Functional Role of Traditional African Folklore in Modern African Literature: A Study of Bessie Head's Life

Funmilola Kemi Megbowon[1]* , Kamva Poswa[2]

[1,2]*Department of Arts, Walter Sisulu University, Eastern Cape Province SOUTH AFRICA*; Email: kamvaposwa2@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: kemimeg@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Traditional African folklore has long served as a foundational mechanism for cultural transmission, moral education, and social cohesion within African communities. In the context of modern African literature, folklore functions not only as a nostalgic element, but also has been recontextualised to reflect contemporary realities. Thus, the objectives of this study are to identify the lessons conveyed in Bessie Head's Life and assess the relevance of these lessons to contemporary African society. The study employs a qualitative and interpretative literary analysis of Head's Life, using close reading techniques and thematic coding through the lens of postcolonial literary. From the analysis conducted, some of the lessons conveyed through the text include the value of communal wisdom, consequences of personal behaviour, virtue of modesty and dignity, and the risk of autonomy without accountability. Furthermore, the identified lessons maintain significant relevance in the contemporary African society as they continue to engage with core themes of identity, promote desirable behaviour, dignity of labour and social harmony. These lessons, carried forward through literature, serve to preserve cultural heritage and to mediate evolving values in a rapidly changing society. This study concludes that folklore-based narratives remain vital in shaping moral consciousness and maintaining cultural continuity within modern African contexts. It is recommended that African literature rooted in folklore be actively promoted across educational, media, and community platforms to strengthen ethical reflection and development, as well as strengthen cultural awareness and collective cultural identity especially among younger generations.

Keywords: African literature, Cultural heritage, Folklore, Moral Education, Ethical Development, Cultural Identity

INTRODUCTION

Oral tradition, also referred to as folklore include proverbs, songs, praise poetry, and oral histories holds profound cultural significance in Africa. This tradition has long served as a foundational mechanism for cultural transmission, moral education, and social cohesion within African communities (Akinyemi & Falola, 2021; Finnegan, 2012). These traditions have endured for centuries, withstanding the disruptive and often degrading effects of colonialism due to their capacity to educate, entertain, and engage with critical issues (Shukla, 2025). Paschal-Mbakwe & Okoronkwo (2024) emphasize that oral has historically been the primary medium of communication, expressed through spoken word, music, dance, and performance. Storytelling remains one of the most enduring and widespread traditions in African society, from the earliest times to the present, every society and culture has crafted stories that have been passed down through generations (Osei-Tutu, 2023).

In African society, folklore affirms collective identity, transmits traditional knowledge, strengthen social bonds, and offers wisdom for navigating life complexities (Paschal-Mbakwe & Okoronkwo, 2024). Sone (2018) echoes this perspective, asserting that the value of folklore extends beyond entertainment; it functions as a didactic tool.

Within modern African literature, folklore is not merely a nostalgic device, it has been re-contextualized to reflect contemporary realities. As Megbowon & Uwah (2020) observe, present-day African societies face numerous social challenges that threaten the social order, including changes in institutions, behaviour, relationships, and ideologies. This underlines the need to reinforce African moral values through every possible way including through literary studies., particularly folklore, by threating literature not as a static object or an obscure practice, but rather as a dynamic tool for ensuing that the rich moral frameworks embedded in African cultures remain relevant and adaptable in contemporary society.

The advent of formal education in Africa significantly transformed the literary landscape by introducing written literature as a secondary mode of expression (Megbowon & Uwah, 2021). They further argue that a defining characteristic of African literature is its commitment to engaging with and reflecting African society, philosophy, and lives experience, regardless of the language employed. Contemporary African folktales are now creatively adapted to reflect and convey new meanings, values, and ideas shaped by current social dynamics and lived realities. Sone (2018) contends that the storyteller operates within a culturally homogenous environment, and their worldview is shaped by the immediate cultural setting they share with their community. Guha (2016) highlights how modern African literature synthesizes elements of African folklore with European performance codes. Indeed, many modern African writers incorporate folkloric devices into written literature to address the issues of their time. For example, Chinua Achebe's A Man of the People (1966) and Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born (1988) critique government corruption, while Armah's Fragment (1970) explores the impact of Western norms on African identity. Similarly, Soyinka's play The Strong Breed (1963) employs folk elements to portray and preserve the ethnic world of the Yoruba people.

