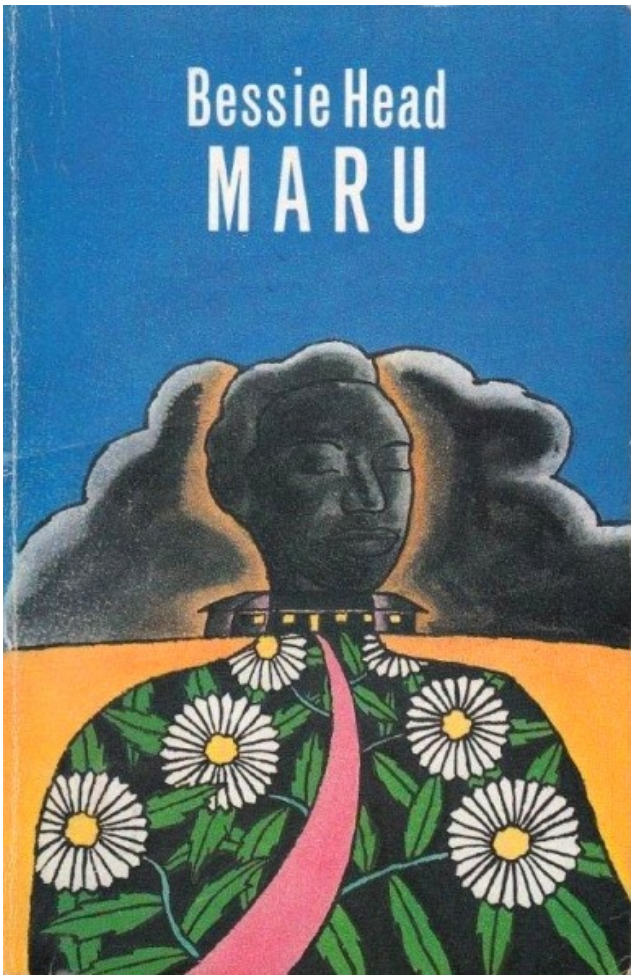
Bessie Head

MARU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South Africa, 1937-1986

Maru

1971, EN, Botswana

Margaret, an orphaned Masarwa girl, comes to Dilepe to teach, only to discover that in this Botswana village her people are treated as outcasts. In the love story and intrigue that follows, the book combines a portrait of loneliness with an affirmation of the mystery and spirituality of life.

Part One

The rains were so late that year. But throughout that hot, dry summer those black storm clouds clung in thick folds of brooding darkness along the low horizon. There seemed to be a secret in their activity, because each evening they broke the long, sullen silence of the day, and sent soft rumbles of thunder and flickering slicks of lightning across the empty sky. They were not promising rain. They were prisoners, pushed back, in trapped coils of boiling cloud.

Like one long accustomed to living in harmony with the earth, the man had continued to prepare his fields for the seasonal ploughing, and even two brand new water tanks had been fixed to the sides of his small new home to catch the storm water, when it rained. He wanted a flower garden of yellow daisies, because they were the only flowers which resembled the face of his wife and the sun of his love. If that were one of his preoccupations, there were a thousand others as well. Maybe life was too short. Maybe life had presented him with too many destinies but he knew that he would accept them all and fulfill them. Who else had been born with such clear, sharp eyes that cut through all pretence and sham? Who else was a born leader of men, yet at the same time acted out his own, strange inner perceptions, independent of the praise or blame of men?

“I’ll be going home now,” he said quietly, to a group of three men working on the construction of vegetable beds.

He had hesitated before speaking. The men were no ordinary farm workers, but close friends who had surrounded and protected him all his life. He added a word or two which made them shake their heads behind his back and mutter: “Maru is always impossible!”

“Ranko,” he said sharply, pretending annoyance. “Didn’t I tell you not to break up the clods? They are for conserving moisture in the soil.”

