

Identity and Belonging in a Changing African Village: An Exploration of Social Realities and Individual Struggles in "Village People" by Bessie Head

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Abstract

"Village People" dives deep into the world of African village life, focusing on how it shapes people's identities, friendships, and experiences. Set in the 1970s and 80s, the story takes us to the fictional village of Golema Mmidi in Botswana and one woman's view of community life. The author uses her own time in a Botswana village to bring the place to life with vivid details of its people and nature. At the heart of the book is an African village, with a mix of characters facing their own joys and troubles but still connected to their home. The story shows how places influence identities and emphasizes the importance of belonging in a world that's always changing. As people move around more, the idea of a "place" where you belong becomes more complicated.

Keywords: Identity And Belonging, Portrayal Of Identity, Alienation, Landscape, Solidarity.

Introduction

This article examines issues of identity and belonging as they emerge in the changing social realities of an African village in Bessie Head's 1973 novella, "Village People". Although fiction, Head's narrative is based on and deeply engaged with her lived experience in the village of Serowe in Botswana, where she settled in 1974. The article explores how village identity and belonging are socially produced and imagined, as well as struggles and negotiations over identity and belonging at the individual level. Such identity and belonging struggles inevitably resonate beyond the African context.

Head portrays a village confronted with individualizing modernity and a collective search for its future. The story begins with the death of the village chief and the village people's negotiations over who will succeed him. These negotiations reveal a 'village people' unity based on the collective imagination of village identity and belonging, as well

as the tensions and conflicts between different individual ideas of village identity and belonging. The analysis reveals how a collective village identity and belonging are imagined through the idealization of village pasts, yet how these ideals are contested at the individual level through people's complex and multiple pasts, social positions, and desires for the future.

The village collective is portrayed as a social imagination of identity and belonging, encompassing the bringer of peace, the embodiment of traditional African values, and a space of shelter and care. However, the village collective also negotiates modernity's individualizing impacts issues of difference, equity, and free choice must be imagined collectively, lest individual desires pull the village apart. These desires stem from social differences embedded in people's pasts and desires for the future. Therefore, aside from depicting the collective imagination of identity and belonging, Head's narrative also illustrates how village people negotiate their identities and belongings individually and how such struggles unsettle the village as a collective.

Head's narrative explores varying pasts and social positions, shaping people's different ideas of village identity and belonging. Some characters idealize the village as an inclusive space of care, while others challenge this ideal through memories of exclusion and marginalization (Curtis, 2016). Ultimately, the narrative illustrates that village aspirations for collective identity and belonging still find renderings despite conflicting pasts and social positions.

Background and Context of the Study

Illustrating the social realities and individual struggles of owning and uprooting identities and senses of belonging in a changing African village, Bessie Head's short story "Village People" reveals a range of characters' experiences in a common setting. The centre of action is a small, poor, rural African village that once suffered drought and failed harvests but has recently been blessed with rains. Consequently, new social arrangements are formed as the village environment changes: some village people leave it in search of better living conditions in the white capital city of Botswana; others come to live in the village, a couple of them being, for example, a newcomer teacher and a widow fresh out of Gaborone. Within the same village setting, however, experiences of roots, friendship, and belonging, encountered by Head's characters, vary widely; so do the anxieties, frustrations, or reconciliations these experiences evoke in them. Moreover, while considering the village as a rooted environment facilitating social ties and shared memories, the story illustrates how villages also breed and reinforce isolation, restraint, discrimination, and prejudice.

In order to explore how different social realities bring about different identities and belonging in the same environment, Head's "Village People" is first situated in the wider village context, considering its past droughts and recent changes. The focus then shifts to the story's characters, viewing their experiences as social realities that shape different

senses of belonging and identities in the same village setting. Driven by the social realities of the Gaborone character, a widow perceiving the village as rooted space of security, acceptance, and belonging, the story's one extreme is a warm village welcome, friendship, and reconciliation narrative. Shaping the Gaborone character's anxiety of uprootedness, disbelief, and resentment over village discrimination narrative, the story's other extreme is the troubled identity narrative of a teacher's Gaborone upbringing. Emerging from friendship frustrations in public space, the final village "other" character narrative of a newcomer teacher's inner turmoil questions village walls and the freedom from the grip of prejudice and belonging. This story ends unanswered, leaving the teacher doubting his village role as a reddening "other" (Curtis, 2016).

