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Research Article

(Re) illuminating the Misrepresented Identity of the Marginalised Minority Groups in Bessie Head's *Maru*: an Afrocentric Approach

Thabo Mahasha[1], Mphoto Mogoboya[2]

Abstract

This article explores social identity and the plight of the marginalised groups in Southern Africa as depicted in Bessie Head's novel, *Maru* (1971). From time immemorial until now, minority groups have suffered exploitation, subjugation and repression from the dominant elite who are usually led by patriarchal societies who treat them as slaves and outcasts. In *Maru*, Head seeks to reconstruct the distorted identity and the positive image of the marginalised minority groups in the Southern Africa. She does so by employing an autobiographical narrative voice in order to blend her own personal experience with fictional characters. The novel mirrors a fluidity of identities in both social and political spheres and demonstrates how suppression of these identities affects both individuals and nation states. This is a qualitative study which is underpinned by Afrocentric theoretical assumptions. It is a thematised textual analysis of Head's *Maru* which seeks to overtly re-illuminate and dismantle established ethnic prejudices and racial discrimination against the vulnerable minority groups who form the larger part of the underprivileged people in Southern Africa. *Maru* was purposively sampled because of its relevance to the study. This article recommends the deconstruction of stereotypes and reconstruction of the misrepresented identity of the marginalised people in Southern Africa.

Keywords: *identity, plight, marginalised, stereotypes, Afrocentric*

Introduction

Discrimination has been and still is a nightmare and a social threat in various nation states around the world. Even though it is a common practice among people of different races universally, South Africa went to the extent of formalising it through legislation. In *Maru* (1971), Head challenges racism and discrimination in general and exposes the stereotypes of the mixed-race character in general.

Maru is set in Botswana but portrays a South African experience. Whereas this article draws attention to the characterisation and portrayal of dehumanisation of the Bushmen in *Maru*, it also cognises the fact that there is a connection between Head's characters and aspects of her own biography. Olaussen (1997) affirms that Head writes autobiographically. She creates characters as a means of exploring her own identity, nature and potential, hence, the layer between Head as an author and her characters is thin and permeable. For example, the circumstances around Head's life and her protagonist, Margret Cadmore, share the same characteristics and are juxtaposed in this study to show this parallel similarity. In other words, her concern for the marginalised groups bears a sharp reflection of her personal experience. This study aims to reconstruct the distorted identity and the positive image of the marginalised minority groups in the Southern Africa.

A Note on Terminology

In *Maru*, Head applies the terms, "Bushmen" and "Masarwa" interchangeably. These collective concepts have connotative meaning and suggest how these people are often seen without identity. Are

[1] University of Limpopo (South Africa). Email: thabo.mahasha@ul.ac.za
[2] University of Limpopo (South Africa). Email: mphoto.mogoboya@ul.ac.za

they really "Bushmen" as Head calls them? Is "Masarwa" an acceptable name? Are they "San" or "Khoi"? Or can one apply a double-barrel term, "Khoisan" in order to be more liberal and accommodative?

The word "Masarwa" in Setswana is both ungrammatical and derogatory. Head's correspondence proves that she knew the term was derogatory and she used it deliberately to expose common attitudes among higher-status *Batswana* (people of Botswana). "Bushman" is commonly understood to be derogatory. "San" and "Khoisan" are more general terms that have been accepted internationally and "Mosarwa/Basarwa" (singular/plural) is a derogatory term used by Batswana tribe (Lederer 158). Leepang (176) further highlights the following:

> At Itekeng Junior Secondary School in Ghanzi, there was an expression common amongst our Setswana-speaking classmates: *'Mosarwa ke Mosarwa hela'* ("Mosarwa is nothing"). This implied that a Mosarwa will go to school (up to junior secondary school level) and still go back to his settlement and do his hunting. '*Mosarwa' could [mean]* '*mo-sa-rua'* (a person who owns nothing, has no property and no language). '*Ga wa rua, o ruilwe,'* means you own nothing, but you are owned [as a slave] by someone else.

This study applies all these terms: "San", "Masarwa"/"Basarwa" or "Bushman" as used by Head and other critics for discussion purposes only. This is neither prescriptive nor definitive. It is not the intention of this study to defame or devalue any racial group through derogatory labelling.

