Parental Protection and Abuse in Bessie Head's *The Cardinals*

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Abstract

Parents' protection is a human responsibility everywhere, yet its absence generally leads to abuse and life-long injury for children. This study analyzes the issues of protective parents and abuse in Bessie Head's The Cardinals, situating the novella in apartheid South Africa's socio-cultural and political landscape. Protection, or defense or state of defending, is one of the key concerns in contemporary African literature in general, but particularly with respect to human relations and organizations in society. The essay addresses how parental desertion and societal failure to provide lead to abuse and empowerment of children, particularly the girl child. By sociological analysis, and feminist theory being used here as an analytical model, the paper interprets Head's narrative into a portrait of social reality, embodying the psychological, emotional, and physical consequences of lacking paternal care. Head's protagonist, Mouse, experiences various displacements—physical, social, and genealogical—each reflecting the extended consequences of neglect, sexual assault, and societies' imbalances. Mouse is exposed to exploitation by both biological and adoptive parents from childhood, showing the subtle distinction between protection by parents and lack of protection, usually manifesting in the shape of abuse. The novella also illustrates the intersection between private trauma and public oppression, showing the intricate intersections between family pathology, gender disequilibrium, and institutional injustice. Through the use of autobiography in fiction, Head critiques patriarchal societies and government and social institutions' failure to safeguard vulnerable children. This analysis thus ends up describing how

The Cardinals presents an enthralling narrative about the consequences of poor parental protection, emphasizing the urgent need for society to recognize children's rights and protection. Head's writing not only focuses on the woes of underprivileged children but also places literature on the ground as a place for social consciousness, reform, and feminist activism.

Keywords: Abuse, Environment, Niger Delta, Neglect, Parental Protection

1.1 Introduction

According to Webster's All-in-One Dictionary and Thesaurus, protection is simply defined as the act of protecting. It is also defined as the state of being protected (511). In a general sense, protection can be seen as when something or someone is being secured by another thing or someone else. Protection is one English word that is quite predominantly used today in contemporary African literature. Creative writers have made it one of their dominant subject matters. They use it when they are referring to human relationship and human to his environment, like in the case of Niger Delta.

In the texts under study, an attempt is made to view protection from the angle of parent-child relationship, hence, the title: "Parental Protection and Abuse in Bessie Head's *The Cardinal.* Every child irrespective of his/her society/background deserves parental protection. This is because, no child can survive a society vanquished in all manner of ills without the exclusive protection of his or her parents. But from findings and recent happening, it is crystal clear that most parents have abandoned their primary responsibility of protecting their children/wards and have gone ahead to violet the rights of these children/wards, in the guise of protection. This is what this essay is an attempt to differentiate between parental protection and its lack, which consequently leads to abuse.

African society had suffered political, economic and environmental hardship. This has led to the emergence of many creative literary texts that focuses on the plight of its citizens in the hands and supervision of the colonialist. These sufferings are in stages: there is the stage of Africans suffering hardship and dehumanization in

the hands of the whites and the stage of Africans suffering dehumanization in the hands of fellow blacks, mainly the women folk were made to suffer as a result of the dreadful and traumatizing encounter they had with the Men-folk in the society. What many do not know is that children, particularly the girl child are victims of the suffering created by the imbalance in the society. Most parents have failed to provide the needed protection to their children; hence, this has led to one form of abuse or the other. In its general meaning, parental protection entails when a child or ward is being secured or protected by his or her parents or guardians. More so, this essay examines what Head have to say about parental protection by fusing autobiography with fiction.

1.2 Biographies of Bessie Head

Bessie Head was born on July 6, 1937 in a mental hospital in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. She was the child of a white mother and a black father. It was believed that her mother was mentally ill, this led to her being sent to a quiet location to give birth to Bessie. The main reason Bessie's mother was adjudged insane is because of her intimate relationship with a black man. After Head's birth, her mother committed suicide and she was adopted by a black Africa. She was later raised in a mission orphanage. Head qualified as a teacher in January 1957 and taught shortly at Clairwood between 1958 and 1960. She received her teaching certificate in 1960. She later worked as a news reporter in *The Golden City Post* and *Drum* magazine. In the later part of her life, she joined the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC). 1St September 1961, she got married to her husband Harold Head.

