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## **Diasporic Pariah: A Study of Bessie Head's *Maru***

### **Diasporal Parya: Bessie Head'in *Maru* Eseri Üzerine Bir Çalışma**

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#### **Abstract**

Home is a very important notion in human life which helps people establish emotional, social and intellectual belonging and identifications so that they can hold on to life. When the sense of home is contested, the sense of identity is impaired too. Those people who are characterized by the sense of disconnectedness and desire to re-establish their home are known as diasporic people. The protagonist of *Maru* (1971), Margaret is one of those diasporic people who long for home and attachments to people. This article is an attempt to examine the struggle of Margaret against a ruthless and cruel society. In her status as a diasporic individual, Margaret is seen as a nonhuman being due to her race, as a Masarwa, living in Botswana. She is alienated, and treated as a pariah, because she does not belong to a superior race defined by the colonial British forces which ruled Botswana. The article tries to view the protagonist's estrangement and her experience as a diasporic pariah through the lenses of some of the famous postcolonial critics and writers. It also tries to explore the origins and aspects of this kind of treatment.

**Keywords:** Cultural identity, Diaspora, Alienation, Bessie Head, *Maru*.

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## Öz

Yurt, insanların hayata tutunabilmeleri için duygusal, sosyal ve düşünsel aidiyet ve kimlik geliştirmelerini sağlayan önemli bir kavramdır. Yurt kavramı ihtilafli hale geldiğinde kimlik duygusu da zarar görür. Diasporal insanlar bağ geliştirememekle ve ev-aidiyet arayışıyla karakterize edilirler. Maru (1971) romanının baş kahramanı Margaret, bu aidiyet ve bağ arayışında olan diaspora karakterlerinden biridir. Bu makalenin amacı Bessie Head'in *Maru* (1971) romanının baş kahramanı olan Margaret'in acımasız topluma karşı verdiği mücadeleyi incelemektir. Botswana'da diaspora statüsünde yaşayan Margaret, Masarwa kimliğinden dolayı insanlık dışı bir muameleyle karşı karşıya kalır. Botswana'da kolonyal İngiliz kuvvetlerince belirlenen üstün ırk grubuna ait olmadığı için Margaret yabancılaştırılmıştır ve parya muamelesi görmüştür. Bu makale, baş kahramanın yabancılaşma ve diasporal parya deneyimini önde gelen postkolonyal eleştirmenler ve yazarların görüşleri ışığında incelemeyi hedeflemektedir. Bununla beraber, bu yabancılaşmanın kökenini ve unsurlarını açıklamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kültürel kimlik, Diaspora, Yabancılaşma, Bessie Head, Maru.

## Introduction

Diaspora does not always refer to physical places. It is basically living in a place where you do not feel you do belong intellectually, emotionally, and physically. In *A Woman Alone* Bessie Head enunciates her diasporic identity saying that "nothing can take away the fact that I have never had a country; not in South Africa or in Botswana where I now live as a stateless person" (MacKenzie, 1990, p.28). Having experienced "the state of misery and subjection and non-humanity" in the places/spaces she lived, Head developed a sense of disconnectedness and alienation from people and place, which made her a diasporic subject (Head, 1971, p.109). Bessie Head expresses her resentment for the alienation and discrimination she experiences in her home country and the host country by saying that she is a homeless person.

In *The Life and Works of Bessie Head*, Virginia Uzoma Ola comments on the fact that Bessie Head chooses her characters from the ones who are "refugees, exiles, victims" of marginalization (Ola 1994, p.24). Ola's comment on narrational characterization of Bessie Head validates the fact that *Maru* (1971) is basically on diaspora reality of the protagonist, *Margaret* who is an ethnic minority because diaspora has come to be used for the marginalized groups like "immigrant", "refugee", "guest worker", "exile" or as a semantic code for "ethnic and racial minority" (Brah, 1996, p.15). As an ethnic minority, Margaret lives as an outcast in Dilepe. She does not feel that she belongs to the society in which she lives. Throughout her life she fights to legitimize her identity and feel belong to a place. Margaret becomes a teacher to prove that a Masarwa person is equal to a so-called Botswanan in every way.

