

WOMEN AS APPENDAGES OR PARTNERS: AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE OF MAN-WOMAN RELATIONSHIP IN THE WORKS OF BESSIE HEAD

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Abstract

Representations of women in most of the early African literature tended to follow a stereotypical pattern where marriage and the home were perceived as central to the being of women. To marry and to bear children were often seen as the whole essence of life for the African woman. However, most often the all-consuming roles of women as wives and home keepers place them in a kind of double bind. They confer on them the most coveted privilege of bearing children on the one hand but deprive them of the liberty to fully express themselves as individuals on the other. Often in the highly patriarchal Africa society, most men tended to treat their wives as mere appendages. But this is just one side of the story. There were also men who partner with women to create relationships of mutual respect. Using the selected novels of the South African writer Bessie Head, this paper highlights how men and women are rejecting the stereotype of women as mere appendages in man-woman relationships while negotiating new ways of relating with one another. It also discusses how the writer [re]presents this shift in perspective.

Keywords: literature, women's writing, fiction, appendages, partners, women, men, relationships, representation, stereotype, perspectives.

1. INTRODUCTION

In most traditional African societies, the role of the woman as wife often tend to undermine her power and influence much more than the role of the woman as mother and daughter. As a mother, she commands respect from her children, husband, the patriarchal society and even other women. As a daughter she commands respect from her father, brothers, (especially in matrilineal societies) her sister in-law, (in societies like the Igbo in Africa where the strength of the Umuada is most prevalent.). However, as a wife she tends to lose these powers and privileges and is often subjugated to the control of a man. She also becomes a stranger in another man's house, another place and part of the powerless brood in a man's homestead, if she marries into a polygamous homestead. Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie points out this fact, "the woman as a daughter or sister has greater status and more rights in her lineage. Married, she becomes a possession, voiceless and often rightless in her husband's family, except for what accrues to her through her [male] children" (*Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*: p. .9)

Even though complementary gender roles in male-female relationships is recognized in the African world view, the man often views the woman as an object of his male authority and aggression. The role of the woman that most guarantees him this opportunity is that of a wife.

Napoleon Bonaparte, asserts:

Nature intended women to be our [men's] slaves... They are our property; we are not theirs. They belong to us, just as a tree that bears fruit belongs to the gardener. What a mad idea to demand equality for women! Women are nothing but machines for producing children. (Maatz, 1993)

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 though some supporters of the practice argue that the payment of dowry elevates women, adds to their worth and strengthens the marriage. However, this supposed stability in marriage can be faulted in two ways. In matrilineal societies where the wife comes into the husband's homestead with bride wealth, the wealth does not belong solely to the woman. The man is a co-owner as long as the marriage lasts. However, if the marriage ends, the refund of the wealth is not made to the woman but to her father and her brothers who can decide to squander it. In patrilocal or patrilineal

societies where the husband pays bride wealth to his in-laws, he sees his wife as a commodity he has purchased whose owners have lost every right to ownership. In fact, the tendency for mistreatment increases if he spent so much in acquiring her. In all of these patterns of dowry making, the woman's right to self-expression remains undermined.

Women have also been treated as victims in African literature for too long but contemporary women writers want a change in the status quo. For example a writer like Buchi Emecheta expressed this desire for a change in the status quo when Nnu Ego the main character in *The Joys of Motherhood* who exemplifies the stereotypical oppressed wife asks, "God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage?" (*The Joys of Motherhood*, p.186). The narrator in Bessie Head's collection of stories, "*The Collector of Treasures*" categorizes men in the South African society into two, "there were really only two types of men in the society. The one kind created such misery and chaos that he could be broadly damned as evil... he is responsible for the breakdown of family life" (p.9). While "there was another kind of man in the society with the power to create himself anew. He turned all his resources, both emotional and material, towards his family life..." (P.93). In keeping with the search for the latter type of man, more and more women writers are creating characters in the male – female relationships that have mutual love and respect for each partner. More importantly, the wives or women are free to express their individuality. They are no longer subsumed in the personalities of their husbands or other men in their lives.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis of the selected works is based on the literary theory of feminism, particularly the womanist perspective. Feminism is a post-colonial literary theory that espouses the need to create more spaces for women as equals of men in the society as well as in the fictional world of literature. It takes its locus from the assumption that men are very visible and vocal in both society and fiction while women have been mostly invisible and silent in both. It therefore seeks to foreground issues concerning women, giving them a voice and raising consciousness about their plight and the need to redress women's oppression both in the society and in literary representation. Generally and essentially Feminism is an umbrella name under which the different perspectives or "angles of vision" within the gender equality and women liberation struggle is known. However, due to the differences in race, class, socio-economic and other socio-cultural issues, there has arisen many shades of feminism. Thus, the critical analysis of the novels selected for this paper is built around the particular feminist perspective espoused by most Africa and Diaspora women writers; specifically; Womanism.