Ranko looked up, raised one hand and rubbed the side of his nose. Sudden, sharp words and the mention of his name threw him into

confusion. Ranko meant ‘big nose’ in Setswana, and when had people not had vegetable garden soil raked in a fancy way? Every new and unacceptable idea had to be put abruptly into practice, making no allowance for prejudice. It was painful, like his big nose, and who knew where life and destiny would take the three of them as long as their lives were attached to Maru? They began shaking their heads, and the gesture was very deep. The man who slowly walked away from them was a king in their society. 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 everything was exposed, they had only one alternative: to keep their prejudice and pretend Maru had died. But did it end there? Was that not only a beginning?

Only Maru knew the answers. He paused awhile and looked towards the low horizon where the storm brooded. The thorn trees turned black in the darkening light and a sudden breeze stirred the parched, white grass. There was so little to disturb his heart in his immediate environment. It was here where he could communicate freely with all the magic and beauty inside him. There had never been a time in his life when he had not thought a thought and felt it immediately bound to the deep centre of the earth, then bound back to his heart again – with a reply. Previously, the stillness with which he held himself together to hear the reply had always been disrupted by people. People were horrible to him because they imagined that their thoughts and deeds were concealed when he could see and hear everything, even their bloodstreams and the beating of their hearts. If they knew all that he knew, would they not have torn him to shreds some time ago, to keep the world the way it was where secrets and evil bore the same names? It was a vision of a new world that slowly allowed one dream to dominate his life.

A little brown, dusty footpath turned away from the roaring busy highways of life. Yellow daisies grew alongside the dusty footpath and danced in the sun and wind, and together the footpath and the daisies would make his heart bound with joy. As soon as the first rains fell he would plant those yellow daisies along the footpath leading to his home – so simply and precisely did he translate his dreams into reality. At least, the present was simple. But there was a depth of secret activity in him like that long, low line of black, boiling cloud. There was a clear blue sky in his mind that

calmly awaited the storm in his heart and when all had been said and done, this earth would be washed clean of all the things he hated. He slowly continued his walk home, his gaze turned towards the horizon. It was very beautiful.

So quietly did he enter the house that his wife looked up fearfully from her work of preparing the table for the evening meal. He sometimes had vicious, malicious moods when every word was a sharp knife intended to grind and re-grind the same raw wound. Most certainly, no memory remained in her heart and mind of previous suffering. Most often she felt quite drunk and mad with happiness and it was not unusual for her to walk around for the whole day with an ecstatic smile on her face, because the days of malice and unhappiness were few and far over-balanced by the days of torrential expressions of love. Maybe a dark shadow had been created to balance the situation. Maybe some blot of human wrong had to happen to force Maru to identify himself with the many wrongs of mankind. He moved too swiftly and surely. He never doubted the voices of the gods in his heart. It was only over the matter of Moleka that he was completely undone, not the way one would expect a wrong-doer to be undone. He was thrown off-balance by the haunting fear that he would one day be forced to kill Moleka, one way or another.

There were two rooms. In one his wife totally loved him; in another, she totally loved Moleka. He watched over this other room, fearfully, in his dreams at night. It was always the same dream. Moleka would appear trailing a broken leg with blood streaming from a wound in his mouth and his heart. No one ever cried with such deep, heart-rending sobs as his wife did on these occasions. Often he would start awake to find those hot tears streaming on to his arm from her closed eyes.

“Why are you crying?” he’d ask, pretending not to know. But she would see the tears too, yet be unable to account for them on waking because she had no mental impression of her dreams, except those of the room in which she loved Maru. There was nothing he could invent to banish the other room. He seemed to be its helpless victim and it was not much to his liking as jealousy was almost an insanity in him and the inspirer of it was nearly his equal. No one else was. To Moleka he had made so many concessions, he did not care to make others. He had ensured that Moleka had the next best woman in the world. The next best woman in the world had more

intellectual attainments than his wife. She had style and class and immediately impressed people as someone worth noticing and listening to. All these things flattered Moleka, as he was also a man who impressed people. What did he want with a woman who meant nothing to the public? In fact, until the time he married her she had lived like the mad dog of the village, with tin cans tied to her tail. Moleka would never have lived down the ridicule and malice and would in the end have destroyed her from embarrassment.