Ola compares what such diaspora characters go through saying that "a personal and very private odyssey of the soul from which they finally emerge regenerated, as well as spiritually and psychologically enriched" (Ola, 1994, p.24). As such, Ola thinks of diaspora as a metaphorical concept encapsulating a journey which starts with loss and longing for home and ends up with "regenerated" cultural identities blossomed into a different historical, social and political context. As Stuart Hall, Ola believes that the diasporic person is contested in-between history and cultural representation of the place of origin and the place of the arrival. Finally, cultural diversity transforms and enriches the diaspora subjects. Diaspora is a word which had a very specific meaning in the past. It was used to describe people who are physically forced to leave their own communities and live as displaced, or

religious minorities which are usually oppressed by other groups. (Dufoix, 2008, p.1). With the advent of the colonial postcolonial studies, the word has acquired new meanings. It has come to mean physical as well as metaphorical displacement of people who are racially, religiously, politically, or even psychologically displaced. Safran (1991) observes that diaspora is now deployed as “a metaphoric designation” to describe different categories of people – “expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities tout court.” (Cohen, 1997, p.21) Moreover, Paul Gilroy defines diaspora as

A network of people, scattered in a process of non-voluntary displacement, usually created by violence or under threat of violence or death. Diaspora consciousness highlights the tensions between common bonds created by shared origins and other ties arising from the process of dispersal and the obligation to remember a life prior to flight or kidnap. (Knott and McLoughlin, 2010, p.2)

Consequently, diasporic individual is now seen as any person who feels alienated, or who has lost the sense of belonging. This individual loses the “common bonds” with their environment, and they are rendered ad alien or pariah in the new community. Bessie Head’s *Maru* clearly examines the struggle of the protagonist, Margaret, to belong. Her hybridity and the fact that she lives in diaspora deepen her sense of loss and alienation. We will try in our present study to explore the reasons behind Margaret’s alienation and discrimination.

### **Diasporic Pariah in *Maru***

In *The Life and Works of Bessie Head*, Virginia Uzoma Ola defines Margaret Cadmore, the protagonist of *Maru* (1971) as “a woman without identity, an outcast in a hostile society” (Ola, 1994, p.15). Margaret is an orphan who belongs to the Masarwa tribe who are regarded as the most inferior ethnic group in Botswana. Since Margaret is taken out of her native place and raised by a British missionary, she struggles with the difficulties of displacement. Margaret inhabits a new social and cultural space where she is not allowed to feel her Masarwa identity because the Masarwa identity is constructed as a permanently unwanted *Other* in relation to Tswana speaking Batswanans. In postcolonial societies there are racial stratifications, and “identity depends on the definition of other as subordinate and loathed” (Driver, 1993, p.47). However, Margaret introduces herself as a free and active Masarwa subject in opposition to the silenced, passive and subjugated position of the rest of the Masarwa identities who are seen as an object of the dominant discourse of Tswana speaking groups in Botswana.

Since her childhood, Margaret has lived with insults and degrading treatments of Batswanans and she becomes familiar with being alienated and discriminated against. She is exposed to alienation and she is seen as a diasporic pariah because she lives in a place where she feels she does not belong. She occupies a third space where she can find social and cultural elements of both Masarwa and Botswana community, therefore in this in-between space she creates a hybrid identity. Since her hybrid identity is a new and transformed version of both Masarwa and Botswana identity, she “reshapes cultural boundaries” of the Botswana people and the Masarwa tribe. This ambivalent and in-between subject is alienated and isolated by Botswana society because the hybrid identity of Margaret disrupts the binary of superior and inferior culture. Bessie Head describes Margaret by saying that the near perfect English accent and manners did not fit her looks. In fact, not one thing about her fitted another and she looked half like a Chinese and half like an African and half like God knows what” (Head, 1971, 237). This ambivalent identification is caused by exposure of different cultural practices.

Since the hybrid identity of Margaret is nonfixed and fluctuating, we can say that her identification process is not completed and on the move. Her nonfixed identity and the social position which is different from the one ascribed to the Masarwas causes Margaret to feel alienated and displaced. Identification is closely linked with the mutual recognition, love and respect, therefore, developing connection with the society. The sense of belonging stabilizes the identity because individuals create a rapport with the community, they feel they belong to. Margaret does not feel she belongs to neither Masarwa community nor Botswana community. Margaret lives in isolation and loneliness because she fails to establish a bond with her foster mother or any other Botswanan people until she meets Moleka in the village, Dilepe. When Moleka recognizes Margaret's need for bed and offers her help, this has helped her to find a ground on which she could lay her feet: "there had been no backbone to her a short while ago. Now something had stabilized her" (Head, 1971, 244). So, Margaret's sense of home is secured by the presence of a person who recognizes the identity of Margaret as his equal and Margaret does not feel alienated and isolated anymore.

