Dikeledi serves as a powerful commentary on racism and sexism. Head, as a storyteller, uses this relationship to exemplify her vision of transcending racial and gender boundaries by focusing on shared humanity. Dikeledi is a woman who faces oppression and hardship, and yet, through her friendship with Paul, we see a connection that is grounded not in social or racial identity but in mutual respect and understanding. Paul's appreciation of Dikeledi is based on her qualities as an individual, allowing Head to show her readers that the worth of a person is not defined by skin color, gender, or societal roles. Instead, Paul sees Dikeledi as a complex human being, an individual with emotions, strengths, and struggles. However, this research paper explores the discourses of gender dynamics to examine the hegemonic subversion of men and the solidarity of women in Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasures* (1977). It also focuses on how Bessie Head reproduces the character of Dikeledi Mokopi to challenge domestic violence, gender inequality, and patriarchal marginalization to solidify a strong bond of sisterhood and womanhood in African black society.

Decoding Gender Dynamics: The Subversion of Gender and Power Relations in the African Context

The term "gender dynamics" describes the intricate ways that gender roles, identities, and power dynamics manifest in cultures, influencing how people interact with one another, their access to opportunities, and the social structures that control them. The socio-cultural factors, such as individual experiences, cultural origins, historical settings, and intersecting components like race, class, sexual orientation, and disability, all have an impact on these interactions. In gender dynamics, masculinity and femininity are not viewed as innate or biologically determined, but rather as social constructs. They change with time, influenced by the constantly shifting political, social, and cultural environments; they are not static. In the power relationship, masculinity, often emphasizes strength, dominance, authority, and rationality, whereas femininity is typically associated with nurturing, emotionality, and passivity. However, these roles are not fixed, and individuals may express themselves outside these prescribed norms. In African societies, the effects of colonial histories and legacies are deeply embedded in gender relations. Colonialism imposed rigid gender roles, often reinforcing patriarchal structures that marginalized and oppressed

women. These colonial legacies continue to shape the way gender is experienced and expressed today. In order to keep the colonized under control, colonial authorities frequently created romanticized conceptions of manhood. In an effort to establish colonial supremacy over colonized populations, this masculinity was linked to domination, power, and authority and frequently depended on patriarchal and hierarchical structures. It was associated with the preservation of land and human dominance. In African cultures, women experience two forms of colonization: by the colonial powers, who aimed to define and regulate their roles, and by patriarchal systems in their own communities, which frequently further oppressed them. Resistance, solidarity, and the collective strength of women in opposing the historical legacies of colonialism as well as the internalized patriarchal dominance within their communities are characteristics of postcolonial femininity. In postcolonial contexts, women fight against internal gendered hierarchies and foreign colonial authorities in an effort to regain identity and authority.

However, decoding gender dynamics in the African context involves examining how traditional gender roles and power relations are negotiated, challenged, or subverted within the cultural, political, and social landscapes of the continent. These relationships are intricate, influenced by postcolonial realities, colonial histories, and the interaction of modern influences, religious rituals, and regional customs. Gender and power relations are frequently subverted in a variety of media, literature, politics, and daily life, both overtly and covertly. Traditional gender roles, which clearly distinguish between male and female obligations, are ingrained in many African communities, especially in areas like leadership, family life, and communication. But as modernity, education, and economics advance, these positions are changing. The patriarchal order is being challenged by the growing number of women in African contexts who are assuming leadership, activist, business, and even household-heading positions. The power structures that control civilizations and the ways in which they are upheld or challenged are frequently revealed by gender dynamics. Legal, political, and cultural standards have traditionally institutionalized and reinforced masculine supremacy in many countries, marginalizing and oppressing women in the process. There is a movement toward decolonization as cultures evolve and individuals grow more conscious of the injustices sustained by gendered power dynamics. This entails opposing the patriarchal standards that have been ingrained in these civilizations as well as rejecting colonial legacies. In this way, the fight for justice, equity, and acceptance of different identities is embodied in gender dynamics. So, the intricate and changing ways that gender roles and identities are created, upheld, and contested are highlighted by gender dynamics in postcolonial contexts. Especially in colonized nations, historical legacies, cultural practices, and power dynamics influence the relationship between masculinity and femininity. Addressing inequality and pursuing more inclusive and fair communities require an understanding of these dynamics. So, this research paper explores the discourses of gender dynamics to examine the hegemonic subversion of men and the solidarity of women in Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasures* (1977). It also focuses on how Bessie Head reproduces the character of Dikeledi Mokopi to challenge domestic violence, gender inequality, and patriarchal marginalization to solidify a

strong bond of sisterhood and womanhood in African black society.

