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# Maru Bessie Head Character Analysis

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Character Analysis*

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## CALLUM BALDWIN

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*A Novel* Manchester University Press

"I am a human being; I am a woman; I am a black woman; I am an African.

Once I was free; then I was captured and became a slave; but inside me, here and here, I am still a free woman." During a period of four hundred years, European slave traders ferried some 12 million enslaved Africans across the Atlantic. In the Americas, teaching a slave to read and write was a criminal offense. When the last slaves gained their freedom in Brazil, barely a thousand of them were literate. Hardly any stories of the enslaved and transported Africans have survived. This novel is an attempt to recreate just one of those stories, one story of a possible 12 million or

more. Lawrence Hill created another in *The Book of Negroes* (Someone Knows my Name in the U.S.) and, more recently, Yaa Gyasi has done the same in *Homegoing*. Ama occupies center stage throughout this novel. As the story opens, she is sixteen. Distant drums announce the death of her grandfather. Her family departs to attend the funeral, leaving her alone to tend her ailing baby brother. It is 1775. Asante has conquered its northern neighbor and exacted an annual tribute of 500 slaves. The ruler of Dagbon dispatches a raiding party into the lands of the neighboring Bekpokpam. They capture Ama. That night, her lover, Itsho, leads an attack on the raiders' camp. The rescue bid fails. Sent to collect water from a stream, Ama comes across Itsho's mangled corpse.

For the rest of her life she will call upon his spirit in time of need. In Kumase, the Asante capital, Ama is given as a gift to the Queen-mother. When the adolescent monarch, Osei Kwame, conceives a passion for her, the regents dispatch her to the coast for sale to the Dutch at Elmina Castle. There the governor, Pieter de Bruyn, selects her as his concubine, dressing her in the elegant clothes of his late Dutch wife and instructing the obese chaplain to teach her to read and write English. De Bruyn plans to marry Ama and take her with him to Europe. He makes a last trip to the Dutch coastal outstations and returns infected with yellow fever. On his death, his successor rapes Ama and sends her back to the female dungeon. Traumatized, her mind goes blank. She comes to her senses in

the canoe which takes her and other women out to the slave ship, *The Love of Liberty*. Before the ship leaves the coast of Africa, Ama instigates a slave rebellion. It fails and a brutal whipping leaves her blind in one eye. The ship is becalmed in mid-Atlantic. Then a fierce storm cripples it and drives it into the port of Salvador, capital of Brazil. Ama finds herself working in the fields and the mill on a sugar estate. She is absorbed into slave society and begins to adapt, learning Portuguese. Years pass. Ama is now totally blind. Clutching the cloth which is her only material link with Africa, she reminisces, dozes, falls asleep. A short epilogue brings the story up to date. The consequences of the slave trade and slavery are still with us. Brazilians of African descent remain

entrenched in the lower reaches of society, enmeshed in poverty. "This is story telling on a grand scale," writes Tony Simões da Silva. "In *Ama*, Herbstein creates a work of literature that celebrates the resilience of human beings while denouncing the inscrutable nature of their cruelty. By focusing on the brutalization of *Ama*'s body, and on the psychological scars of her experiences, Herbstein dramatizes the collective trauma of slavery through the story of a single African woman. *Ama* echoes the views of writers, historians and philosophers of the African diaspora who have argued that the phenomenon of slavery is inextricable from the deepest foundations of contemporary western civilization." *Ama, a Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade*, won the 2002

Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Best First Book.

*Stories of women* Heinemann International Incorporated

A new novel by a towering presence in contemporary South African literature In 1971, nineteen citizens of Excelsior in South Africa's white-ruled Free State were charged with breaking apartheid's Immorality Act, which forbade sex between blacks and whites. Taking this case as raw material for his alchemic imagination, Zakes Mda tells the story of a family at the heart of the scandal -and of a country in which apartheid concealed interracial liaisons of every kind. Niki, the fallen madonna, transgresses boundaries for the sake of love; her choices have repercussions in the lives of her black son and mixed-race

daughter, who come of age in post-apartheid South Africa, where freedom prompts them to reexamine their country's troubled history at first hand. By turns earthy, witty, and tragic, *The Madonna of Excelsior* is a brilliant depiction of life in South Africa and of the dramatic changes between the 1970s and the present.