There are different definitions of the concept of home. In *Diasporas: Concepts, Intersections, Identities* Knott and Mcloughlin refers to the layeredness of the concept, home. According to Knott and Mcloughlin, home can be evaluated as "a symbolic conceptualization of where one belongs", or "an actual place of lived experience and a metaphorical space of personal attachment and identification", and finally "a conceptual or discursive space of identification and as a nodal point in concrete social relations" (Knott and Mcloughlin, 2010, p.25). In this sense, home is not merely a physical place but the place an individual develops belonging. We define Margaret as a diasporic pariah because she lacks the sense of belonging and integrated identity. Therefore, she is severely alienated and displaced for her "doubling dividing and interchanging of the self" on the ground that her identity violates "the boundary that marks the nation's selfhood" (Pervez, 2004, p.154). Margaret is alienated because her hybridity is seen "as a heresy" and this situation makes her experience the sense of homelessness, therefore, diaspora (Bhabha, 1994, p.225). Taken all together, what Margaret and the other characters of Head experienced can be best explained by diaspora.

To begin with, Bessie Head believes that to be born as African or even half African is a curse that one must carry its burden as long as they live:

And if the white man thought that Asians were a low, filthy nation, Asians could still smile with relief - at least they were not Africans. And if the white man thought Africans were a low, filthy nation, Africans in Southern Africa could still smile - at least they were not Bushmen. They all have their monsters. (Head, 1971, 226)

Head explicitly states that the white race is the source of misery and suffering to the other races. They are the ones who have implanted the seeds of racialism and discrimination in the world. In *Maru* (1971) Margaret, being a Masarwa, which is seen as an inferior race, suffers racial bigotry and estrangement in the Botswana society. Head reviews the place of Masarwas in Botswana with these words: "They said of the Masarwa what every white man had said of every black man: 'They can't think for themselves. They don't know anything'" (Head, 1971, 315). In other words, Head points to "the conscious or unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model" (Ashcroft et al, 2002, p.9). Botswana became a British protectorate in 1885 and white supremacist power recognized only eight native tribes in Botswana. Masarwa tribe is one of thirty-eight unrecognized tribes of Botswana, which are under threat of losing their identity.

Moreover, the Botswanans received a badge of honor from the British forces which makes them superior to the other tribes in the region. This sense of given superiority arms them with an excuse to

oppress and discriminate against the other tribes like the Masarwa, to which Margaret belongs. For the Botswanans, the Masarwa is a “filthy nation”, because the latter does not have the privilege the former was given by the British forces. Ironically, the British forces help in establishing an interracial environment, where Africans oppress each other and alienate each other under the name of superiority. They seem to be deluded by this sense of superiority and they become unconsciously oblivious to the fact they are enslaved by this phony superiority. According to Bhabha, in “these instances of social and discursive alienation there is no recognition of master and slave, there is only the matter of the enslaved master, the unmastered slave.” (Bhabha,1994, p.131).

In diasporic environment that Margaret lives in, she could never develop a sense of belonging. She is torn between the Masarwa culture which she is unwillingly uprooted from, and the British white environment which Mrs. Cadmore creates and shrouds Margaret with. Thus, her life is a constant battle to achieve “home desire”, and this dream seems to be farfetched, simply speaking because she finds it hard to reconcile her two selves, the Masarwa and the British. Thus, her estrangement and her isolation are aggravated, and she fails to develop a sense of belonging and integrated identity in diaspora where she negotiates cultural differences (Brah, 1996, p.16) Since she is accepted by neither the British nor the Botswana cultures, Margaret feels lost and feels that she has neither people nor society to belong to. The only acceptable pattern she could be allowed to live under is her status as a slave. This is why Head comments on the Masarwa people, “no one wanted them to, except perhaps as the slaves and downtrodden dogs of the Batswanas” (Head, 1971, p. 233).