Who are the Bushmen?

Despite the afore-mentioned prejudices that trivialise the Bushmen community, this study argues that there is no nation in the world without identity. The Bushmen are the oldest inhabitants of Southern Africa, where they have lived for many centuries. Their home is in the vast expanse of the Kalahari Desert. They are hunters, with traditionally about 70% of their diet consisting of plant food, including berries, nuts, roots and melons gathered primarily by the women. The remaining 30% is meat (mostly antelopes) hunted by men using poisoned arrows and spears on hunts that can last for several days. They make their temporary and nomadic homes from wood that they gather. Their social structure is not tribal because they have no paramount leader and their ties of kinship are fairly relaxed. They have a loosely knit family culture where decisions are made by universal discussion and agreement by consensus. An individual's opinion is naturally weighted according to their level of skill and experience in the particular field of discussion.

The Bushmen had their homelands invaded by African nomads from around 1,500 years ago, and by White colonists over the last few hundred years. From that time, they faced discrimination, eviction from their ancestral lands, murder and oppression amounting to a massive, though concealed genocide, which drastically reduced their population. Today many people perceive them only as a community with a primitive lifestyle.

Given the above abridged historical account, it becomes imperative to assert that the Bushmen community, like any other nation in the world, has all the dynamics that constitute a nation with identity, integrity and history. Head posits that to argue that the Bushmen are a nation without identity is not only demeaning their humanity but it is also another way of sustaining the colonial perception that classifies them with wild animals. Their identity may be alien to other nations of the world but this should not justify grounds for prejudice and discrimination. They also find other cultures strange and incongruous in some way, but remain tolerant and respectful.

Theoretical Perspective of the Study

This paper is undergirded by Afrocentricity. Asante (1999,1-2;4) defines Afrocentricity "as a critical corrective to a displaced agency among Africans" by "re-centering African minds". In other words, Afrocentricity is aimed at correcting the damage the colonialists inflicted against the Africans through regenerating African thought. Karenga (1988,404) regards Afrocentricity as "essentially a quality of perspective or approach rooted in the cultural image and human interest of the African people". This means that it is a state of being centred on Africa, which is to say that in Afrocentricity, everything revolves around the African continent, her people, their customs, knowledge (including scientific and technological), art forms, morals, habits, ideologies and politics, cultures, and traditions (Asante 1999,4). Africa is used as a centre of discourse, a context for whatever content there is to pronounce on. In this way, Africa becomes a subject of analysis, a point of focus and concentration, the axis. Afrocentricity also serves as an affirmation that Africans are capable of doing any other exploit that any person can do (Appiah 1992). In other words, one should overstretch oneself in an attempt to help others. Afrocentricity is a relevant theoretical lens for this paper because in *Maru*, Head seeks to reconstruct the distorted identity and the positive image of the marginalised minority groups in the Southern Africa for reconciliation purposes (Mogoboya & Mahasha, 2020).

Methodology

Qualitative approach was used in this study to re-illuminate and dismantle established ethnic prejudice and racial discrimination against the vulnerable minority groups who form the larger part of the underprivileged people in Southern Africa. Qualitative paradigms are "characterised by material practices incorporating an interpretive, naturalistic approach [and], explores how social experience is constructed and given meaning" (Landers 2005,17). It is a textual analysis of Head's *Maru*. As a research design, textual analysis "describes the content, structure, and functions of the messages contained in texts" (Frey, Botan and Kreps 1999, 1). Primary data was collected from the novel, *Maru* by Head while secondary data was gathered from critical texts and journal articles in the field of literature. *Maru* was purposively sampled because of its relevance to the study. The basis of this selection is that *Maru* has thematic patterns that reverberate with issues of identity in Southern Africa. Black (2010,15) claims that purposive sampling is "when elements selected for the sample are chosen by the judgment of the researcher". Collected data from the sampled text was analysed through the thematic analysis technique which aims to "identify themes, i.e. patterns in the data that are important or interesting, and use these themes to address the research or say something about an issue" (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017,353). This technique has helped the researchers formulate themes which have enhanced the analysis of the sampled text.