Womanist discourse and aesthetics differs slightly from the core ethics of Western feminism on the grounds that it is a perspective founded and promoted mainly by black and other Third World women writers. While western feminist discourse seem to be narcissistic in its approach, womanist discourse recognise that women and men make up the society and each group need the other to be complete. Womanist perspective understands the mutuality that exists in the African and its Diaspora world view and wishes to negotiate spaces for women with regards to this world view. It also does not subscribe to the feminist discourse that men are the architects of all the problems bedeviling women in the society especially in Third world societies. It recognises that Third World men and women are often both victims of both colonialist and neo-colonialist structures built and encouraged by the West. The frustration caused by Western imposed, economic, social, class, race ethnic, and political systems works both on men and women and further imposes more inequalities and strain on men and women. Dismantling these systems is a key issue in womanist discourse. Thus in most writings that espouse the womanist perspectives, men and women seem to work together in order to change the oppressive systems that debilitate them. In working together, there is really no illusion of equality but for power holding and sharing tend to be more "negotiative" than aggressive. Bessie Head whose selected works is analysed in this study is a firm believer in the womanist vision of creating a society where equality reigns supreme. In her works she shows a passionate concern with the plight of the oppressed and downtrodden in the society. Moreover, her writings show how the intersection of race, colour class, sex and power combine to oppress men and women in society. Her womanism is manifest in how she portrays the combined efforts of men and women in her novels to overcome evil.

3. CRITICAL ANALYSES OF THE SELECTED NOVELS AND SHORT STORIES

Fellow writers and critics often accuse Bessie Head born writer of being apolitical. However, a closer look at her works shows that she makes the greatest political statements of our time in her preoccupation with the appalling situation of human relationships in South Africa and indeed other African societies. Her preoccupation with exploring the option of love instead of hatred and violence in righting the wrongs of society is evident in the themes of her novels. Ogunbesan in his study of Head's works acknowledges this

trend:

Bessie Head sees commitment mainly as love; it is love, which gives both the individual and the collective life a pattern of meaning. Her novels are concerned with presenting the achievement of love, with exacting its discovery and with assaying its power. All the novels present the movement of the protagonist towards another person or persons; we are invited to follow the fortunes of an isolated and alienated character towards others; and this quest eventually assumes both for the character and for the reader a much larger moral importance than that of the personal relationships as such. (Ogwude, p. 19)

Though her novel, *A Question of Power*, is not the first in the chronological arrangement of her works, it is in this novel that she explores the evils of women's subjugation and the hope of a relationship of mutual respect and equality between the sexes as a metaphor for overthrowing discrimination in all human relationships. She explores the theme of man's subjugation of woman in the marriage relationship between Elizabeth and Dan. The detailed exposition of the stages of Elizabeth's descent into mental psychosis shows the level of injury that can be inflicted on a woman in an exploitative relationship. The supremacy of the man as the ultimate aggressor and the woman as the hapless prey is also played out here.

Going back to Elizabeth's childhood, her patriarchal and racial prejudiced South African society brands her mother mad because she has an affair with a black man. Elizabeth is the product of that doomed relationship. Her mother is thrown into an asylum where her baby, Elizabeth is born and handed over to foster parents after the mother's death. Elizabeth goes through a traumatic childhood in the home of her foster parents. She spent many a day on her own as her foster mother ran a beer parlour and was almost always drunk. Even her school days were filled with painful memories of discriminatory treatment from her missionary principal. The principal always watched out for signs of mental illness in her. Her school mates torture her without ceaselessly because the principal would neither punish nor dissuade them. Therefore when she marries Dan, an ex-convict, she does so with the hope of finding a partner that would love and help her cope with the trauma of the circumstances of her birth. However, Dan uses her and dumps her. The marriage breaks down barely a year after. However, Dan's very many adulterous and degrading relationships work to aggravate Elizabeth's already troubled psyche and she descends into a psychotic and mental breakdown.