Bessie Head had most of her important works set in Serowe, in particular the three novels *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), *Maru* (1971), and *A Question of Power* (1973). Other works published by Head are short stories: *The Collector Treasures*, (1977) and *The Cardinals*. (1993). She also published a book on the history of Serowe, the village she settled in Serowe *Village of the Rain Wind* (1981). Head's last novel is titled *A Bewitched Crossroad* (1984). She also wrote an autobiography, *A woman alone: Autobiographical Writing* (1990). She was awarded the South African Order of Ikhamanga in Gold for her uncommon contribution to literature and struggle for social change, freedom and peace after her death

1.3 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is sociological criticism. In this study, the term sociological criticism will be used inter-changeably with sociological approach and sociological theory. Every literary work is better understood when it has been studied using a particular theoretical approach. This study is one among numerous literary studies that have adopted a particular literary approach. Onyemaechi Udamukwu's emphasis on theoretical approaches in relation to a text:

> The study of literature and the theoretical approaches that make it a worthwhile endeavour cannot. Be understood or taught as an academic subject without familiarity with the nature itself. Although there exists a symbiotic relationship between literary creativity and its criticism that value of such relationship is underwritten in the position of the final receiver, the reader. (1)

Every creative work of art has a strong link/connection to the society where it is set. Critics therefore approach these work based on it societal connections. For instance, literary text, that has colonial and post-colonial backgrounds are often approached using post-colonial theory, so also are works that have sociological background. By sociological background we are referring to works that have a link to the society and the happenings around it. *The Cardinals* is a good example of literary texts that have strong links with the society. As a theory or critical discourse/approach, sociological approach shares a link with feminism and Marxism. Hence, Kirszner and Mandell theorize thus: "in the twentieth century, two strong arms of sociological criticism emerged as dominant: feminist criticism and Marxist criticism. They remain particularly forceful theories because most of their practitioners have a strong commitment to those ideologies, which they apply as they read literature" (2204). Continuing, Kirszner and Mandell posit:

> … sociological criticism takes issue with formalism. Sociological theorists maintain that the literary work cannot be separated from the social context, in which it was created, insisting that literature reflects society and derives its essential existence and significance from the social situations to which it responds. Sociological critics speculate about why a particular work might have been written

> and explore the ways in which it reacts to a specific situation. (2204).

In the area of representation of minority groups using literature, Kirszner and Mandell went further to say, "psychoanalysis and structuralism have allowed sociological critics to focus on what had been overlooked or skewed in traditional readings and to analyze how the experience of marginal and minority groups has been represented in literature" (2204). More so, sociological critics often "employ poststructuralist strategies to reveal and question the assumptions made within their discipline and to analyze the cultural contexts of their own work" (2204). From the above emphasis that sociological criticism deals with the cultural context of a literary text. Authors like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong 'O, Ayi Kwei Armah, Bessie Head, and Ola Rotimi are good advocates of sociological theory. More recent creative writers like Kaine Agary, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Obari Gomba, etc, usually write in advocacy of the society.

Sociological approach deals more with reader response; this therefore entails a situation where readers give meaning to any piece of literary text in view/focus. It also focuses on the issue of the minority in the society. Minority here can mean the less privileged, blacks or the female in the society. Sociological criticism interprets literary texts in relation to what critics refer to as social context. Omafume Onoge asserts that "Marxist criticism is necessarily sociological" (471). They believe in the demarcation of the society into classes; man and woman, the working class and the no-working class.

Sociological criticism deals with the study of literary text as in relation to its subject matter, language and theme. Hence, we clearly state that the researcher's interest on the term sociological criticism here will be to use feminism which is an offshoot of sociological critical theory for the analysis of our selected texts. In addition, sociological theory deals with the social, psychological and cultural life of the people. One of the aims of sociological criticism is to reject the oppression, maltreatment and hardship which the citizens go through as a result of bad government. Critics of' 21st century often apply sociological approach when

dealing or studying works by African contemporary creative writers. As was stated early, *The Cardinals* by Bessie can best be studied using the sociological theory, reason being that they focus on the psychology of the girl child as it relates to the oppression, maltreatment and hardship they face in their respective societies. Head systematical explored the issues of societal ills as they relate to the South African society.