Exploration of Masculinity in Crisis, Femininity in Bloom in *The Collector of Treasures*

Head's portrayal reflects a complex understanding of traditional African societies, showing how the collective moral structures were designed largely to serve the interests of men, thereby normalizing certain oppressive behaviors. By highlighting these societal norms and their impact on gender roles, she points out the limitations and inequalities inherent in these historical frameworks. Here Head not only examines the treatment of women but also exposes the need to reconsider and reform these norms to better address issues of gender equity and social responsibility. In her socio-historical exploration, Head delves into how such behaviour was viewed in pre-colonial tribal societies. During this period, elders were the moral authorities, setting societal norms, taboos, and ethical guidelines that shaped individuals' behaviours and attitudes. These frameworks were predominantly patriarchal and often neglected the rights and needs of women, positioning them as secondary to men. This male-centred moral order reinforced the idea that women's roles were limited, and their individual needs or rights were not given serious consideration. However, the story, *The Collector of Treasures*, which takes place in Botswana, South Africa, begins with a police truck driving out from the settlement of Puleng in the morning and heading toward the central state jail in Gaborone. The story, which takes place in Botswana, South Africa, begins with a police truck driving out from the settlement of Puleng in the morning and heading toward the central state jail in Gaborone.

As a feminist writer, Head's depiction of gender interactions in *The Collector of Treasures* captures broader post-colonial socioeconomic changes. Traditional gender norms are being undermined, which causes power dynamics to shift. Since empowered women are taking back control of their own lives, bodies, and futures, masculinity once associated with dominance and control is facing challenges. This change in power dynamics brings up significant issues regarding how gender, class, and culture connect as well as women's roles in the post-colonial world. In her socio-historical classification of men in African civilization, Bessie Head criticizes the detrimental effects of patriarchal systems in the past and today. Her categorization of men into two groups is based on how men behave and what their social obligations are. In the short story, Bessie Head's analysis of men in African society offers a critical view of traditional gender roles and moral frameworks, classifying men into two distinct types based on their behaviour and social responsibilities. The first type, according to Head, is a selfish and irresponsible male, one who exercises power over women without considering their autonomy or welfare. This type of man subjugates women sexually and abandons his duty toward his children, leaving them without guidance or care. By comparing these men to animals such as dogs, bulls, and donkeys, Head underscores their primal, unrestrained instincts, likening them to creatures who act purely on biological impulses without regard for consent or nurturing.

By classifying postcolonial masculinity in the literature into two groups, Head offers a sharp critique of it. She makes a vivid analogy between the first type of guys with a group of

stray dogs pursuing a bitch in the heat. Because the male dogs' sexual need is a complete frenzied state, the female dogs cannot consent and the mating process is exceedingly violent. There is frequently a pack of male dogs ready to mate with a single female dog. Head uses the term "bitch" to illustrate how postcolonial masculinity reproduces animal aggression in human society and treats women like bitches. At the same time, the male dog "indulged in a continuous spurt of orgasms, day and night until he was exhausted" (42). She describes that men constantly release testosterone and abuse women all year round, whereas male dogs only impregnate bitches during two-month heat cycles per year. In the context of this animal motif, compared to dogs, humans appear awful. Head makes the connection between a critique of the postcolonial state and a critique of masculinity. Little schoolgirls are often raped and impregnated by Kebonye's husband, an education officer. The postcolonial state uses this man, a custodial officer, as a vehicle for his need to be in a perpetual state of sexual ecstasy. Although he is in charge of stopping sexual exploitation, he is also its best practitioner. Girls in these men's care would never be able to complete their education. Thus, Head demonstrates how women's equality and freedom have not kept pace with political freedom in postcolonial nations. She is illustrating how the prevailing political system is characterized by violent heteronormativity. She is not merely discussing the narrative of one girl here; rather, it is typical of the lives of most women. Thus, rather than becoming a truck driver or fisherman, Kebonye's husband works as an education officer. This is violence that the postcolonial heteronormative state both causes and facilitates. Head is depicting the total marginalization of women in this post-colonial country. Moreover, Head goes on to say that the second type of man is caring and sensitive, much like Paul Thebolo, who devotes all of his material and emotional resources to his family. He is the principal of a primary school and shares Kebonye's husband's custodial bond with education. Although Thebolo is a nice guardian and a well-educated person, he has access to the same young ladies that Kebonye's husband abuses. His ability to complete his mud home fence quickly and effectively suggests that he is proficient in both his personal and business endeavours. After Dikeledi kills Garasego, Paul promises to care for her children as if they were his own, showing that his masculinity isn't solely defined by fatherhood. In post-independence Botswana, most men typically left their villages for urban areas in search of jobs, as villages lacked facilities, infrastructure, and employment opportunities. In contrast, Paul has taken the opposite path by moving to the rural village of Puleng, where he invests in local resources, counteracting the trend of migration to overcrowded cities. In his spare time, he supports the village's illiterate residents, bridging the gap between tradition and modernity. Meanwhile, Garasego and Kebonye's husband are depicted as corrupt and abusive, embodying conventional black hegemonic masculinity. Paul and Thebolo represent a progressive masculinity that moves beyond the oppression of women, while Garasego and Kebonye's husband reflect a more traditional, oppressive model of masculinity. Together, these characters represent two visions of Africa with two contrasting masculinities: one rooted in respect and progress, the other in dominance and exploitation.