Racial Discrimination and Social Identity

Identity forms the basis of individual personhood, self-image as well as the collective self-image shared by members of social groups and communities (Mogoboya, 2011). It is a primary concept for understanding the relationship between the personal and the social realms, the individual and the group; the cultural and the political, the relationships between the social groups and the influence of the media on social relations (Zegeye and Harris 242). It incorporates the emotional attachments or bonds that individuals often have as a result of their shared membership in social groups. Group membership influences the way in which individuals see themselves, especially if the group is reviled or esteemed.

There are many theories of social identity. Cantle (2) articulates the following contribution in relation to social identity:

> Social identity takes into account the several social identities people adopt in their lives and how this influences their sense of belonging to a community.

> Interculturalism also draws on the theories around social identity, which was originally developed to understand the psychological basis of intergroup discrimination. The theory is based on the idea that a person has not one 'personal self', but instead is made up of "several selves", which depending on the context are more or less prominent. An individual also has multiple "social identities", which are the individual's self-concept derived from perceived membership of social groups.

In the above context, Cantle notes that group cohesion is indispensable in order to build a strong and united community. Thus, if a member of a particular community is alienated or discriminated against, it is not only that individual who falls victim to alienation but the entire community as it will be disturbed and affected, and communal cohesion will not be attained.

Social identity is an important aspect that has inspired Head's novel, *Maru* (1971). In *Maru,* Head interrogates the prejudice and racial discrimination against the Bushmen in Botswana. This is compared and contrasted with how she manages to transcend the intractable conditions of her birth, her social experiences as a Coloured South African and the dehumanising circumstances in Botswana. The conditions around her birth, her early life and harsh realities of exile in Botswana are mirrored in the main character, Margaret Cadmore junior and the Bushmen community, in this novel. A cursory glance on her background also reflects on South Africa's atrocious past where people were oppressed and condemned on the basis of trivial aspects such as colour, race and ethnicity.

To affirm Head's predicament in a society ruled by both apartheid and patriarchal systems, Birch, Head's family member, depicts conditions around her birth as follows:

> On the 6th of July 1937 Bessie Amelia "Emery" was born to Bessie Amelia "Toby" Emery [...] Mrs Birch, then in Pietermaritzburg, arranged with her solicitor put in train an adoption procedure [...]. How the naming of the child came about nobody knows... Who the father was is completely unknown, and speculation is a waste of time. The event must have taken place in Johannesburg when Toby was out on a parole from the family home; a brief encounter; a misuse of her mental state? Was she waylaid? Was she enticed somewhere? We do not know [...] When young Bessie was pronounced coloured by the first foster parents and rejected, the shock was even greater, and more bewildering [...]. (1-8)

Gardner notes that the circumstances of Head's biography appear to be so idiosyncratically inauspicious it can seem miraculous that her creativity flowered in the first place. In her own words, Head narrates the predicament of her life story as follows:

> I was born on the sixth of July, 1937, in Pietermaritzburg Mental Hospital […] The reason for my peculiar birthplace was that my mother was white, and she had acquired me from a black man. She was judged insane, and committed to the mental hospital while pregnant. Her name was Bessie Emery and I consider it the only honour South Africans ever did me – naming me after the unknown, lovely, and unpredictable woman (227).

Based on the circumstances around her life, Head claims to have no close relatives apart from her divorced husband and her son. She declares: "I have always just been me, with no frame of reference to anything beyond myself" (Head 35). In the mid-thirties, bills were tabled under the United Party government to amend the Immorality Act to prevent marriages between Whites and all 'non-Europeans'. From 1948, the National Party took over the task of promulgating such legislation: the

Mixed Marriages Act and Immorality Act were both law by 1950, the time at which Head was uncovering the mystery of her birth. When, in that year, she entered the educational care of the Pietermaritzburg missionaries, the headmistress casted her as the product of an insane and criminal activity. Cooper notes:

> Your mother was insane. If you're not careful you'll get insane just like your mother. Your mother was a White woman. They had to lock her up as she was having a child by the stable boy who was a native (73).

This complete absence of sympathy visited on the orphaned child a moral retribution for her unknown parents' 'sin': miscegenation. Moreover, Bessie's mother's illness was deliberately explained as sociopathy rather than a psychological illness. The missionaries also tried to overwrite any sense of her history with that of the official history of apartheid South Africa:

> [...] it was to be a history of skin colour, [...] the white skin being a passport to paradise and many privileges; the black skin being a kind of rhinoceros hide at which are hurled tear gas, batons, bullets and ferocious police dogs (Head 73).