1.4 Review of Literature on *The Cardinals*

Writers in African society are often referred to as elites; this is so because the Western education they acquired gives them the edge over others who were not privileged to attain Western education. Mugo tries to present it this way, 'in the African context, writers tend to be members of the privileged elites, the product of a colonial education which in most cases, trained them to view themselves as a unique breed of people, occupying an elevated presence in relation to the rest of the colonized population'' (145). From the above, we will not be making a wrong assertion when we refer to writers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Wa thiongo, Bessie Head, Kaine Agary and others as African elites.

Though much have not been written on *The Cardinals* in form of review or critical essay, however, some critics have focus their attention on the themes, style, structure(s) and language. Accordingly, Nweze practically suggests that she explores the theme of love in her novels. She prefers 'exploring the option of love instead of hatred and violence in righting the wrongs of society…' (1381). More so, Sue Atkinson argues that Bessie Head's works are mainly about her experience. This is the way she puts it in her PhD thesis: "it was one of Bessie Head's earliest critics, Arthur Ravenscroft, who first pointed out that her novels were strange, ambiguous deeply personal books (1976,176) with their basis in the vast caverns of interior personal experience''(1). She added, 'Bessie Head, however, asserted her right to experience in her own way, and invariably used the style and form characteristic of the novel to present aspect of her lived reality, a reality which has caused some contention among her critics' (2). Accordingly, Atkinson comments on Bessie Head's view of herself as a product of an immoral act, she has always seen herself as one who society has no knowledge of her existence. Her life as many

will attribute, is that of "contradiction", she lived with the guilt of being a product of illegality (3).

During the apartheid regime, blacks in South Africa were made to go through one form of segregation or the other in the hands of the whites; these segregations have been a topic/issue of discussion by most South African writers. Bessie is one of the writers whose works challenged the apartheid regime. Joyce Johnson is a notable critic whose critical review on Bessie Head seriously reveals her (Head) as a writer who explores oral tradition as literary style. Accordingly, she makes her audience understand that Heads writings are a product of her deep knowledge of the society where she finds herself. In Johnson's word, "Head style of using traditional names, metaphors and symbols portrays her as an oral traditional ambassador." She goes ahead to state that Heads use of traditional symbols in her writing give much meaning to her work. Dorothy personally puts it thus: "Johnson presents her close readings through a set of analytical plot summaries that often dwell on the extensive implications of names, metaphors and symbols in Head's forging meaning, as well as on her interweaving of elements from various discursive styles and narrative forms" (1). Driver on another hand opines that Johnson views Head as a creative writer whose "initial interest is in British nineteenth century novel." He goes on to state that she writes like "the Brontes, Maria Edgeworth, George Eliot and others" (2). More so, as Driver will reveal, Head's earlier works centre on "women as literary pioneers" (2).

As most critics will make us realize, Head is very much political in her writings, though must critics see her as being apolitical. She uses her writings to criticize the bad governance which is predominant in South Africa as at when she existed as a writer. Nweze goes on to posit, "fellow writers and critics often accuse Bessie Head born writer of being apolitical. However, a closer look at her work shows that she makes the greatest political statements of our time in her preoccupation with the appalling situation of human relationship in South Africa and indeed other African societies" (1381).

Head is known for her feminist stance. As most critics will argue, Head is more of a feminist in her approach to matters of literature and writings; she is said to be outstanding; as her writings portrays the women in the society positively. In Nweze's article, Bessie Head is categorically placed in the elevated position of a woman crusader/advocate. Not only did she present Head as an advocate, she also presented her as one who views women as mother and wife in one. She therefore appealed that women should be given the respect they deserve and not to be relegated to the background. According to Nweze, "the need for women to be asserted in marriage becomes much more pressing in the light of the oppressive patriarchal culture that exists in many African societies" (1386).