[The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales](#) Heinemann

This electronic version has been made available under a Creative Commons (BY-NC-ND) open access license. Elleke Boehmer's work on the crucial intersections between independence, nationalism and gender has already proved canonical in the field. 'Stories of women' combines her keynote essays on the mother figure and the postcolonial

nation, with incisive new work on male autobiography, 'daughter' writers, the colonial body, the trauma of the post-colony, and the nation in a transnational context. Focusing on Africa as well as South Asia, and sexuality as well as gender, Boehmer offers fine close readings of writers ranging from Achebe, Okri and Mandela to Arundhati Roy and Yvonne Vera, shaping these into a critical engagement with theorists of the nation like Fredric Jameson and Partha Chatterjee. This edition will be of interest to readers and researchers of postcolonial, international and women's writing; of nation theory, colonial history and historiography; of Indian, African, migrant and diasporic literatures, and is likely to prove a landmark study in the field.

In the Fog of the Seasons End Princeton University Press

Rural Botswana is the backdrop for *When Rain Clouds Gather*, the first novel published by one of Africa's leading woman writers in English, Bessie Head (1937–1986). Inspired by her own traumatic life experiences as an outcast in Apartheid South African society and as a refugee living at the Bamangwato Development Association Farm in Botswana, Head's tough and telling classic work is set in the poverty-stricken village of Golema Mmidi, a haven to exiles. A South African political refugee and an Englishman join forces to revolutionize the villagers' traditional farming methods, but their task is fraught with hazards as the pressures of tradition, opposition from the local chief,

and the unrelenting climate threaten to divide and devastate the fragile community. Head's layered, compelling story confronts the complexities of such topics as social and political change, conflict between science and traditional ways, tribalism, the role of traditional African chiefs, religion, race relations, and male-female relations.

Heinemann

After losing their parents, Tee and her brother Toddan are taken in by their exuberant aunt Tantie, but when Tee wins a scholarship and moves in with Aunt Beatrice, she finds herself challenged by race and class conscious middle class values.

Women Writers in Black Africa Open Road + Grove/Atlantic

In this fast-paced, semi-autobiographical

novel, Head exposes the complicated life of Elizabeth, whose reality is intermingled with nightmarish dreams and hallucinations. Like the author, Elizabeth was conceived out-of-wedlock; her mother was white and her father black—a union outlawed in apartheid South Africa. Elizabeth eventually leaves with her young son to live in Botswana, a country less oppressed by colonial domination, where she finds stability for herself and her son by working on an experimental farm. As readers grow to know Elizabeth, they experience the inner chaos that threatens her stability, and her constant struggle to emerge from the torment of her dreams. There she is plagued by two men, Sello and Dan, who represent complex notions of politics, sex, religion, individuality, and

the blurred line between good and evil. Elizabeth's troubling but amazing roller-coaster ride ends in an unfettered discovery.

Autobiographical Writings Waveland Press

Arguing that the fundamental, familiar, sexual violence of slavery and racialized subjugation have continued to shape black and white subjectivities into the present, Christina Sharpe interprets African diasporic and Black Atlantic visual and literary texts that address those “monstrous intimacies” and their repetition as constitutive of post-slavery subjectivity. Her illuminating readings juxtapose Frederick Douglass's narrative of witnessing the brutal beating of his Aunt Hester with Essie Mae Washington-Williams's declaration of freedom in Dear

Senator: A Memoir by the Daughter of Strom Thurmond, as well as the “generational genital fantasies” depicted in Gayl Jones’s novel *Corregidora* with a firsthand account of such “monstrous intimacies” in the journals of an antebellum South Carolina senator, slaveholder, and vocal critic of miscegenation. Sharpe explores the South African-born writer Bessie Head’s novel *Maru*—about race, power, and liberation in Botswana—in light of the history of the KhoiSan woman Saartje Baartman, who was displayed in Europe as the “Hottentot Venus” in the nineteenth century. Reading Isaac Julien’s film *The Attendant*, Sharpe takes up issues of representation, slavery, and the sadomasochism of everyday black life. Her powerful meditation on

intimacy, subjection, and subjectivity culminates in an analysis of Kara Walker’s black silhouettes, and the critiques leveled against both the silhouettes and the artist.

*Life Kwani*

“Bessie Head’s short stories have an extraordinary simplicity and breadth of vision,” heralded a review in *The Tribune* after publication of Head’s first collection of short stories, *The Collector of Treasures*. Regarded today as one of Africa’s best-known woman writers in English, Head draws on the rich oral tradition of southern Africa and masterfully applies storytelling’s language and imagery. Carefully sequenced, the anthology gives special focus to village people from independence-era Botswana and the



status, position, and plight of African women.