Literature Review

Head's works grapple with issues of identity and belonging within the context of social change, drawing from her own experiences as an outsider and migrant. "Village People" depicts a rapidly changing African village through the eyes of a disabled woman who feels out of place. As Western influences permeate the village, traditional ways of life are threatened, and inhabitants respond in different ways. Some embrace change and modernity, while others hold on to the past. The protagonist, Mothusi, faces internal struggles related to her identity and social realities, leading to the consideration of how similar themes shape the space and individual consciousness in the village. Changes in the village affect Mothusi's sense of belonging; contextualizing "Village People" has implications for understanding the social and individual struggles of identity in a changing village.

As social realities shape the space of villages and individual consciousness, a village is often portrayed as a stable place in literary responses to modernity. However, the arrival of migrants or strangers hints at the instability of village life. Rural spaces in contemporary villages are represented in literary texts exploring social change, individual migrant experiences, and the rethinking of identities and belongings. After the independence of African states, there was a revival of interest in depicting rural villages, with an apparent return to the focus on village life. However, depicting the rural or village as a "whole" may ignore social realities. Although villages may seem "whole," they experience internal changes due to social realities in local and global contexts. Social realities often reshape the space of villages and individual consciousness, resulting in a struggle with fixed notions of identities and belongings.

Concepts of Identity and Belonging in African Literature

In the context of African literature, the concepts and themes of identity and belonging are explored in various ways by different authors through different narrative styles. These concepts play a major role in the lives of the characters created by the authors and affect their physical existence, life choices, actions, and social interactions as they

grapple with realism. Head's "Village People" exposes the social realities of a changing African village as seen from the perspective of an individual struggling to feel accepted. Nonetheless, these social realities are reinforced and envisioned through various characters and their interactions, struggles, accommodations, and disagreements, even as they may transgress societal expectations, traditions, and boundaries. In "Village People," Head presents a village concerned with its identity and the belongingness of the people who constitute it in light of the changing social reality that global forces have brought. It does so through the eyes of a villager, modiyatsi, who feels increasingly alienated and strives to make sense of the village unfolding before her while questioning its ability to provide her a sense of identity and belonging (De Wet, 1992). At the same time, the village emerges as a co-narrator of the story and a guardian of its identity and its people's sense of belonging. Village people's quests for identity and belonging concern the dilemmas anew, so as to widen the frame of reference and enrich the discourse. The villagers engage in considerations as to what constitutes the village, who belongs in it, and in what sense, whether and how an individual may be deemed a village person, and the difference between ascribed and chosen identities. As a response to these dilemmas, reconsiderations invigorate the dialogue between the self and the societal whole upon which individual actions and choices are founded (Oosterink, 2019). Ultimately, the village's resolute disciplining reveals the limits of accommodation and its prioritization of collective interests over individual ones, underscoring the fragility of consensus-based belonging.

Theoretical Framework

The complex problem of socio-cultural change and continuity in Africa is explored. Contemporary rural communities in Africa experience substantial socio-cultural change, as a consequence of global socio-economic development, national policies and migration to urban areas. But, at the same time, a number of people living in rural communities attempt to maintain traditional cultural identities. These basic human drives for economic survival and the maintenance of identity are embroiled in a drama of social progress and social disintegration (De Wet, 1992).

Most men, women and children in rural communities of Africa are caught up in this drama. They experience conflicting values out of a dual quest for socio-economic advancement, on the one hand, and the maintenance of a cultural identity, on the other. The danger of self-alienation and anomie may threaten whole communities as economic development efforts, in the absence of a mediating symbolic network, contradict the value of a cultural identity. People in rural Transkei experience competing worldviews and values out of a dual quest for economic advancement in an increasingly industrialized society, on the one hand, and the maintenance of identity, on the other. The prioritizing of economic development is seen to contradict the value of an African cultural identity. In the absence of a mediating symbolic network to facilitate the renegotiation of identity, these

values remain in tension.