This state of being less than a human or being a slave degrades Margaret and diminishes her power, and with this loss of power, an individual can never feel secure or feel belonging. In postcolonial literature, cultural vilification is an obvious source of alienation. Margaret says, “then seemingly anything can be said and done to you, as your outer appearance reduces you to the status of a non-human being” (Head, 1971, 226). It is clear that Margaret sees herself as a commodity or nonhuman being when she also compares herself with animals. She says, “If you can catch a Zebra, you can walk up to it, forcefully open its mouth and examine its teeth” and “scientist do the same to Bushmen” (Head, 1971, p.227). According to Ashcroft et al, “a valid and active sense of self may have been destroyed by cultural denigration” (Ashcroft et al, 2002, p.9). On this matter, Bessie Head draws attention to the alienation and discrimination against denigrated Masarwa/Bushman tribe, and she says Bushman or Masarwa is the word standing for contemptuous words like ‘nigger’ and “kaffir” (Head, 1971, 227). The Botswana society breaks off the relation with Masarwa people due to their assumed position of inferiority. This isolation culminates in the effacement of the sense of self and belonging. This discreteness between Margaret and society is the essence of Margaret’s diaspora in metaphorical and practical terms. In the rupture of racial communities Margaret finds herself in oblivion and embarks on a quest of identity and belonging.

What is more, Margaret’s dilemma is that she is not only seen as a diasporic pariah by the Botswanans, but she is also alienated by her own people. The life she spent with Mrs. Cadmore makes her think and feel differently. After she was adopted by Mrs. Cadmore, who we discussed above as doing so to conduct an experiment with Margaret, Margaret felt that she suffers from both social as well as personal alienation. Social alienation because she is estranged and alienated by both her own people and the Botswanans. Her personal alienation comes as a result of the way she was brought up. She has double consciousness, because she has the British as well as her indigenous consciousnesses controlling her. This is why laying bridges with whoever seems to be too hard for her. Mrs. Cadmore makes it obvious that Margaret has no connection with her, which is obvious in the quote “the child used to watch it 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" (Head, 1971, p.231). As a result of imposing British culture and norms, Margaret develops a totally distinctive character according to Botswana and Masarwa community. As a result of cultural input which is different from Masarwas or Batswana people, Margaret develops a unique mindset that confuses the Botswanas with respect to cultural identity. Since sharing the same cultural traits is foundational to be part of racial or ethnic unity, Margaret becomes dissimilar from other Masarwa people. She occupies a third space, namely, she has a hybrid identity, which is "unable to fit into a definition of something as narrow as tribe or race or nation"; and yet it is incompatible with the race of the Botswanans (Head, 1971, p. 230). Her suffering, and her "social and psychic alienation" seem to be indiscernible to the people, because "they are always explained away as alien presences, occlusions of historical progress, the ultimate misrecognition of Man. (Bhabha,1994, 43).

Margaret lives as a diasporic pariah, because she is forced to move from her homeland or the culture she can find a connection with. Mrs. Cadmore makes Margaret a diasporic subject when she takes her out of the world of Masarwa people as "a real living object for her experiment" (Head, 1971, p230). Seeing herself as superior to the Masarwa people, she thinks that she can do whatever she wants with whoever, because the Masarwas are less than humans. This is why she takes Margaret out of her community to raise her as an educated Margaret Cadmore junior. This ends up with turning Margaret into a diasporic pariah. This forced separation causes Margaret to have "a big hole" that she spends her whole life trying to recoup (Head, 1971, p.230). The author comments on Margaret's childhood:

A big hole was there because, unlike other children, she was never able to say: 'I am this or that. My parents are this or that. There was no one in later life who didn't hesitate to tell her that she was a Bushman, mixed breed, half breed, low breed or bastard" (Head, 1971, p.230).

Margaret is raised in an environment where everyone including her foster mother makes her feel that she is an alien or "a low animal" (Head, 1971, p.264). She is treated as a "semi-servant in the house" (Head, 1971, p.231) and she has suffered different shades of alienation. Melvin Seeman defines the features of alienation as: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement (Seeman, 1959, p.783). Margaret seems to suffer from all the shades defined above. She is in fact a true incarnation of what alienation is. She is fully aware of the fact that she is powerless and voiceless. Therefore, she defines herself in the following words:

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... (Head, 1971, 232)