However, the crisis of masculinity in the story is not merely an individual struggle; it reflects a societal breakdown, where patriarchal structures are being questioned and destabilized. Women's transformation, on the other hand, signals hope and renewal. As they confront the violence and oppression in their lives, they begin to find a sense of inner strength that redefines femininity in a more liberated, self-affirming light. In the story, masculinity is often portrayed as fragile and in crisis. Male characters, particularly the husbands in the narrative, are portrayed as struggling to assert their authority in a world where their traditional role as providers and protectors has been undermined by societal shifts and personal failings. The character of Kgosi, for instance, is depicted as a man who has been undone by his infidelity, emotional distance, and inability to understand his wife's pain. The men in the story, despite their physical strength or social status, are often emotionally weak, and their actions are driven by frustration, jealousy, and a desire to reclaim control. This crisis of masculinity can be attributed to the disempowerment of traditional male roles within the changing social order. The colonial and post-colonial context in Botswana, along with the erosion of indigenous structures, leaves men grappling with their sense of purpose. The expectations placed on them to be strong, authoritative, and controlling often lead to violent outbursts, highlighting the tension between what they feel they should be and the reality of their fractured identities.

In contrast, femininity in *The Collector of Treasures* is portrayed especially in the representation of the protagonist, Dikeledi who embodies a sense of resilience, independence, and emotional depth that is often missing from the men around them. Dikeledi's strength is evident in her ability to endure and rise above the betrayal and violence inflicted upon her by her husband. Her journey of self-discovery and empowerment represents a reclaiming of her autonomy in a patriarchal society. So, the concept of femininity in bloom can be interpreted as the growth of Dikeledi's, Kenalepe's, and Kebonye's voices, agency, and their ability to find fulfilment outside of traditional roles as wives and mothers. Bessie Head, through the characters Dikeledi, Kenalepe, and Kebonye, embody a powerful model of female solidarity that emerges in response to the constraining effects of patriarchy and postcolonial systems. These forces have created a society where women are marginalized and limited to domestic roles, stripped of agency in public life, politics, and economic independence. In their socio-cultural settings, women are denied education, jobs, and roles in decision-making, making it nearly impossible for them to challenge or engage with the oppressive structures around them. They depend on the goodwill of their husbands, and their lives are largely confined within the household. Dikeledi lives within these constraints and cannot directly confront or negotiate with systemic patriarchy because she lacks access to the tools—education, employment, and political influence—that could empower her. Instead, her only avenue for resistance and relief comes from the relationships she forms with other women who share her experiences. When Dikeledi's husband abandons her and their three children, she finds herself facing an immense challenge: how to provide for her family with no formal education or access to traditional employment. Determined, she turns to the skills she can leverage—sewing, knitting, and thatching roofs—to support her family. These small acts of survival are her only options in a world that has long denied her access to the tools and

opportunities for independence. One day, Dikeledi overhears Paul, a man in her community, discussing world politics with other men, and she is struck by the realization that there is a vast world beyond her daily struggles. Through these conversations, Dikeledi glimpses the transformative power of education, a resource that could allow her access to this larger world but one she has been denied. She realizes that men have the freedom to explore, discuss, and even shape policy, while women are left to overhear and imagine what it must be like to participate fully.

Similarly, Kenalepe and Kebonye, who are also familiar with the oppressive circumstances Dikeledi endures, provide her with the empathy, understanding, and support that she cannot find elsewhere. In their shared vulnerability and mutual understanding, they create a form of refuge, allowing each woman to find strength and comfort in her bonds with others who are also marginalized. For Kenalepe, life appears kinder on the surface. She was raised by loving parents and is married to a man who holds progressive values. Yet, despite this, her role remains confined to the domestic sphere, centred on bearing children, cooking, and caring for her family. Like Dikeledi, Kenalepe understands that no matter how kind or loving her circumstances may seem, male dominance and the limitation of women's roles are so deeply woven into their lives that they seem inescapable.

Thus, this female solidarity acts as a quiet, yet impactful form of resistance. By turning to one another, Dikeledi and her friends can validate their feelings, share strategies for coping, and affirm their self-worth. Although they cannot challenge the external structures directly, they create an internal world where they can experience agency, compassion, and mutual respect. Head illustrates that, within oppressive systems, solidarity among women can be a powerful means of survival, resilience, and subtle resistance against the forces that seek to confine them.

Conclusion

In *The Collector of Treasures*, Bessie Head delves into the shifting landscape of gender roles, portraying masculinity as fraught and femininity as flourishing. The men in the story wrestle with identity and authority, their sense of self destabilized, while the women, enduring hardship yet resilient, redefine femininity through their strength. This contrast not only critiques the confines of traditional gender roles but also highlights women's capacity for growth, empowerment, and self-discovery, offering a hopeful vision of their potential in a world undergoing change. So, this gender dynamic not only critiques the limitations imposed by traditional gender roles but also offers a powerful vision of women's potential for growth, empowerment, and self-realization.

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