There was always the public. A man with a public eye tried to please them. Once he had decided to act, he had based his calculations on what was good for Moleka and what was good for him. He brooded over this. Perhaps he had seriously miscalculated Moleka's power, that Moleka possessed some superior quality over which he had little control. Was it a superior kind of love? Or was it a superior kind of power? He'd trust the love but not the power because power could parade as anything. He'd weep too, if he really believed that Moleka had a greater love than his own. What his heart said was that Moleka had a greater power than he had, and he had felt no remorse at what he had done to the only person he loved as he loved his wife. This brooding and uncertainty made him malicious. Perhaps his heart was wrong and a day would come when he would truthfully surrender his wife to Moleka, because he had decided that Moleka's love was greater than his own. If this mood was upon him, he would walk in through the door and say: "I only married you because you were the only woman in the world who did not want to be important. But you are not at all important to me, as I sometimes say you are."

It could turn the world to ashes. All the fire and sun disappeared because his words were inwardly lived out in his deeds. That evening, he was happy. He thought about the yellow daisies. He walked in at the door and said, softly: "My sweetheart."

♦

They were the most precious words, if you only knew the horror of what could pour out of the human heart; a horror that seemed most demented because the main perpetrators of it were children and you were a child yourself. Children learnt it from their parents. Their parents spat on the ground as a member of a filthy, low nation passed by. Children went a little

further. They spat on you. They pinched you. They danced a wild jiggle, with the tin cans rattling: “Bushman! Low Breed! Bastard!”

Before the white man became universally disliked for his mental outlook, it was there. The white man found only too many people who looked *different*. That was all that outraged the receivers of his discrimination, that he applied the technique of the wild jiggling dance and the rattling tin cans to anyone who was not a white man. And if the white man thought that Asians were a low, filthy nation, Asians could still smile with relief – at least, they were not Africans. And if the white man thought Africans were a low, filthy nation, Africans in Southern Africa could still smile – at least, they were not Bushmen. They all have their monsters. You just have to look different from them, the way the facial features of a Sudra or Tamil do not resemble the facial features of a high caste Hindu, then seemingly anything can be said and done to you as your outer appearance reduces you to the status of a non-human being.

In Botswana they say: Zebras, Lions, Buffalo and Bushmen live in the Kalahari Desert. If you can catch a Zebra, you can walk up to it, forcefully open its mouth and examine its teeth. The Zebra is not supposed to mind because it is an animal. Scientists do the same to Bushmen and they are not supposed to mind, because there is no one they can still turn round to and say, “At least I am not a – ” Of all things that are said of oppressed people, the worst things are said and done to the Bushmen. Ask the scientists. Haven’t they yet written a treatise on how Bushmen are an oddity of the human race, who are half the head of a man and half the body of a donkey? Because you don’t go poking around into the organs of people unless they are animals or dead.

Some time ago it might have been believed that words like ‘kaffir’ and ‘nigger’ defined a tribe. Or else how can a tribe of people be called Bushmen or Masarwa? Masarwa is the equivalent of ‘nigger’, a term of contempt which means, obliquely, a low, filthy nation.