But she will yet fight to reclaim her personality from the pit of mental breakdown. Her struggles and triumph form the main story of a *Question of Power*. At the end, she defeats Dan and all that he stands for. But she does not win this victory all alone. Sello, the other man in her life helps her regain this personality. Sello is a monk but with enough love and goodwill to triumph over every evil that the human system is capable of throwing up. He asserts that, "love is two people mutually feeding on each other, not one living on the soul of the other, like a ghoul" (p. 197).

Elizabeth's eventual triumph will form a major departure for Head from the portrayal of weakness and subservience in her women characters and their relationships. Elizabeth suffers so much because she has internalised the oppression of her racial society and wants acceptance by the standards of the same society. However, she eventually liberates herself from the narrow mindedness of her husband and men like him.

The hero of Head's first novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Makhaya is portrayed as a man who believes in the equality of the sexes. As a fugitive on the run, he rejects the gift of sex from the grandmother who houses him for the night. His reason points to his mindset on the relationship between the sexes. The 'gift' offered to him is a mere girl child and he does not see the sense in taking advantage of the child. Back home in South Africa, he had already freed his sisters from the subordination of patriarchal culture:

He had sisters at home. But he was the eldest in the family, and according to custom he had to be addressed as 'Buti,' which means 'Elder Brother' and treated with exaggerated respect. As soon as his father died he made many changes in the home, foremost of which was that his sisters should address him by his first name and associate with him as equals and friends. When his mother had protested, he had merely said, 'Why should men be brought up with a false sense of superiority over women? People can respect me if they wish, but only if I earn it.' (p. 9-10)

This conviction shapes his relationship with women when eventually he settles in the Botswana village of Golema Mmidi. As an agricultural instructor to the women, he treats them as equals. The women throw away their inhibitions and cooperate with him. When it is time to choose a wife and partner, he chooses Paulina Sebeso, the articulate and passionate young woman who is the leader of the women. His reason for choosing Paulina is not far-fetched, "She was the kind of woman who could not lie to men" She was also "so

daring and different". He had earlier on advised Gilbert, his colleague and friend to marry a woman who 'had a life of her own.' The fact that he decides to marry a widow instead of one of the young never-married-before girls in the village attests to his belief in equality and the dignity of both sexes.

In the traditional African society, widowhood is a most degrading state for a woman. As mentioned in the earlier part of this chapter, a widow loses all rights to personhood. She is dispossessed of her husband's property and inherited by the husband's brother. She had neither an opinion nor a choice but to accept this imposed situation. But here, Makhaya, a young and handsome bachelor decides to marry a widow. Head's message here is that the healing of society can only be achieved when men and women shun established norms that work as barriers to mutually respectful relationships. Moreover, people should be judged on the basis of their personalities not according to societal stereotypes. In the relationship, Makhaya treats Paulina like an equal. Even when she tries to dissuade him from domestic work, he refuses and points her to the equality of the sexes, "It's time you learned that men live on this earth too. If I want to make tea, I'll make it, and if I want to sweep the floor, I'll sweep it. (p.135)"

It is this kind of independent minded woman that will satisfy his lofty desire for a soul mate. It is significant that Makhaya's love and encouragement brings out the best in Paulina. The author reveals that her first marriage was uneventful because "her husband wasn't a remarkable man, being rather of a mild, passive, stay-at-home temperament." (p.72) On the other hand, she is described as having "strong big black eyes that stared at everything in a bold way", and "She had a decisive way of walking as though she always knew where she was going and what she wanted" (p.73). Thus, when she marries a very remarkable man; a man that complements her personality, she blossoms. The way two of them work together to establish and maintain the agricultural cooperative in Golema Mmidi and the resounding success of that venture is a testimony of Head's belief in the complementarities of the male-female relationship and the strength that can come from it.