Another critic, Nettie Cloete in particular supports the assertion that Head is also a feminist writer. She writes, "Bessie Head, on the other hand regarded by some as the foremost woman novelist of the continent, assumes an overtly feminist stance in her work – although her stance is defined more by a general awareness of abuse of power, not just the abuse of women" (32). Head, as many critics will aver, exposes the ills in her Botswana society through literature. Accordingly, in the words of Cloete, "thematically, both Head's and Ngugi's major novels thus represent their authors' rendering of central issues of current literary and critical concern" (33). He, Cloete went further to remark that "Head used fiction as a means of solving her own inner conflict in coming to terms with life as a lonely, stigmatized exiled other," (33).

As was earlier stated, Head is also referred to as a writer who brings in her private life into writing. This we tried to showcase earlier when we discussed Head as an autobiographical writer. In supporting this argument, Cloete, while commenting on Nkosi essay states: "Nkosi (1981: 102) views Bessie Head as "a writer who throws in every flotsam and jetsam" of her private life into a novel "in an untested supposition that we, as readers, will find significance in it" Although essentially an autobiographical and highly committed author" (34). More so, Cloete is among the critics who portray Bessie Head as a feminist writer; he goes ahead to point out that Head does not support the traditional ways women are being presented in novels. He tries to justify this by stating that both Ngugi and Head fall into the class of writers who believe that women should be availed the same opportunity the men

possess in the society. This is how he puts it: Both Head and Ngugi deny the traditional female discourse of the African woman as being dominated, exploited, abused and merely used as beast of burden. In other words, Head and Ngugi may both be regarded as feminist writers" (35).

More still, as we will be made to understand in the work of Achufusi as quoted by Cloete, "Bessie Head's female protagonists are often stronger and more resilient than their male counterparts. Her novels are Characterized by "the predominance of female over male protagonists the tendency to endow the heroines with sympathy – evoking qualities and the usually articulate nature of these heroines" (Achufusi, 1991: 356)." (36). In addition, critics evaluate Bessie stands in opposition to the writings of both whites and blacks that portray African women as tools in the hand of their male counterparts. In Nweze's view, "the position of women/wives as property in Black societies may have been strengthened by the payment of dowry to the woman's family during the marriage rites even through some supporters of the practice argue that the payment of dowry elevates women, adds to their worth and strengthens the marriage" (1380).

1.5 Parental Protection and Abuse: The Examples in Bessie Head's *The Cardinals*

Most parents in the African society are guilty of parental neglect and child abuse; hence, they have practically failed to protect, care and provide for the basic need of their children/wards. The government also cannot be absorbed from this crime. This is so because they have refused to set up machineries or institutions that will look into the child's welfare, thereby aiding in their abuse. It is on this premise that creative writers and critics alike have risen in defense for the vulnerable (Children), using their writings as a weapon to correct all the anomalies which is manifest in the society. Bessie Head and many more like her have used their writings to attack the institutions of family and governments that have paid little or no attention to the plight of children in the South African society.

The Cardinal (1996) is a creative literary work that falls, chronologically within the South African literary tradition, otherwise known as apartheid writing. The author, endeavored to use her book to expose the ills of the society, with particular

attention on the family. According to her, it is the failure of the protagonist parents to take care of her that led her to suffer all abuse and disillusionment in the story. The protagonist in the story lived all her life disenchanted because of lack of parental protection. Unlike other children around her, she is made to go through a lot of mental, physical and emotional torture from age one to her adulthood. Consequently, our discussion in this section will be hanging on the events that happened in Mouse life (protagonist), from when her mother sold her off to when she started working as a journalist and subsequent falling in love with Johnny.

In this essay, two major themes will be x-rayed – parental protection and Abuse. Here, we shall be unbiased in the way we will be handling both themes, reason being that we want our readers to see how lack of parental protection can turn to abuse in the society. *The Cardinals* is a posthumous novella (published after the author's death) with additional seven short stories that are better referred to as an appendage to *The Cardinals.* It is a coming of age story of a girl who during her infancy was sold off by her mother. A story set in apartheid South Africa. The protagonist (Mouse) is a young shy woman who never knew her real parents. At infancy, she was sold off to a childless couple in a city slum. Initially, she was happy leaving with these foster parents of her, but reverse becomes the case when her adopted father molested her. She later runs away and spends the rest of her childhood in foster homes. During this period, she writes a letter to a magazine, thereafter she gains an employment as a reporter where she meets Johnny, a colleague in journalistic profession. She is pursued Johnny who is said to be having several amorous affairs but falls in love with her and proceeds to teach her to love him through brutal methods.