**The True Story of a Black Youth's Coming of Age in Apartheid South Africa** Waveland Press

“More convincingly than any other woman writing in Arabic today, Alifa Rifaat lifts the veil on what it means to be a woman living within a traditional Muslim society.” So states the translator’s foreword to this collection of the Egyptian author’s best short stories. Rifaat (1930–1996) did not go to university, spoke only Arabic, and seldom traveled abroad. This virtual immunity from Western influence lends a special authenticity to her direct yet sincere accounts of death, sexual fulfillment, the lives of women in purdah, and the frustrations of everyday life in a

male-dominated Islamic environment. Translated from the Arabic by Denys Johnson-Davies, the collection admits the reader into a hidden private world, regulated by the call of the mosque, but often full of profound anguish and personal isolation. Badriyya’s despairing anger at her deceitful husband, for example, or the haunting melancholy of “At the Time of the Jasmine,” are treated with a sensitivity to the discipline and order of Islam.

**The Red-haired Khumalo** Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Yemen, 1935. Jama is a "market boy," a half-feral child scavenging with his friends in the dusty streets of a great seaport. For Jama, life is a thrilling carnival, at least when he can fill his belly. When his mother—alternately

raging and loving—dies young, she leaves him only an amulet stuffed with one hundred rupees. Jama decides to spend her life's meager savings on a search for his never-seen father; the rumors that travel along clan lines report that he is a driver for the British somewhere in the north. So begins Jama's extraordinary journey of more than a thousand miles north all the way to Egypt, by camel, by truck, by train, but mostly on foot. He slings himself from one perilous city to another, fiercely enjoying life on the road and relying on his vast clan network to shelter him and point the way to his father, who always seems just a day or two out of reach. In his travels, Jama will witness scenes of great humanity and brutality; he will be caught up in the

indifferent, grinding machine of war; he will crisscross the Red Sea in search of working papers and a ship. Bursting with life and a rough joyfulness, *Black Mamba Boy* is debut novelist Nadifa Mohamed's vibrant, moving celebration of her family's own history.

**The Madonna of Excelsior** Fairleigh Dickinson Univ Press

Drawn in hazy gray pencil and printed in blue pantone ink, this book is about Elizabeth, an exotic dancer in cyberspace, and Carlos, who was just fired from the last human-staffed oil rig, attempting to keep their romance alive. When they realize that their bodies are full of artificial organs and they live almost entirely online, they begin to question what being human actually means. Do our ancestral, or even animal,

instincts eventually kick in, or are we transcending the limits of our bodies? When an unplanned pregnancy is caused by an AI hack, Elizabeth must decide if the child is the next step in evolution — or a glitch that will wipe out humanity once and for all.

Penguin Random House South Africa  
The Lovers collects Head's short fiction of the 1960s and 70s, written mainly in Serowe, Botswana, and depicting the lives and loves of African village people pre- and post-independence. An earlier selection called Tales of Tenderness and Power was published in the Heinemann African Writers Series in 1990, but this expanded and updated volume adds many previously unavailable stories collected here for the first time.  
Anthology favourites like her

breakthrough 'The Woman from America' and 'The Prisoner who Wore Glasses' are included, leading up to the first complete text of her much translated title story. Stephen Gray is a noted South African scholar and novelist.  
Crown

The South African novel of identity that "deserves a wide audience on a par with Nadine Gordimer."

Desdemona Third Press  
Review of Books  
"Margaret Cadmore, an orphaned Masarwa girl, goes to teach in the remote village of Dilepe in Botswana, where her own people are kept as slaves. Her presence polarizes a community which does not see Masarwa people as human, and condemns her to the lonely life of an outcast"--Publisher's description.

*The Lovers* The Feminist Press at CUNY  
A Black writer describes his childhood in South Africa under apartheid and recounts how Arthur Ashe and Stan Smith helped him leave for America on a tennis scholarship

*A Collection of Short Stories* Waveland Press

Chelsea Forster has never thought of herself as a racist. But when her mother decides to get married again, to a black man, she finds herself confronting deep-seated prejudices that she didn't know she had. Chester's son is also a problem: he upsets her ordered world and brings the new South Africa firmly into her living room.

*Making Post-Slavery Subjects* Waveland Press

The Cardinals--thought to be the first

long piece of fiction Head produced and the only one she ever set in South Africa--is an exciting literary event.

*Maru* Ingram

This work provides an insight into the Serowe village community and its history.

*A Woman Alone* Fantagraphics Books  
Maru Waveland Press

*A Bit of Difference* University of Virginia Press

Read worldwide for her wisdom, authenticity, and skillful prose, South African-born Bessie Head (1937-1986) offers a moving and magical tale of an orphaned girl, Margaret Cadmore, who goes to teach in a remote village in Botswana where her own people are kept as slaves. Her presence polarizes a community that does not see her people

as human, and condemns her to the lonely life of an outcast. In the love story and intrigue that follows, Head brilliantly combines a portrait of loneliness with a rich affirmation of the mystery and spirituality of life. The core of this

otherworldly, rhapsodic work is a plot about racial injustice and prejudice with a lesson in how traditional intolerance may render whole sections of a society untouchable.