In the context of Southern Africa, one of the most prominent modern writers is Bessie Head, whose works explore issues of identity, exile, and belonging in both fiction and non-fiction. Head's writing illustrates that individual experiences are deeply embedded in historical contexts, making personal narratives a critical reflection of societal norms and power structure (Gagiano, 1999). Born to biracial parents in 20th century South Africa, Head's work evinces her experiences of rejection from her family and society, primarily due to her mixed-race heritage. For instance, Gagiano (1999) observes that Head's exploration of her mixed-race identity in A Question of power (1974) challenges simplistic notions of race and belonging, emphasizing the need for acceptance and understanding within diverse communities. Beard (1991) further notes that Head often adopts Zulu and San folklore as a deliberate aesthetic choice, embedding her narratives within the cultural and symbolic frameworks of African oral traditions. Given her stature in the literary field of Southern Africa, this study seeks to explore the lessons conveyed in her short story Life, as shaped by its folkloric functions, and to assess their practical relevance to contemporary African society. This study explores Bessie Head's Life to present it as a dynamic lens for critiquing, instructing, reimaging modern African realities and promoting desirable social change.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Folklore is a culturally rooted system that embodies aesthetic, social, and cognitive functions within African societies and beyond. Folklore encompasses oral traditions, myths, rituals, and artistic expressions. Scheub (1985) asserts that folklore distils complex human experiences into memorable images that can be recontextualized and reshaped, thus continuously revitalising cultural memory. Masilela and Jordan (2007) assert that traditional stories often reinforce societal norms and values passed down, thus shaping social behaviour. These stories can transfer knowledge, values, and history beyond simple entertainment (Moonga, 2022; Sone, 2018). Kato Bukenya (2025) asserts that folklore is not merely a record of cultural memory but a living dialogue between tradition and innovation in forming group identity and collective values. Folklore is a thread that reinforces societal norms and allows societies to reflect on their own beliefs and values (Paschal-Mbakwe & Okoronkwo, 2024). Folklore is integral to societies' cultural logic and cognitive map and enables members to interpret experiences and express their worldview through narrative and stylistic features (Bastet & Houlbrook, 2023; Ben-Amos, 1975).

Scholars have pointed out that literature in pre-colonial Africa was mainly oral, and African literature remains firmly rooted in folklore (Megbowon & Uwah, 2020; Sone, 2018; Gérard, 1970). In extending this argument, Scheub (1970) writes about how artists use folkloric devices as a structural and performative device in narrative traditions, particularly expansible images within Xhosa ntsomi performances. Scheub (1970) posits that these images can expand and elaborate, and serve as crucial elements for conveying action, character, and themes to develop emotional depth without relying solely on descriptive or interpolative techniques. Okpewho (2003) adds that including personal and imaginative elements by storytellers is a fundamental aspect of oral storytelling, which enhances the performance and reinforces cultural values, rather than signifying deception. Okpewho (2003) asserts that oral storytelling is a culturally embedded performative act that prioritizes artistic, social, and symbolic truths over literal facticity, challenging simplistic notions of lying in oral tradition. In a similar view, Barber (2005) submits that folklore is often composed to be detachable from immediate contexts, which enables its interpretation and reinterpretation. Sackey (1991) points out that folklore serves to transmit moral lessons, social norms, and

communal history across generations, often through storytelling, proverbs, and mythic narratives. In this regard, Finnegan (1970) asserts that folklore reflects present concerns and values and thus provides critical insight into a society's culture and historical attitudes.

Kato (2025) asserts that traditional narratives are adapted and preserved in modern contexts. According to Sone (2018), contemporary African folktales are refined to inject new meanings, ideas, and values, based on society's contemporary experiences and relations. African folklore is not merely a predecessor to written literature but an enduring force that continues to influence and shape African cultural expressions across generations. African folklore has evolved, linking oral performances to written works (Scheub, 1985). African oral art forms have maintained a continuous and vital connection to literary developments such as the novel and poetry. These oral forms have provided narrative structures, themes, and stylistic techniques that continue to shape literary expression. Despite external influences, particularly from the West, African oral traditions have preserved a unique cultural identity, demonstrating resilience and adaptability through their integration into modern literary forms. (Megbowon and Uwah, 2020).