The Cardinals, in a careful examination explores how the absence of love and lack of proper upbringing can affect the mental reasoning of a child. The protagonist suffers what we refer to as multiple displacements in literature as a result of this – a situation where a character is unable to place his or herself spatially nationally, or genealogically in a society where he/she lives. It is a book that refers the sufferings the South African children go through in the care of either their parents or guardians. We can also add that *The Cardinals* is a short story that gives insight into the complications of love in a South Africa that is uneven.

The story revolves around Miriam, whose name later changed to Charlotte Smith by her second foster parents and Mouse by her colleague at the Magazine office. She is the central character in this novella, the protagonist as most literary scholars will prefer to say. Accordingly, in the novella, her case is that of rejection, neglect, pain, trauma and disillusionment. She, like many other black South Africans live in the slum – a terrible one at that. The opening sentence of the story points to these facts: "It was a large slum area of tin shacks, bounded on the one side by mile-long graveyard and on the other by the city refuse dump and the sea" (3). Not only did the author reveal the environment as a slum, she goes ahead to present the house where Miriam was sold to in a negative image. Furthermore, she says, "it was a small space with every possible bit of junk crammed into it; boxes stuffed with rags and faded clothing; an old, cracked mirror in a corner; a torn, stained mattress competing for space with battered pots, an oil, blankets and a small, shaky, wooden table" (3).

From infancy, Miriam lacks every form of parental protection and love; she never witnessed the warmness of her real parents. Unlike other children, she was given out in infancy: '"Hello, Sarah,' said the young woman with a forced brightness. 'I've brought the baby.'" (3). Mothers are good at taken care of their babies, but the case of Miriam's mother is the other way round, as she ends up selling her baby simply because her husband to be asked advise her against marrying with the child. This is the height of lack of love on the part of Miriam's mother who prefers marriage to her God given daughter. Let us look at this conversation between Miriam's adopted mother and her friend Sarah, "the young lady is well known to me as I do the washing at her home. She is to marry soon. This child was an accident from another man. The one she is to marry has said that he will not have the child. The family approached me and I agreed to take the little one as my own" (4).

The most shocking thing about blackest parents/guardians in apartheid South Africa their resolve to turn their children/wards into scavengers while they go around spending their resources stupidly. Parents, fathers in particular are in the habit of drinking every weekend from the little pay they receive. These parents have sold their soul to the apartheid regime which has turned them into mere animals. Hence they care less of for their family welfare – particularly, their

children. Where there is lack of protection, abuse is always in the increase. Protection is in diverse forms, ranging from shelter, care, love, etc., but in a situation where these are not in place, mostly in the family, the end result therefore is abuse. In as much as children face abuse in the family and in the society at large the male adults can be abused, likewise female adults. But in this stance, our focus is on the "girl-child" abuse as Bessie Head presents it in her story. One thing leads to another, as the saying goes. The inability of Mouse mother to take care of her, leads to her selling her off to a childless couple; this is the first case of lack of protection. Secondly, Mouse is turned into a hustler and a scavenger at childhood, another lack of protection; this is the worst, reason being that this act exhibited by her foster parents' amounts to abuse of the highest order.

Protection for Mouse is a mirage; unlike other children, Mouse has no knowledge of what parental protection is all about. Instead of her enjoying the minimum form of protection any parent can offer, she suffers the worst abuse a homeless child daily go through. One will expect the childless parents fostering Mouse to protect and care for Mouse, but the reverse is the case. Is it not ironical when a father attempts raping his would be daughter? We will be wrong to conclude that such a man is going insane or is already insane? Is it for sexual gratification or a sheer act of wickedness? These are some of the questions begging for answers in the issue of sexual molestation of children by parents. In the story, the author presents this issue of sexual harassment thus: "One night the little girl awoke startled when a heavy hand was placed over her face almost smothering her. With the other hand the man tore at the thin and tattered clothing that she slept in. in her fight the child kicked out and struggled desperately and her struggle awakened the woman Sarah who shouted: 'My God, what are you doing to the child?" (9).