Postcolonial Theory and its Relevance

Postcolonialism can be thought of as a discourse that critiques the historical developments and social realities stemming from colonial experiences. Therefore, postcolonialism is immediately relevant to Africa, a continent that has a deep history of colonial experience. Postcolonialism also brings attention to the emergence and ongoing struggles of national identities. Nations in Africa struggled with the search for their identities long before European invasion. During colonialism, village peoples' identities were pushed away from the centre of power. Consequently, postcolonialism, national identity and village identity are interlinked issues across contemporary Africa (Nimer Abdalqader Abu Jweid, 2016). Since postcolonialism critiques historical injustices by considering the perspective of those who were dominated by the imperial power, it is foundational for this thesis to analyse the contemporary identity crises of the village peoples in the selected short stories of Bessie Head. Head's "Village People" is a collection of ten short stories that take place in an African village five years after independence from colonial power. Although independence freed the village people from domination by the white colony, new injustices and struggles emerged. Social realities, such as individual poverty, an absent ruling power, border struggles and relocations, also stem from the global forces of contemporary neo-liberalism. These social realities brought identity crises based on a duality of struggles; on the one hand, everyday struggles threaten village peoples' identities; on the other hand, a search for belonging and social ties, which emerge as 'acts of defence', also shape individual village peoples' identities (De Wet, 1992).

Methodology

In literature, narrating individual struggles within a greater social reality can shed light on broader social issues. This approach is taken in "Village People" by Bessie Head, which focuses on a small, changing African village in the 1970s. At the center of the exploration is the dilemma of a young man returning to the village after studying in the city. Straddling two worlds, he grapples with questions of identity, belonging, and viability in a drastically changing village. In his quest, he confronts both visible and invisible forces that shape social reality and individual choices in the village's hope for progress. This narrative is analyzed using a post-modern perspective on identity, focusing on how individual stories relate to broader social contexts. "Village People" is summarized, and its most central characters are introduced to set the context for the analysis. The analysis comprises three parts: the social realities of the village as seen through the eyes of the protagonist, the visible narratives shaping the village's present and future, and the invisible narratives that dictate individual choices in the face of the village's social realities. In conclusion, the coexistence of visible and invisible narratives is discussed and reflected on regarding the village's hope for progress. The analysis focuses on social realities and

individual dilemmas but recognizes their relativity and the predominant narratives shaping them (Curtis, 2016).

Research Design and Data Collection Techniques

The social realities of life in a Lesotho village, as exposed through personal struggles, visits, and interviews, drastically change in their representation when adapted into a play text. It is a deliberate choice to keep most of the social realities unchanged, and the changes made focus on expanding the empathetic understanding of the individual struggles to fit within the larger village social context. Some changes were made to characters or events to avoid making their social reality too explicit, allowing the audience to focus on the individual struggle rather than passing judgment on the wider society. At the same time, careful consideration was given to ensure that the village social context remained accessible, as it is central to making an individual struggle relatable. Attention is paid to the wider village exposures in the narrative. Head's fiction examines the social world that shapes the individual's identity and sense of belonging, and the political and personal struggles to adjust to the shift in that social world (Curtis, 2016). One fictional adaptation passage selection exemplifies this. In *Village People*, as in existing village realities, the village social settings are widely shared and characteristically invested in by all. People who live in and shape the village social settings, both personally and socially, are collectively seen as village people, despite demeaning distinctions based on the social hierarchies and exclusions formed within those shared social settings. When one social reality changes or is drastically challenged, the identity and sense of belonging within that social reality are questioned and struggled with individually and personally, even though it may seem otherwise at the larger social viability view. Head's fiction and its adaptation text similarly depict the wider social world as foundational to the individual struggles to articulate that world and the relating identities and senses of belonging (De Wet, 1992).

Social Realities in the African Village

Social realities in the African village revolve around identity and culture amid changing circumstances. While some people believe that culture is rejuvenated through youth, others point out the fading ways of life, such as cattle herding. Head acknowledges the complexity of social realities in African villages, where old traditions clash with new values. She portrays village life with all its beauty and harshness, emphasizing the importance of belonging while revealing the uncertainties surrounding it. The village becomes a microcosm to explore broader questions of identity and belonging in contemporary Africa. Although the village might lack a sense of belonging for some individuals, it is still a desired place for many. Head's depiction of village life resonates with her own experiences and those of contemporary Africans in the early twenty-first century.

Examining the lives of the village people in Head's "*Village People*" sheds light on

broader social realities in African villages. The village appears as a transitional space for some characters, leaving them in a liminal state between villages and cities. The stakeholders of the village suggest that cities are not a final destination; instead, people move back and forth between villages and cities (Marie Kotowicz, 2013). The city and the village are like two sides of a coin; the village is inseparable from the people's identity and life. Despite individual struggles, village life is idealized, seen as a place of belonging and social security. Nevertheless, the village does not provide a home and belonging for everyone. Characters like Pogiso and Botlhale question their place and identity in the village. Their struggles depict diasporic experiences in the village, raising broader questions about identity and belonging in a changing African village.