As a diasporic pariah, Margaret is deprived of her least right, which is to speak or to express an opinion. She is rendered a subhuman whose rights are completely usurped, and her words are confiscated. The only way left to her to ascertain her humanity is her tears. The above extract reveals the utter helplessness of Margaret. Being disarmed of "the weapons of words", she is cut aloof and alienated in this society. Head tries to show some practices of injustice against Margaret and her people. She divulges the way those people live being deprived of all that makes them feel like real humans. Margaret's sense of being a diasporic pariah comes as a result of "dispossession and dislocation - psychic and social" which is "the condition of the marginalized, the alienated, those who have to live under the surveillance of a sign of identity and fantasy that denies their difference," ((Bhabha,1994, 63) to use Bhabha's words. Margaret who is "faceless, voiceless, almost nameless in the country" (Head, 1971, 315), tries to look for any means by which she can comprehend her difference. Her only solace is when she decides to be a face and voice for her people. She tried to fight

back and get some of her rights. Hence, she boldly declares her position in society as a teacher, to show that she is proudly a Masarwa and she is not ashamed of what she is. Despite all the injustice and pain she suffers from, she decides to stand up for her society and for herself as well.

One of the aspects of diasporic estrangement is the absence of meaning in the character's life. Margaret feels that her life is meaningless because of her inferior race. She does not dare to socialize with people because she is fully aware of her marginalization and worthlessness. She sees herself as "a woman who meant nothing to the public." (Head, 1971, 225) No matter how educated and smart she is, society still sees her as nothing. This marginalization is what the colonial British rules have instilled in Botswana. People are divided into hierarchy of royals and inferior people. Following the traditional colonial principle of "divide and conquer", the people of Botswana are unaware of the purpose of this division. Thus, they started persecuting, marginalizing, and alienating their own people. In this colonial context, Margaret feels that she does not belong to this society, "she is not part of it and belongs nowhere" (Head, 1971, 301). Therefore, Margaret is so alienated that she does not see a way to develop an attachment with the Tswana people in Dilepe.

One of the signs of diasporic alienation is the inability to fully adapt to the norms and traditions of society. The diasporic pariah feels that they are cut loose from the cultural as well as ideological tenets of their environment. Margaret feels her incapacity to fully function in her society because she is not looked at as an equal figure to the people there. This is shown in almost all the places Margaret is associated with. One example is when she is insulted and degraded by her students with the commands of the principal of that school. The students kept reminding her that she was a Bushman. In the academic institute Margaret works as an educator, the principal and the students treated her as a slave. In exchange for her service, Margaret receives mortification and degradation from both the administration and the students. This is the reason that pushes her to lose her temper on many occasions. She starts frantic fits of hallucination where she imagines that she kills the guilty students with a stick. Being an experienced person in pain, she could never inflict violence against anyone. All she could do is to burst with these fits of hallucination which reveal the extent to which Margaret is in agony and despair.

Margaret's only way of finding peace and settlement is through love and respect. The kind treatment she has from Moleka redefines Margaret and repositions her on the map of her society. For the first time in her life, Margaret feels that she is treated as a normal human being because she has already lost this sense with the long-termed racism and hatred she has received from the people in Botswana. Moleka's treatment of Margaret shows how simple Margaret's dreams are. All she wanted is a place where she feels that she is loved and respected. In *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Stuart Hall defines identity as "the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (Hall, 1994, p.225). It is this new identity and new perspective that console Margaret and make her have a stable life. This stability is best described by Heads in the following words:

There had been no backbone to her a short while ago. Now, something had stabilized her. He seemed to have said silently: 'You see, you don't have to be afraid anymore. First, there was one of you. Now there are two of you. It was that generous. (Head, 1971, 244)

Thus, it is this love, that Margaret defines as "necessity, recognition, courage, friendship and strength" (Head, 1971, 306). It is this "necessity", "friendship", and "strength" that give Margaret her humanity back to her. These are what make her feel safe and equal to the others. They make her feel belonging, grant her peace and security. This is Head's message to the world, that *amor vincit omnia*. It is through love and understanding that the world will become a better place.

## Conclusion

To sum up, Margaret who lives as a diasporic pariah, who was mistreated and degraded to the level of a subhuman, could rise again with love and respect. The injustice and the humiliation that she receives due to racial bigotry are redeemed by love and recognition. Margaret is just an example of millions of people who live as aliens and pariahs in some communities. They have no fault of their own. They are forced to live this life of agony and misery. They are absurdly blamed of things which are beyond their control. Margaret is born as a Masarwa, she does not choose to be one. She is treated badly and ruthlessly because of her race. She is never looked at as a human being, as if her race would mean that she was a nonhuman. This novel is in fact a study of her defiance and her endeavors to prove her humanity, which she finally realizes and achieves when she is seen and loved as a real human being.

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