In one study, for instance, Mervis (1998) asserts that Zakes Mda's Ways of Dying (1995) incorporates folklore by blending traditional myths, oral traditions, and indigenous beliefs with contemporary social realities. Mda draws on African myths, particularly supernatural spirits and ancestor veneration, which creates a narrative that resonates with communal myths and cultural values. This use of folklore allows Mda to confront socio-political issues while emphasizing the importance of tradition and collective memory in shaping identity and understanding societal change (ibid). In congruence, Bawa et al. (2023) and Ferris (1973 unpack the use of folklore by Nigerian novelists, Chinua Achebe in Things Fall Apart (1985) and Amos Tutuola in his novels, The Palm-Wine Drinkard (1952) and My Life in the Bush of Ghosts (1954), respectively. Likewise, these novelists incorporate folklore into their works by embedding traditional oral stories, proverbs, and figures into their narratives, often using them as a means of communication and cultural expression. Ferris (1973) asserts that in these novels, folklore is rooted in conversation between characters, where it is employed as verbal shorthand, which helps convey cultural values, social norms, and personality traits effectively within dialogue. In a similar critique, Paschal-Mbakwe and Okoronkwo (2024) utilise textual analysis of Ikechukwu Asika's dramatic text Omalinze (2024), thereby arguing that folklore promotes a deeper engagement with Igbo culture and its enduring moral lessons. Guha (2016) explores how Soyinka's play The Strong Breed (1963) draws on western and Nigerian traditions as it synthesises Yoruba folklore and European performance codes. Soyinka, in his play, refashions the traditional Yoruba culture in a way that combines old myths with new forms, imparting its contemporary relevance. His frequent resort to the Ogun myth enacts the ontological radiance of Yoruba cultural sensibilities (Guha, 2016).

It is observed that the works of Bassie Head, one of the modern literary Southern African writers who uses folklore, remains underexplored despite her prolific contribution to African literature. Osei Nyame Jnr (2002) postulates that Head engages with the existential anxieties entrenched in the notions of self and the individual vis-à-vis the politics of communal ideology and nationalism. Head's journey and how her own life and psyche mirror the larger fight for self-identity and freedom amid masculine dominance. This is consistent with Clayton's (1988) view that Head actively engages with the critique of colonial and apartheid histories as they offer a moral and human judgement rooted in her African perspective. Likewise, Atkinson (2011) submits that Bessie Head's literary texts serve as a means for her to transform her traumatic lived experiences of exile, racial classification, and social marginalisation, as well as struggles with her mental health, into a form of empowerment and survival. Atkinson (2011) posits that Head's When Rain Clouds Gather (1968) provides her with purpose and a way to assert her identity beyond the oppressive labels imposed upon her. Cappelli (2017) asserts that Head's A Question of Power (1974) portrays how South Africa's history of apartheid is engraved into female experiences. Cappelli (2017) unpacks how madness in women as depicted in Head reflects deeper narratives about race, gender, and power struggles during complex political changes. Similarly, in a critical analysis of Bassie Head's texts Maru (1971), A Question of Power (1974), and The Cardinals (1993), Pucherova (2011) posits that Head challenges rigid racial and gender binaries, thus dismantling essentialist notions of identity.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study utilises a qualitative research approach to unpack the role of traditional African folklore in reflecting contemporary realities through a textual analysis of Bassie Head's Life. Mwita (2023) posits that qualitative research aims to understand and interpret social phenomena, behaviours, and experiences through in-depth, non-numerical data collection. Bahari (2010) describes qualitative research as an intensive method, as it enables the researcher to examine the perspectives and experiences of participants closely. Offering another explanation, Kamal (2023)

asserts that qualitative research is an approach used to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to social or human problems. In this study's context, a qualitative approach is suitable for identifying and critically exploring the lessons conveyed through folkloric devices in Bassie Head's Life.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