The other major male character in the novel, Gilbert is a white man from Britain. He also marries the other remarkable and intelligent woman in the novel, Maria. He encourages Maria and accepts her desire to learn the English language due to the respect he has for her. He also decides to learn the local language in order to improve their communication. The traditional South African racial superiority is challenged in the marriage between Gilbert and Maria. The rules of apartheid that encourages segregation between races by creating a superior white race that looks down on all other races was overturned here when a white man settles in the midst of natives and marries one of them. The fact that the two men who are strangers marry women from the locality where they settled shows Head's belief in the integrative value of marriage and that mutual respect and love between a man and a woman is the starting point of such values in the wider society.

Margaret Cadmore the heroine of Head's second novel *Maru* is trained from the beginning to take pride in her ancestry. Her mother is a Masarwa who died giving birth to her. The wife of the missionary pastor adopts her and raises her as her own. While Elizabeth's foster mother in *A Question of Power* does a poor job of raising her, Margaret's foster mother teaches her to be proud of her ancestry. All through school, her foster mother taught her how to capture the inner realities of people through drawing. As she becomes ready to face the world, she has already accepted her tribe and is ready to defend it everywhere. Perhaps, Head's message comes out more clearly when Margaret is sent to work in a school in one of the villages. At the earliest opportunity, she introduces herself as a Masarwa to Dikeledi, the daughter of a paramount chief in Dilepe village. At the school Margaret causes not a little stir when she introduces herself to the principal as a Masarwa. She had so perfected the art of self-definition that when she meets the aristocratic Maru, she stands tall, "Almost everyone groveled before him, because of his position. But she looked down at him, indifferently, from a great height, where she was more than his equal. It had nothing to do with the little education she had acquired from a missionary." (p. 64)

As events in the novel turn out, Moleka and Maru the two most eligible bachelors in the town fall in love with her. Maru eventually marries her thereby causing a major upset in the traditional arrangements of Dilepe village:

A day had come when he had decided that he did not need any kingship other than the kind of wife everybody would loathe from the bottom of their hearts. He had planned for that loathing in secret; they had absorbed the shocks in secret. When eventually everything was exposed, they had only one alternative; to keep their prejudice and pretend Maru had died. (p. 6)

Head's message here seems to be that marriage can be used not only as a means of bringing equality to men and women but to all peoples. bell hooks (2000) comments on the power of such transforming love:

When we accept that true love is rooted in recognition and acceptance, that love combines acknowledgement, care, responsibility, commitment, and knowledge, we understand there can be no love without justice. With that awareness comes the understanding that love has the power to transform us, giving us the strength to oppose domination. (p.104)

Maru helps Margaret to reclaim her personality even as she also assists him to liberate himself. Maru's personality has been hitherto subsumed in the internalised doubts and questions that torment him. He is the heir-apparent to the throne. His family has a long history of owning the Masarwa as slaves. However, he believes that no man should own another man. He considers the system that promotes slavery and subservience as "a betrayal of all the good of mankind" and asserts:

I was not born to rule this mess. If I have a place it is to pull it, the old structures down and create the new. Not for me any sovereignty over my fellow men. I'd remove the blood money, the cruelty and crookery from the top, but that's all. There is a section of my life they will never claim or own. (p. 68)

His marriage to Margaret is a demonstration of his desire to liberate the tribe. In many of the marriages in African novels, husbands feel superior and demand absolute submission from their wives but in this novel Maru encourages Margaret and her tribe to reclaim their personhood:

When the people of the Masarwa tribe heard about Maru's marriage to one of their own, a door slightly opened on the small, dark airless room in which their souls had been shut for a long time. The wind of freedom, which was blowing throughout the world for all people, turned and flowed into the room (p. 126.)

Another significant lesson Head seems to be teaching here is that no matter how oppressed, people especially women should learn to define themselves according to their abilities rather than accepting others' definition of them.

Margaret sends out a powerful message about the need for freedom for herself and for her people through the paintings she does for Dikeledi. In one of the paintings, she paints a house with three different backgrounds but with couples embracing their partners. When Dikeledi questions her about the inspiration for her art, she responds, "I drew all pictures from pictures from my mind. I first see something as it looks but it looks better when it reappears again as a picture in my mind." As soon as Maru sees this painting, his perceptive imagination goes to work and he concludes that Margaret must be the soul mate he had been searching for. He had always wanted a woman with substance and deeper personality, different from the women in the village whom he thinks are greedy and shallow.