Decades after the headmistress' ruthless and humiliating pronouncement, Head revealed the truth behind her mother's claimed insanity by the Birch family.

> I don't think I told you this but my mother's family locked her up in a mental asylum for sleeping with a black man. I feel they did this to save the family name from scandal and she was in the asylum by the time I was born. I carried this with me for a long time. There is a terrible depth of loneliness in supposed or even evident insanity (Head 64- 65).

These powerful and punitive evocations of the discourse of segregation became major themes in many narrative versions of Head's autobiography that she constructed over the years, some of them for friends, and others for the growing number of academic interviewers who flocked to see her in Serowe (Starfield 659). Head's hybridity suggests that her doubleness, her sense of self, as split and incapable of belonging, is endemic to her existence as part of a colonised people. Her upbringing was characterised by rejection and resentment imposed and justified by the apartheid system. She was born and bred in appalling social conditions in which alienation and dehumanisation were part of her daily existence eroding both her self-worth and self-image (Smith 1999,69). She grew up in a community in transit. Throughout South Africa, coloured people were increasingly subjected to the National Party's social engineering policies (Goldin 1995,156). She became aware that Coloured people were, by reason of their diverse origins, hardly a homogeneous population group, but were lumped together for administrative purposes by the White supremacist state. She perceives herself as a person without identity: "Nothing I am, of no tribe or race, and because of it full of a childish arrogance to defend myself against all of you" (Head 121).

Both in South Africa and in her chosen country of exile, Botswana, she felt inadequate and isolated in an African society. As a woman, she felt more alienated and compared Africa to: "men all over" who will "kill and destroy in the struggle for position and place" (Head 122). As she saw it, Africa basked in a masculinity and misogyny covered by layers of restraint and tradition. This masculinity was opposed to her own deficiencies of femininity. Africa became an intellectual and emotional problem for her. She did not know how to break down the barriers and spaces that separate her depth from that of Africa (Starfield 656). MacKenzie (1990,x) writes:

> As a South African-born 'Coloured', Bessie Head was subjected to all the brutalities meted out to those citizens not born white, and she, as a 'first generation' child of bi-racial origin, bore the full brunt of South Africa's discriminatory legislation. Her place of birth, foster childhood, adolescence as an orphan, her failed marriage and experiences as a 'non-white' in the various ghettos around the cities of South Africa form [her] background.

Ola (1994,66;72) describes Head's resilience by indicating that "she was the underdog among underdogs, but refused to stay under; born a victim but lived a survivor". Head expresses her own adversity as follows:

> I could say that I have the stamina to survive the sort of situations only wild alley cats encounter, but would not want to take another birth in South Africa and end up in Botswana […] No one cares. Why the hell did you come here in the first place, they say? We don't want you. And behind you is such hell and calamity that one simply asks: Oh God why was I born? What other effort do I make to survive? Where do I go? Or on which day do I die? (Ola 1994,66;72).

In the opening chapter of *Maru* (1971), Head paints a portrait of how the Bushmen are perceived by other human races. They are dehumanised in such a way that there is no distinction between them and wild animals. This is Head's depiction of the mind of the coloniser towards the African people. She portrays this outrageous perception as follows:

> The white man found only too many people who looked different. That was all that outraged the receivers of his discrimination, that he applied the technique of the wild jiggling dance and the rattling tin cans to anyone who was not a white man. 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[...] then seemingly anything can be said and done to you as your outer appearance reduces you to the status of a non-human being. In Botswana they say: Zebras, Lions, Buffalos and Bushmen live in Kalahari Desert. If you can catch a Zebra, you can walk up to it, forcefully open its mouth and examine its teeth. The Zebra is not supposed to mind because it is an animal. Scientists do the same with the Bushmen and they are not supposed to mind, because there is no one they can still turn around to and say, 'At least I am not a […]'(11).