Historical and Political Context

In "Village People," Bessie Head's fictional African village grapples with a social reality caught between its history and an uncertain future that threatens its identity. It is not that Head is unaware of the rightness of recent political developments. However, the recent arrival of democracy, freedom of the press, and stability to the wider milieu of South Africa has left the village community feeling bereft. As it contends with these recent shocks, the villagers temporarily retreat into a past secured by the presence of a narrative set in the 1970s and introduced by a newcomer writer. With the villagers, the narrative seeks to understand what it means to belong and be seen as one flounders amid new social realities. In a discussion group, an ongoing conversation takes place around the points of view and experiences mediated by the writer's story of a village teacher. It is a story of individual yearning and struggle to reconcile with a communal yet often isolating life.

Head's concerns with identity and belonging are, somewhat ironically, highlighted in the fictional preservation and representation of the village. Present-day political questions are, in part, relocated to the past. This relocation highlights the difficulties in realizing faded hopes and affirming the struggle for a world imagined anew. Instead, there is a desire to secure prior certainties and a sense of unreality, as new social possibilities are dismissed as threatening and absurd. Nevertheless, the image of the village as a place is also one of transformation, adjustment, and emergence in an outside world shaping different questions and hopes. Social life may be propelled into new and unforeseen directions, yet it does not follow that all is fluid and uncertain; fixed and often contesting certainties may persist ((De Wet, 1992)).

Individual Struggles and Narratives

An earlier Bessie Head novel, *A Question of Power*, focuses only on a troubled woman's inner world. In contrast, *Village People*, the later novel being considered illustrates its protagonist's external world sufficiently in relation to the woman's inner situation. Head's transient women attend to identity and belonging issues through social concerns. The text depicts a neglected village that must yet still be an emotional home to a

character who has left it and returned. They negotiate belonging, here mainly by considering a village's social realities as they resonate with worries on an individual level. Consequently, they recount struggles toward different kinds of attachments in shifting spaces. This echoes wider African points. Having spent decades developing elsewhere and returned as a writer, Head fictionalizes her outsider status in a home village.

In rural South Africa, western education, urban migration, and apartheid bureaucracies have reshaped social life in villages, which women find most affected yet least able to change. Most men have left for mines or towns, resulting in villages being gendered female and "tasked with upholding social decency," the very reason for their decline. Social deaths disrupt domestic space and attachment-making. Reminiscences create homely emotional realities, while narratives dwell on vanishing memory and effort-laden reconstructions of village attachments. This plight also pivots individual struggles. On its narrated edges, village decay unveils the fragility of social realities and the wandering nature of memories, and reckoning with memory loss becomes the ground for reconstructing a woman's inner world. Individual narratives sketch lonely attachments yet outline broader social concerns and interrogate the narratives' own shortcomings. Here, preservation's labor and futility concern both social and individual realities. (De Wet, 1992)

Character Analysis in "Village People"

In "Village People," the characters struggle with issues of identity and belonging in a rapidly changing social landscape. Kenneth, an education officer, and Jo, a novelist, return to their native village after years away, grappling with feelings of dislocation and observing the impact of modernization, education, and immigration on their once familiar community. Their encounters with other characters, such as Vusi, a failed migrant worker, and Bahumi, a dismissive teacher, further illuminate the complexities of belonging in a changing village. These characters personify the tensions between tradition, modernity, and individual aspirations, reflecting broader questions about the nature of community and belonging in a shifting world. In "Village People," the author skillfully explores these challenges through the lens of her characters, making it a poignant and relevant work for contemporary readers (De Wet, 1992) (Kit Tay et al., 2016).

Kenneth and Jo return to their native village after years away, struggling with feelings of dislocation and searching for their place within the changed community. Kenneth observes the village's transformation as other characters speak of their experiences apart from the village. At the story's outset, Jo, a novelist, returns after a long absence, finding the village unrecognizable from what she had previously known. The once familiar landscape is now foreign, but it is the people who have changed the most. As she rekindles relationships with other characters, it becomes evident that the village has been irrevocably altered by modernization, education, and immigration. In her early encounters, Jo meets

Vusi, who had opted out of the education system, and who now returns to the village after failing to find work as a migrant laborer in far-off mines.