Dikeledi, the other prominent woman character and Maru's sister seems besotted with Moleka, yet she is described as a remarkable woman. She judges and condemns the feeling of self-importance associated with her own social class:

There was something Dikeledi called sham. It made people believe they were more important than the normal image of human kind. She had grown up surrounded by sham. Perhaps it is too embarrassing to see people make fools of themselves because at one point she said: "I'll have none of that." She was not alone in that decision." (p. 25)

She joins forces with Maru to overthrow the supposed superiority complex of her tribe. Her marriage to Moleka redeems him from the confused and catastrophic love affairs he has been hitherto prone to. She gives him dignity too since he could not contemplate marrying a nonentity, "What did he want with a woman who meant nothing to the public?" (p. 9)

Head demonstrates in these novels that marriage can indeed be liberating for women. She also encourages women to resist oppression as a way of gaining the respect of the men in their lives. Elizabeth refuses to be held down by the emotional and traumatic pains inflicted on her by Dan, Paulina refuses to be circumscribed by widowhood, Margaret identifies with her tribe even when she is aware that her tribe is designated as "Bushmen" and Maria marries a white man and learns to speak the English language. All four women refused to be defined by the status quo prevalent on their society.

It is significant to note that in all of the marriages in Head's three novels examined here, there is no mention of bride price.. This is not a theme that is peculiar to only stories in Head's novels set in modern times. In her historical collection, *A Bewitched Crossroad, the story of an African Saga*, King Khama abolished the *bogadi* [bride price] in his kingdom. Coming from a background where prices for the 'purchase' of a wife could be as high as twelve heads of cattle, Head knows the constraint and burden this tradition can place on women.

Men tend to take out their frustrations on the women whom they have paid so much to acquire. Head seems to be of the opinion that such payments should be abolished in order to foster a relationship of mutual respect between husbands and wives. All the relationships in her novels are based on good communication and mutual understanding and all the couples choose their partners without the interference of parents or relatives. By negating the importance of the bride price in the marriages, Head removes the emphasis on economic and financial considerations as the centre of the marriage relationship for any of the sexes. Rather, she places companionship as the primary aim of the relationships. All her women characters are somewhat economically independent. Elizabeth is a teacher and a farmer who is able to provide for her son and herself. Paulina is a livestock farmer. Margaret Cadmore is a school teacher. Dekeledi, Maru's sister takes up a teaching job even when she does not really have to work on a paid job, being a princess whose comfort is already guaranteed throughout her lifetime. Thus with the economic independence of these women they prove to the men that they can contribute something meaningful to the society. Paulina works together with Makhaya at the agricultural project for the women in Golema Mmidi, while Elizabeth works as a teacher and as a farmer in *A Question of Power*. In *Maru*, Dikeledi is appointed the village school head teacher when the former head is sacked for encouraging racism.

For Head, the need for women to go out to work is not only for economic independence but also for the enrichment it will bring to their lives and, by extension their relationships with the men. For most women in Africa and the Diaspora, the place of work also doubles as the place of recreation and leisure where women achieve bonding and discuss issues that primarily concern them. White (2000) notes how slave women encouraged one another at the place of work which was actually the only place they could come together without suspicion and sanction from the slave masters.

The stories in Head's collection of short stories, *The Collector of Treasures* are indeed all treasures in their treatment of man/woman and other familial relationships. Head further pursues her philosophy of the goodness of man's soul as an antidote to the increasing lack of love in the society. More especially, her notion of the husband/wife relationship as a microcosm of the larger society is borne out in some of the stories. The divisions and barriers in religion, culture, disabilities, age, race and politics can all be resolved through the fusion of the man and woman. For example, in the stories, "Jacob: The Story of a Faith-Healing Priest" and "Heaven is Not Closed" Jacob and Ralokae marry women who are churchgoers but at the same time versed in the tradition of the people. While Jacob moves against the societal norm and marries Johanna, an unwed mother of many children, Galethebege exercises her freedom from church indoctrination by marrying the traditionalist, Ralokae. The church expels her, but the important issue to Head and her protagonist is that the couple finds happiness. Moreover, it is suggested that happiness can only be found in love not in a religion that stresses rules but is devoid of love. In fact, it is the indifference and inverted definition of love by the missionaries that harden Ralokae's heart against the new religion:

There was something wrong with the people who had brought the word of the gospel to the land. Their love was enslaving black people and he could not stand it...It made people cry for love. One never had to cry for love in the customary way of life. Respect was just there for the people all the time. That was why he rejected all things foreign. (pp. 9-10).