Comparing the Bushmen with animals is both outrageous and inhuman. As in other contemporary narratives of mixed-blood experience, the temporal frame of reference here stretches back to the historic encounter between Europeans and non-Europeans. It is a reflection of the initial contact between the coloniser and colonised (Miller 1995).
The remonstrations on behalf of the Bushmen by Head are not only against the identity that *Batswana* have foisted on them in order to exploit them but it is also against the constructions of the Bushmen by the world of science and scholarship which objectifies them as scientific curiosities (as in the case of Sarah Baartman), remnants of a bygone stone-age culture and race whose authentic lifestyle must be preserved in asocial reserves. The Bushmen can do little to contest this derogatory construction about them because it is undertaken in faraway places in discourses to which they have no access (Mwikisa 2009,167).

The colonisers treated the Bushmen community with sheer contempt and absolute prejudice and perceived them as non-humans, the lowest of the low, mere living organisms without identity.

Head's Self-Reflection

Throughout history the Bushmen were perceived as an epitome of humiliation and subjugation. Head, being a Coloured herself, went through the same exploitative experience during the apartheid South Africa and witnessed the oppression of the Bushmen in Botswana, first hand. It does not spring any surprise to see her creating in Margaret Cadmore, a character who reflects her (Head's) own ordeals, degradation and utter dejection, Margaret Cadmore. Ola (1994,15) notes her (Margaret) as 'a woman without identity.' In *Maru* (1971), Head applies what Bakhtin calls heteroglossia or dialogism, which means that there is always more than one voice or meaning inherent in a story or any other literary genre. He asserts that:

> We actually sense two levels at each moment in [a story], one, the level of the narrator, a belief system filled with his objects, meanings and emotional expressions, and the other, the level of the author who speaks (albeit in a reflected way) by means of [the story]. The narrator himself, with his own discourse, enters into this authorial belief system along with what is actually being told […] (Bakhtin 314).

Head fictionalises her own search for identity, a search for an African identity on the part of a woman who does not belong to a dominant race in the community in which she dwells. The protagonist experiences a lived blankness in which lack of identity is yoked to being a woman, being a Coloured or Mosarwa and being silent. Margaret is characterised by silence and marginality to the community in which she comes to live.

Everything that Margaret is, her personality, her proficiency in the English language, and her being are that of her English foster mother, Margaret Cadmore senior. She purposefully instilled a positive self-image in Margaret which later on enabled her to survive marginalisation imposed on her by the political and social systems of the day. Margaret's identity is a composite of legacy derived, on the one hand, from her natural mother and on the other hand, created for her by her foster mother. Margret is thus a fluidity and hybridity of identities (Mhlahlo 2002,24). Balseiro (1992,79) also posits that the younger Margaret absorbs much of her adoptive mother's personality. Her resourcefulness, resilience, education and artistic skills are all the constructed inheritance from Margret Cadmore senior.

The only Basarwa identity that Margaret has is her biological composition. Amazingly, her positive self-image pursues her contrary to this notion. On arrival at Dilepe, Margret's firm and confident answer to Dikeledi's enquiry of whether or not she is Coloured marks her coming into her own, her sense of self identity (Mhlahlo 2002,25). She simply answers, "I am a Masarwa" (24).

Margaret seems defiant and wants to maintain her Basarwa identity more than anything else. She could have claimed a Coloured identity and no one would have been sceptical about it. Dikeledi affirms this: "If you keep silent about the matter, people will simply assume you are a Coloured. I mistook you for a Coloured until you brought up the *other matter"* [my emphasis] (24). It is interesting to note how prejudice deepens when Dikeledi deliberately evades to pronounce the word "Masarwa", by cunningly othering it as the "other matter", hence, subtly encouraging Margaret to detach herself from such a humiliating' identity. The reason is that: "Dilepe village was the stronghold of some of the most powerful and wealthy chiefs in the country, all of whom owned innumerable Masarwa as slaves" (24), hence, she advises Margret to hide her ethnic identity.