Gender Dynamics in the Village

Gender dynamics in the village are significantly influenced by a variety of factors, including economic roles, access to agricultural services, and individual perceptions of the agricultural development crisis. For example, women are often disadvantaged by inequities in access to agricultural resources and information, and despite the fact that women generally play essential agricultural roles in household food production, they are usually excluded from development policies relating to food security. In rural KwaZulu, a time and motion study of agricultural work found that women comprised 84 percent of the time spent on agricultural production, while men comprised 16 percent ((Carol Anne) 1961-Murphy, 1990). However, women's contribution to agriculture is often unacknowledged, as men's income-generating activity is prioritized over women's.

The village's social structure is revealed through character perspectives, with the foreman representing a dominant socio-economic class involved in the land deal, and villagers on the margins of society. Despite the gradual loss of socio-economic and political power as land is sold off, villagers still perceive their power in social terms. They participate in village meetings and confidently express their views without fear of dismissal, and village women are even able to scold the foreman at a meeting. This reveals their cultural power as village people. However, as the village community and culture disintegrate, cultural marginality arises for both individual villagers and the culture itself, as the focus of their cultural community becomes distant. The gradual loss of land forming the village contributes to this scenario, as the village community itself becomes marginal. Here, Bessie Head presents local people's deep struggle at both individual and collective cultural levels against the socio-political power of outside people (Govinda, 2013).

Roles and Expectations

Each character in the story struggles to follow village roles and expectations. Being a village person brings both social security and social constraints. If an individual does not follow accepted roles and expectations, he or she will be isolated; social security will be lost. Set in a small village, the story portrays characters' individual struggles to fulfil or reject assigned village roles and expectations. Mothusi is rejected as a village person because he cannot follow what is expected of him as a man. He leaves to find security in city life but ultimately cannot escape his village identity. Like Mothusi, the teacher and narrator Nono tries to reject village roles. She chooses a career in town rather than being a village housewife. However, she still desires acceptance and love. A tragic event forces her to return to the village, and she must atone for her past sins to find peace as a village person.

Through its characters, the story illustrates the unbreakable bond between a person

and place. Even if a character escapes village life, he or she is still haunted by village memories. Places trap people, and their only escape is through death. The characters' lives show that belonging to a place is a source of both comfort and pain. While the village at times feels suffocating, life beyond the village is more terrifying. The certainty of pain in village life is preferred over the unknown dangers of city life.

Community and Collective Identity

Bessie Head's "Village People" presents a realistic account of the social realities of a changing African village in the 1970s. Through the voices of villagers in a Botswana village, the book explores their thoughts, beliefs, and experiences, offering a critical exploration of the complexities of identity and belonging. The text serves as both oral history and social commentary, with villagers responding to a questionnaire posed by Head. Their stories reveal struggles with personal and collective identity, as well as a changing sense of belonging. Some contemplate their place in a community grappling with modernization and change, while others share nostalgia for a past that seems forever lost. Ultimately, the text portrays belonging as an ongoing tension between exclusion and inclusion, reminding readers of the fragility of human connections. In rural Botswana, community means the village and collective identity, with a shared sense of belonging. However, the village's social fabric is unraveling due to modernization. Despite nominally belonging to the village and its people, some respondents feel little attachment. Others grapple with the co-existence of community and individual identities amid change. Some see individuals fighting for a place in a community that no longer offers refuge, while others witness individuals slipping away from the community's center, denying themselves a sense of belonging (De Wet, 1992). In these shifting realities, Bessie Head emerges as an anchor, offering reflections on village life amid outside pressures. Like Head, some villagers believe firmly in belonging to the village and its people, while others doubt their place in a changing African village (Stephen Basure, 2013).

Traditions and Customs

Traditions and customs are significant for the identity, integrity and the social structure of the community. Various narratives, songs, oral literature, poetries, myths and proverbs create an acceptable understanding of the identity for the community. Apart from oral literature, there are social practices such as rituals, initiation ceremonies, marriage ceremonies, clan gatherings, sacrifices and more that are based on proverbs, songs and narratives. These literary works and rituals are ways of communicating cultural practices and codes that shape the identity of the community (Marie Kotowicz, 2013). However, with socio-political, economic changes and the intrusion of others, either it is the whole community or an individual, there is often a struggle over the identity and belonging of these traditions and social structures.