Many will ask, how can lack of parental protection turn to abuse? Others will end up arguing the assertion which states that child abuse is predominant in the African society. But the fact remains that the moment a parent or parents fail in their responsibility of taken care of their children, the resultant effect is abuse that can not only be physical but also psychological. For our protagonist, her abuse is in both ways. She was emotional tortured in the face of all she underwent in the story.

As we see in the narrative, she "… crept under the wooden table and sat up the rest of the night trembling with wild fright that possessed her" (9).

As we have earlier pointed out, these children were denied parental protection, no proper upbringing; above all they were sexually abused even in the height of child-labour which they faced daily. As if the suffering these parents make these children go through is not enough, they bar them from complaining: "Work hard. Do not answer back no matter what we do to you. Be satisfied with the scraps we give you, you cannot have what our children have. Remember we are unpredictable; when the mood gets us we can through you out" (10). It is even worst for those living with their foster parents; their shelter is not total assured likewise their protection. In the story, Mouse presented as a child going through a lot of torture, both in the hands of those she calls parents and those she meets on her way through lives journey. She suffers racial imbalance later in life. At no point is she given proper education. According to the author, "Until the age of sixteen she was placed and re-placed in ten homes. During this time, she had only three years of school" (10-11). Though at some point in the novel, the protagonist experiences some form of parental protection and care, it was short lived. As our narrator points out, "the last home she lived in was the only one she remembered with warmth and affection" (11). The death of the owner of the house who is a tailor and also a member of the Communist Party ended the little care and protection abruptly and returned her to her usual state of suffering and abuse. At age sixteen, she had already started working as a tea-girl in hairdressing salon.

It is never an overstatement when we say the society is the cause of the inequality between men and women; imbalance between the rich and the poor and the lack of equity the children suffer. Even in the face of these inequality and imbalance, the society keeps moving on as if all is well. Moreover, it will be sensible to conclude that Mouse's suffering and abuse will end the moment she secures a job; but this conclusion is quite hasty and in error, because, as the narrator expose, Mouse suffering was high as he was daily abused by his colleagues. This abuse makes her live a life that could be described as miserable.

The most dangerous aspect of abuse for Mouse is in the fact that she cannot love. At some point in the novel, when she was asked why she was crying, she quickly replied, '"Because I cannot love"' (76). Her inability to love places her on the angle of self-hate and self-pity. Hence the author retorts: "A brief flash of lightning revealed the hopelessness and despair on her face" As the author will reveal she at a point as a result of all these despair and hopelessness attempted suicide: "She started following then made a sharp turn and plunged into the sea" (77).

To wrap this section up, it will be revealing to state that most children, most importantly the female, on daily basis suffer one form of harassment or the other. As we have been able to explicate, Mouse is a symbol of the sexually molested, devastated, abandoned and abused children in the African society. There has never been a time when she is allowed to do things as it pleases her; she is more of an appendage than a complete being. As the story explains, even for something emotional as a kiss, Johnny forcefully gives it to her: "As she was about to pass him, he stretched out his arms and pulled her roughly against him and kissed her with a ferocious despair" (98).

1.6 Conclusion

One point that has appeared all through the study is that writers write bearing in mind their surrounding environments and the happenings within and around their environment. Head has demonstrated these using her novel – *The Cardinals.* Thus, in the words of Breyten Breytenbach, "in the poor and colonized countries the writer plays a more visible role: faced with acute social and economic inequalities he is called upon to articulate the dreams and the demands of his people" (166). In *The Cardinal*, as we have been able to point out, the author paints a negative picture about the family and society. The South Africa society where our story is set pays no attention to the suffering of "the child" – of particular instance is the protagonist Mouse. She is presented as a character that is passing through life unnoticed; she cannot find herself, even as she is unaware of the reason for her existence.

As was stated earlier, *The Cardinals,* has a strong connection to the happenings within and around the African society. Its social learning theory as we have

repeatedly said is a feminist perspective of evaluating mothers and daughters in a cultural and social-political economic society. In the light of the forgoing, we will re-emphasis here that *Yellow-Yellow* is a work that explores the themes of environmental degradation, lack of parental protection and abuse. To a considerable extent, we have been able to ascertain that critics have studied *Yellow-Yellow* from the standpoint of both feminism and eco-criticism.

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