It is not only to her companion to whom she affirms her Masarwa identity but she also vehemently introduces herself to the school principal as such irrespective of his leading question: "Excuse the

question, but are you a Coloured?" (40). The answer to the principal is a categorical 'no'. "No" […] "I am a Masarwa" (40). This is an assertion of self-determination and purpose which reflects how ready she is to take control of her mind, her inner world and her identity.
Margaret is portrayed as a victim of discrimination, alienation and oppression. She represents what it means to be discriminated against. She is a medium through which the author conveys the dreadfulness of prejudice and oppression to the reader. The school principal later conveys his frustration and confusion to the education supervisor:
"There's a real mystery about that one at the school", he said. "They don't look you in the face and say, 'I am a Masarwa.' It was like a slap in the face. The statement was so final, as though she did not want to be anything else. I had given her a loophole. Coloureds are just trash, but at least she could pass as one. It would have saved us an awful lot of bother (44).
Throughout the novel, Head indicates that racism is evil irrespective of the perpetrator who practises it. She writes:

> How universal was the language of oppression! They had said of the Masarwa what every white man had said of every black man: 'They can't think of themselves. They don't know anything.' The matter never rested there. The strong man caught hold of the weaker man and a circus animal out of him, reducing him to the state of misery and subjection and non-humanity […]. The Batswana thought they were safer than the white man. He had already awoken to the fact that the mistreated people are also furious people who could tear him to shreds (109).

Head's quest for self-knowledge leads her to a painful self-examination. Her search is directed towards the center of her consciousness to which she refers to as the soul. Confronted with the pain of racial prejudice and oppression in Botswana, she comes to realise that these discriminatory attitudes are not confined to her past in South Africa, but exist also in the country she wishes to adopt (Thusi 1998,60).
Margaret is resilient and highly determined to rediscover her lost self. Eko (1986,143) discerns that with her one sentence (I am a Masarwa) identification, Margret confronts herself, her past upbringing, her future and her society, burst out from the walls of her White foster mother's protection and stands aloof and vulnerable.
The vulnerability that Eko postulates is evident when Dilepe society discovers that Margaret is a Mosarwa. She is then objectified by the intolerant Batswana society of Dilepe village. The education administrators attempt to force her out of the school by taking advantage of both her 'low status' and femininity. "She can be shoved out […] It's easy. She's a woman" (41).
Margaret is determined to preserve and uphold her Basarwa identity but her inner person is waning. She shows elements of internalised inferiority complex. Racial pressure exerted on her by Dilepe community finds a way through her to drag her down. When anyone tries to communicate with her, "she slowly raised her hand as if to ward off a blow. Sometimes she winced, but the raised hand was always there as though she expected only blows from people" (71). Even when she developed romantic feelings for Moleka, she finds neither strength nor audacity to fight for him. She suppresses her feelings and gives him up to Dikeledi. She does this because she thinks "Moleka can't possibly love [her]" (114). She is "a Masarwa" […] She "ha[s] nothing and [she] want[s] nothing" (114). Kamanga (1987,23) notes: "ultimately her isolated existence and social rejection reduce her significance in the village to the level of obscurity".
According to *Batswana* culture, the Bushmen are confined to the bush and uneducable, let alone educate others. Therefore, by Dilepe logic, Margaret could not teach irrespective of her artistic prowess and professional credentials. The principal confirms that she has what matters most: "I only

look at qualifications. She was top of the class the whole way through" (41), "a teacher with [distinction] for every subject" (51). Instead of earning respect and reputation for her professional outstanding achievements, she becomes a public spat, a victim of sarcasm, humiliation and degradation.

In the midst of these circumstances, she forges ahead to stand out as a symbol of transformation and a spokesperson for the voiceless. Head uses Margaret's character to expose the vacuity of ethnic and racial prejudice and to contest the insidious and entrenched arrogant patriotism endemic in dominant ethnic groups. Margaret, being depicted as an abject and pitiable victim like her mother who died while giving birth to her, is cast as a redeemer of her people. She possesses the resources to articulate the plight of her people. She is a representative of "the slaves and downtrodden dogs of the Batswana" (18). She represents the vitality of Basarwa people who through their knowledge and creativity can contribute a revamped set of values to a world deformed by the perverted and toxic logic of intolerance and fanaticism (Tiro 2009,165).

Conclusion

Maru (1971) serves as an embodiment of Head's identification with gender and race exploitation, oppression and dehumanisation facing minority groups and countless women in Africa. It has been asserted in this article that Head identifies closely with her characters. They present part of her experience as well as unrealised yet fantasised fear about her existence (Starfield 1997,663). Margaret's arrival at Dilepe becomes the pinnacle and the driving force for change, both politically and socially (Mogoboya, 2021). Her atrocities are rewarded by freedom for her people who were enslaved for decades and lost all hope and identity.

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