Head's short story "Village People" is about the changed realities of a remote

village in Africa seen through the eyes of a new school teacher. The village turned white from being a black township under apartheid is a desire of many, however, the social and individual realities present a struggle over the belonging between the traditions and changed practices. It begins with the teacher describing the village as manicured gardens, pretty little cottages, neatly painted fences, and crisp white painting on houses along with beautiful pink flowers showering from the trees. The other side of the village with black residents is exceptionality dirty from the casually thrown tins and garbage buttering down the village in contrast to its white part. Even the identification card mentioning “Village People” provides the details of the white in-groups but not a single black village person is accounted for. The absence of black people in the village transfers the village into a different social reality compared to the prior.

Economic Realities and Livelihoods

The group of five young men each with their own histories and reasons for joining, attempt to embody a new kind of life through a new kind of theatre. Young black South Africans who were educated (or miseducated) under apartheid emerge from the policy’s cultural wasteland into village life. What do they take with them? What do they find? What do they leave behind? As they confront humour, denial, fear, economic realities, and their own understandings and misunderstandings of village people, village life, and the world outside, questions of identity, belonging, and new possibilities emerge.

In South Africa, economic realities, and often humiliating entrepreneurial attempts to come to terms with life, are foregrounded. In rural areas, the dominance of money, and what that means for the achievement of social goals, are starkly apparent. For example, subsistence agricultural production is an essential characteristic of most rural communities in South Africa. Despite a range of diversity in households and access to resources, subsistence agriculture remains the backbone of food security and livelihoods (Kay. Smith, 2013). However, rural households in contemporary South Africa are embedded in a national and global economy that is increasingly capitalist, market-oriented, and monetised. Furthermore, outside economic opportunities often result in migration to urban areas, often at the cost of prior subsistence agricultural practices.

The development and pressures of the monetised economy shape the social reality of the rural poor (De Wet, 1992). Newly emergent social realities are reflected in changed, often contested, agricultural practices and household food production. With changing economies, social institutions such as kinship and neighbourhood – once the bedrock of cooperation - erode, and with them the contemporary community’s ability to handle vulnerability. As a consequence, vulnerability takes on new forms. Despite wider economic change and vulnerability, subsistence agriculture remains a part of rural livelihoods. Households engage in food production that is often small in scale and nonspecialised, pragmatically pursuing a mix of commodity and subsistence production in order to cope

with poverty and insecurity.

Agricultural Practices and Changes

Changes in agricultural practices in “Village People” are determined by the availability of land and water resources, maintenance of infrastructure, and choice of crops to be cultivated. Village agricultural practices presently require little water availability and no infrastructural maintenance (Thebe, 2018). Villagers take advantage of yearly flooding to cultivate maize, and cash sorghum is now replaced by traditional sorghum. Wheat previously cultivated requires too costly rehabilitation upkeep. Decreasing village population misses past diverse crop cultivation. Loss of agency replaces cultivation with wage economy reliance or moving to town. Seasonal river flooding creates temporary land available for maize cultivation. Cropping season determines careful timing for maize and sorghum. Cash sorghum replaced by traditional sorghum is protested against reduced food security. Past diverse crop cultivation for home consumption, and livestock grazing, transformed to single maize cultivation. Decreasing village population, and inability to hire for irrigation upkeep, led to selima and general infrastructure loss. Past diverse crop cultivation now replaced by millet and mourning barley reliance is resented. Therein lies posterity acceptance, and hope that children could return, if not in whole then in part. Loss of agency is acceptance of “wretched” village existence replaced by town wage economy reliance. Town wage economy reliance is resented as children now wholly move to town. Enclaustration escapes holding to the past, as town population sees village as implicitly dead. Simply town move renders impossible holding to the past, providing for change acceptance. Free town move, as being neither returning, nor as holding to the past, renders change wholly accepted.