Ralokae's rejection of the hypocritical gospel messengers echoes Elizabeth's rejection of the nuns and the church that preaches love but finds the practice of it abhorrent in *A Question of Power*. The other Christians in the village show their support to Galethebege's decision by leaving the church when she is excommunicated. Their solidarity and identification with Galethebege shows Head's conviction of the rightness and desirability of their action. The title of the story is a satire on the missionaries' assumption that the only way to get to God is through their own religion. If God is a God of love as they preach, he will readily admit into heaven the man and woman who find happiness through love, irrespective of their religious leanings. Purity and holiness can also be found in the traditional way of life. In fact, Ralokae is a pious man in the way of the traditional religion.

However, in some of the stories, Head explores the tragic consequences of failed relationships between husbands and wives. In the stories, "Life", and "The Collector Of Treasures", family and love life are disrupted because of the men's oppressive attitude towards the women. The same husband who meets her as a prostitute and marries her when she eventually returns to prostitution kills Life, the heroine of the story of the same title. Head makes our sympathy lie with Life because her oppressive marriage to Lesego is not what she had envisaged from the beginning. By letting us into Lesego's highhandedness and tyrannical treatment of his wife, the author prepares the readers' mind for Life's eventual rebellion and also gives the reason for it. Lesego's chilling warning to Life that he would kill her if she goes with another man foreshadows the inevitability of the tragedy.

In "The Collector of Treasures" too Head keeps our sympathy with Dikeledi by showing us the life of terrible suffering and deprivation that Garesego has led her into. His irresponsibility reminds us of Emecheta's Francis who is as oppressive. Garesego who has a job as a clerk in a government office is in a better position to provide for his family than some of the men in his community yet he fritters away the opportunity for the good life by engaging in numerous extra-marital affairs. He would eventually desert Dikeledi and their children. He goes philandering for eight years. When he eventually returns to claim his conjugal rights, Dikeledi cuts him to death. There are four other women in the jail with Dikeledi. They also killed their husbands for one reason or the other but most especially because of their infidelity. For instance, Kebonye who cut off her husband's penis with a razor claims to have done so in order to curb the man's excesses in impregnating schoolgirls. Her other reason as she tells Dikeledi was his sexual brutality and lack of tenderness.

Head's warning in these stories seems to be that none of the sexes has a monopoly of violence. Moreover, women who are badly treated in patriarchal societies could sometimes turn violent on the aggressor rather than stoically bearing the burden of oppression. Nonetheless, she sees hope for the African man and woman in monogamy and fidelity. Almost all her stories about infidelity end in tragedies while the relationships in the novels discussed earlier thrive because of a high sense of commitment and mutual understanding between the sexes.

4. CONCLUSION

Head's conviction that women should move from the position of appendages to personhood is not in doubt as demonstrated in her works. The need for women to assert themselves in marriages becomes much more pressing in the light of the oppressive patriarchal culture that exists in many African societies. Mutuality is recognized as the key to unity and development in African societies and the best place to start is the family. The analyses of the man-woman relationships in these novels attests to the claims that the womanist aesthetics does not reject wifehood or heterosexual relationships as a state of being for the African woman but demands an end to the patriarchal oppression often prevalent in these relationship. It would be easier to fight other forms of oppressions that bedevil black societies such as racism when the man and woman are united. Her feminism is manifest in how she portrays the combined efforts of men and women in her novels to overcome evil. Her vision of human society devoid of the oppressive barriers of race, colour, sex and class aligns with the womanist goal of fighting the oppression of women as well as the oppression of all black people. In her portrayal of women who are the equals of men and men who accept and encourage such equality, Head seems to have moved the position of women from appendages to partners in contemporary African literature thereby fulfilling her womanist-feminist vision of gender, racial and class equality.

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