True enough, the woman who gave birth to a child on the outskirts of a remote village had the same thin, Masarwa stick legs and wore the same Masarwa ankle-length, loose shift dress which smelt strongly of urine and the smoke of outdoor fires. She had died during the night but the child was still alive and crying feebly when a passer-by noticed the corpse. When no one wanted to bury a dead body, they called the missionaries; not that the

missionaries really liked to be involved with mankind, but they had been known to go into queer places because of their occupation. They would do that but they did not often like you to walk into their yard. They preferred to talk to you outside the fence. They had a church, a school and a hospital in the village, all founded by a series of missionaries. At that time the church and school were run by a man and his wife. There is little to say about the man because he was naturally dull and stupid, only people never noticed because he was a priest and mercifully remained silent for hours on end. He had a long, mournful face. His mouth was always wet with saliva and he frequently blinked his eyes, slowly like a cow. It was the wife who was to live forever in the memory of the child.

It is preferable to change the world on the basis of love of mankind. But if that quality be too rare, then common sense seems the next best thing. Margaret Cadmore, the wife of the missionary, had the latter virtue in over-abundance. It made her timeless, as though she could belong to any age or time, but always on the progressive side. It also made her abusive of the rest of mankind, because what is sensible is simpler than what is stupid. She had a temperament – high-strung, nervous, energetic, that made her live at the speed of a boat shooting over the rapids. Her plump cheeks were flushed by her self-imposed exertions. Continuous abuse of the rest of mankind, which moved at three quarters of her pace, had sometimes led her into situations where she was in danger of being assaulted. She had a lively sense of humour. She took revenge with a sketch pad and pencil. She gave orders and, while waiting for them to be carried out, she'd sketch the harassed face of her victim, with a note underneath for future reference, like: "He's nice, but stupid." It prevented her from hurling out a continuous stream of abuse.

To ensure that things happened at the speed she required, she was in the habit of getting as many people on to the job as possible. Thus, when the hospital supervisor rang up about who had died, and apologetically added that she was an untouchable to the local people, she had the coffin carried into the hospital while the grave was being dug in the churchyard. Later, when it was all over, she would conduct a one-sided, reflective monologue with her husband, George: "I wonder where these people are buried? They don't seem to be at all a part of the life of this country."

On this occasion her thoughts involved her. She kept her eyes screwed up reflectively as she absent-mindedly bottle-fed the baby of the dead

woman. A number of things had happened all at once. Margaret Cadmore was not the kind of woman to speculate on how any artistic observation of human suffering arouses infinite compassion. She put the notes down on her sketch pad. One sketch captured the expressions of disgust on the faces of the Batswana nurses as they washed the dead woman's body for burial. She scrawled a note under the sketch: "These are not decent people."

Her dislike of the nurses flowed out of her observation of the dead woman. As she walked into the hospital, energetically demanding the body, two nurses conducted her to a small back room where the slop pails were kept. There on the stone floor lay the dead woman, still in the loose shift dress, more soiled than ever from the birth of the child. There was horror mingled with her hysterical shouting, only she no longer cared to lecture human prejudice directly.

"Why the damn, blasted hell haven't you washed the body for burial?" she shrieked.

She was plump. Her mouth was shaped as though she was permanently laughing but she wore tinted glasses and, combined with the shouting, appeared fierce. The nurses jumped in alarm and rushed for pails and soap and water. It was only when they washed the body that they exposed their prejudice, and the reason why the body was not on a stretcher but on the stone floor. From habit she whipped out her sketch pad, then paused. The sketch would not come so rapidly. It was a mixture of peace and astonishment in the expression of the dead woman, but so abrupt that she still had her faint eyebrows raised in query.

What suffering had preceded death? And what had death offered to surprise her so? She had even started to laugh.

Quite unconscious of the oddness of her behaviour, Margaret Cadmore walked to several angles of the room, studying the dead woman's expression. The note she scrawled at last said: "She looks like a Goddess."

She took in too much after that: the thin stick legs of malnutrition and the hard caloused feet that had never worn shoes. She took in also the hatred of the fortunate, and that if they so hated even a dead body how much more did they hate those of this woman's tribe who were still alive. Maybe she really saw human suffering, close up, for the first time, but it frightened her into adopting that part of the woman which was still alive – her child. She had no children, but she was an educator of children. She was