Education and Knowledge Transmission

Narratives of colonial education present a meeting of two knowledge systems, one progress-driven, the other stagnant. The African side of this meeting is usually characterised by under-development, miracles of coherence, and melodrama — much screaming and flailing at the brutal imposition of Western education, and a successful curtailing of the resultant chaos by a few enlightened souls. The Western side, channelled through missionaries, administrators, or educationists, illuminates utilitarian rationality: communities are lively but naive proto-machines that need fixing so as to properly participate in empire (Dear, 2017). The Western educational system is supposed to generate modernity, therefore any re-siting of components or tinkering with design paralyses the machine. Voices from the outside only matter if they are calibrated to the machine’s logic. Voices from the mouths of the colonised are routinely co-opted by this machine, their contents distorted to please its operatives. These contents are indexed to one of two positions — either being engulfed in empire's embrace, or, holding out against irresistible assault — with the former being far more widespread. In Africa, the tragedy of individuals

escaping ignorance and rusticity, of communities beleaguered and imploding, as a Great White Hope brings literacy, education, and enlightenment, is told by the likes of Ngugi, Achebe, and Beti, often in talebearing epistolary form, as complaints to distant feathered pens (Elizabeth Thornhill Stonier, 1996). The phonocentrism of the textual response is telling, as these narratives narrate the triumph of the alphabet in the co-opting of the oral.

Impact on Identity Formation

The discussion of social epistemology develops, as a starting point, an understanding of community as important to identity, as a sense of belonging is claimed with regard to village communities and the individual struggle to belong. (De Wet, 1992) points out that “significant social values arise from belonging to a community, which includes both the living and departed. The individual belongs by fitting into a perceived natural hierarchy”. An individual’s identity is thus dependent upon the present relationships within a community and their history. “A person’s attitudes to life are mainly determined by the knowledge of the history of the family and/or clan”. As “family” is expanded to “community”, so the understanding of identity is expanded to include the consciousness of a shared past wherein individuals knew their place. In South West Africa (SWA), brought to Namibia by the colonial migration system, there is often emphasis on the individual independent of community. proposes that “prior to the advent of Homestead Centred people, identity and community were inseparable”. Yet “a critical point arises when a person with a Homestead Centred background finds themselves in a situation where their job requires them to be senior to a much older person, threatening the perceived natural hierarchy”. “Another situation is when loyalty to family competes with loyalty to economic rationality”. goes on to define community as comprising five basic dimensions: a sense of belonging; place and space; a shared past; public symbols and rites; and social values and morality. The importance of public symbols and rites and social values and morality in community to individual identity is illustrated through a case study.

Religion and Spirituality in the Village

Village religion, with its acceptance of difference and its insistence on harmonizing the conflicting elements of differences, finds itself coming under two intense pressures. One is a village response to economic globalization that pushes the village people towards a more capitalist individual-driven orientation towards life. The other is a conversion response by some village members to a monotheist religion that insists on oneness and uniformity exclusively under one god and denies difference its legitimacy. Village people live between these two competing cultural frames and the novel intensively examines the conflicts generated in the lives of some of the village members.

The village religious belief system has at its center the gods of the village, who have the power both to create and to destroy life on the earth. The power to create life is associated with a multiplicity of village gods who co-exist and have differing abilities to

bestow life in its different forms. Thus the village gods are gods of difference whose multiple creations have resulted in difference as the irreducible condition of village life. Life cannot be perfected nor completed by any one god. Since life is in its essence a condition of ongoing creation, the plurality of village gods and the differences that they embody must always be hallowed (C. Hawley, 2013).

To deny the legitimacy of difference is to deny the possibility of life on earth. Head shows very powerfully the precariousness of village life when difference is threatened. In contrast to the plurality of the village gods, the Christian god is a god of oneness. There is but one Christian god, and all must conform to this single god's design. Creations must be perfected and completed under the one Christian god, and all differences must be annulled. Under the one god there can be no plurality of creations and all must conform subserviently to one life-determinative order laid down by this god. For Christianity, difference is the irreducible condition of sin and evil in the world; hence, there is a world-historic necessity to convert all to the knowledge and love of one god (Sodiq Sanni, 2016).

Syncretism and Traditional Beliefs

In "Village People," Bessie Head weaves a tale of belonging and identity centered on villagers coping with change. Through the lives of Nhamo, his Grandmother, and other characters, the story unfolds in a small, picturesque African village transformed by modernity. Environmental changes, economic shifts in farming, new schools, and altered social patterns affect everyone. Some embrace the new, while others struggle. Head compassionately portrays these changes, showing their impact on the characters' lives, particularly Nhamo's. Set in rural Botswana, "Village People" vividly depicts the land, weather, and village life, stressing the harmony of folk traditions with nature. Yet beyond this idyllic surface lies anxiety and tension. The once-thriving village, now stagnant, is beset by drought, affecting inhabitants' spirits and practical lives. Farmers leave for towns, chasing better agriculture. The village, altered by economic and environmental changes, embodies the anxiety of a world vacillating between modernity and tradition. Emerging schools replace oral tradition with written culture. Western knowledge reshapes villagers' religious world, fraught with anxiety about losing their worldview (C. Hawley, 2013).

Challenges and Opportunities for Social Change

In "Village People," social realities and individual struggles are captured through contemporary issues of languages and identities, access and belonging, and culture in a changing rural African village, influenced by capitalism, modernization, and globalization. Africa is depicted as a place of hope and peaceful coexistence within a dynamic global context, highlighting the intertwined nature of national, global, and local issues, and the ongoing negotiation and contestation of cultural identities. Set in the 1990s, a rural village in Botswana faces change, shifting from being a refuge for the down-trodden and dispossessed to a place for migrant workers seeking development opportunities. These

changes have implications for cultural and linguistic identities, sovereignty, and belonging. The ideological, institutional, and instructional influences of dominant languages, particularly in education, are interrogated. Despite the policy of mother tongue instruction, the challenges of socio-economic realities, globalization, poverty, and parental attitudes towards English education affect the use of indigenous languages in schools, risking the extinction of these languages as communities shift to English as the dominant language. Social hierarchies emerge, where those failing to master English are marginalized. The village school reflects students' sense of dispossession, dread, and hopelessness, longing to belong elsewhere rather than in the village school.

Youth Engagement and Activism

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in young people's engagement in their communities, both locally and globally. This interest can be seen in the increasing involvement of young people in civic activities, protest movements, and youth-led organizations. Development agencies have also begun to recognize young people as a key group to target for development initiatives. Meanwhile, scholars from various disciplines have examined dimensions of young people's civic engagement (M. Elisha, 2016). Some have explored how young people understand and participate in community social problems, while others have looked at how educational institutions can facilitate meaningful participation in democracy. There is also a body of literature that details how young people organize themselves to participate in civic life. The central concern of this body of literature is how young people can become meaningful participants in civic life.

The first strand of literature focuses on within-group variations in young people's views of civic participation. Most of this research has been conducted with White middle-class populations in Euro-American contexts, with the dominant focus being on educational institutions and how they foster civic participation in schooling. Very few studies have been undertaken with African American populations, and even fewer studies have focused on rural populations. Furthermore, most studies consider rurality as a context that shapes civic participation, rather than examining rurality as a set of social relations through which young people participate or do not participate in civic life. The second strand of literature highlights youth participation and activism as a response to oppression and exclusion in civic life (De Wet, 1992). Most of this research has been conducted in the Global South, examining young people's activism in relation to structural inequalities such as poverty, racism, and access to public services. In this literature, young people's activism is understood as a collective response to particular structural inequalities, rather than examining how young people interpret and enact activism in their daily lives.

Conclusion and Implications for Future Research

The issues of identity and belonging addressed in the stories in Village People are relevant not only in the African context, but also in the wider context of globalisation and

the rapid social change it brings with it. Most of the elements in the stories are familiar and relevant to any community struggling to cope with change. The stories provide a broad social perspective on the realities people face, as well as individual struggles with the same social realities and how they manifest themselves.

The implications of the narratives in *Village People* are that they raise awareness of social realities and how they are experienced and coped with individually. This awareness is especially crucial for social and political change, as well as for the well-being of individuals caught up in change. While social change is often experienced in a detached manner through academic discourse or political rhetoric, these stories depict the ongoing reality of change and how it is experienced in people's lives (De Wet, 1992). Being exposed to the realities of change deepens the understanding of the effects of change and individuals' roles in it, thus shaping social consciousness and creating space for agency.

Future research could focus on similar narratives in other contexts, examining how social realities are interpreted and experienced, both collectively and individually. How do people conceptualise and make sense of their social realities, and what impact do these interpretations have on social consciousness and agency? Locating narratives in the homes of the narrators and narrating them in their own language deepens the understanding of both social realities and how they are interpreted and experienced. This point was driven home by (Curtis, 2016), who, while discussing issues of identity and belonging, movingly depict the loss of home in its geographical, social and linguistic dimensions.

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