Mwita (2023) asserts that qualitative descriptions, interview transcripts, observations, and textual materials provide an in-depth understanding of phenomena, behaviours, or social processes. The primary data for this study is Life by Bessie Head. Key quotes were identified and purposefully selected through textual analysis to support thematic interpretation. Furthermore, instances where folklore-based narratives were utilised to shape moral consciousness and cultural continuity within modern African contexts were identified and critically interpreted. With this said, interpretive textual analysis is selected in this study as it provides a suitable framework for analysing the sociocultural impact of folklore in contemporary contexts (McKee, 2005). The analysis followed a systematic, two-step approach: first, identification and categorization, where relevant passages in the text were categorized based on folklore elements. These categories aligned with this study's research objectives to identify the lessons conveyed through folkloric devices. Second is textual and interpretative analysis, where each identified passage was analysed through postcolonial theory. The postcolonial theory plays a pivotal role in unpacking these lessons' relevance to contemporary African society.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws from the postcolonial theory to explore the place of traditional folklore in modern African society. Postcolonial theory is a theoretical framework that critically examines the enduring impacts of colonialism on cultures, societies, and knowledge systems, going beyond the scope of political and economic domination to interrogate issues around identity and representation as affirmed by Arora (2020), who postulates that colonialism deeply rooted changes in cultural identities, language, and self-perceptions. The postcolonial theory thus seeks to deconstruct these influences, challenge imperial narratives, and highlight the agency of formerly colonized societies in asserting their identities and voices (Rask Knudsen & Rahbek, 2022; Kumar, 2009). Bhati (2023) posits that postcolonial theory provides a theoretical basis to unpack the impact of the exploitation and subjugation of colonial subjects and how the persistent impact of colonialism forever moulds their identity. Through concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence, this theory emphasises how colonial discourse is diluted in former colonies (Easthope, 1998). The theory emphasises that contemporary identities are formed through the mixing and intersection of the identities of colonisers and colonised. Through hybridity, Postcolonial theory disrupts fixed representations of colonized identity by embracing ambiguity and partiality, thereby enabling ongoing transformation and resistance to essentialist narratives (Drichel, 2008; Bhandari, 2022). Withholding the hybridity of contemporary identities as identified by the theory, the colonizers' culture tends to be more valorised compared to the culture of the natives. In congruence with this view, Köseoğlu (2017) asserts that the colonized people's mimicking the colonizer is a sign of rejecting their own identities and cultural values to accept the views of the postcolonial West, and consequently, they felt inappropriate due to their otherness and hybridity. This theory forms a basis to unpack the relevance of traditional African folklore in contemporary African societies as it interrogates how power and identity are shaped by the legacy of colonial domination and how these factors continue to affect formerly colonized societies.

WHAT LESSONS ARE CONVEYED IN LIFE? WHAT LESSONS ARE CONVEYED THROUGH FOLKLORIC DEVICES IN LIFE?

The Danger of Cultural Dislocation

One of the central lessons conveyed in Life is the peril of cultural dislocation. Head portrays the rupture between the individual and their communal and moral roots. Life returns to her home village from Johannesburg as an outsider, shaped by urban values of individualism, materialist ideology, and personal autonomy. Her flamboyant attire, love of money, and disregard for traditional values of honesty, modesty and hardwork place her in direct opposition to the village's conservative norms. "She swept into the village like a bright, dazzling bird from another world" (Head, 2013:137) captures the initial shock of her return. The villagers quickly perceive that "she had been living differently, in another kind of life" (p. 137), and her home is soon condemned as being "like Sodom and Gomorrah" (p. 138). This alienation reflects a folkloric warning those who stray too far from tradition risk psychological fragmentation and social exclusion (Okpewho, 1992). Her inability to adapt is emphasised when "she began to find the days long and dull, nothing like the city where something was always happening" (p. 137), depicting a failure to harmonise with rural rhythms. Head shows Life disregard to cultural values which makes

women in the village to shun her complete: "What caused a stir of amazement was that Life was the first and the only woman in the village to make a business out of selling herself. The men were paying her for her services" (Head: 2013:138). Head portrays folktale motif where characters who abandon communal wisdom suffer tragic ends. Head uses this tension to critique the costs of unmediated cultural hybridity. In contemporary African contexts, this mirrors the struggles of return migrants, often perceived as morally compromised or alien to their home communities (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2015). The lesson is clear: detachment from cultural grounding undermines both personal stability and communal cohesion.

The Unsustainability of Hedonism and Excess

This is another lesson that can be drawn from Life by Head. Life's lifestyle rooted in material excess, sexual freedom, and constant stimulation mirrors the archetypal "trickster-turned-tragic" figure in African folklore (Akinyemi & Falola, 2021; Otiono & Akọma, 2021). Life's philosophies on life: "My motto is: live fast, die young, and have a good-looking corpse." All this she says with the bold, free joy of a woman who had broken all the social taboos" (Head: 2013:140). This captures her reckless ethos of unsustainable pleasure-seeking. She spends recklessly, this is seen from her response when one woman asks her about her wealth "'How is it you have so much money, our child?' one of the women at last asked, curiously. 'Money flows like water in Johannesburg,' Life replied, with her gay and hysterical laugh. 'You just have to know how to get it'" (Head, 2013: 138). Initially, the community watches her with fascination and even indulgence, but after a while the glitter wore off and people began to talk, marking the narrative's turning point from admiration to moral judgment: "Thrift and honesty were the dominant themes of village life; they counted every penny and knew how they had acquired it, with hard work. They never imagined money as a bottomless pit without end" (p. 139). Her spending habits is as though money would never end and the emotional undercurrent of a strange, restless sadness reveals the emptiness behind the spectacle. In traditional African narratives, such characters are often exposed as morally hollow and ultimately destroyed by their own desires. Head uses Life to critique the fragility of an identity built on consumption, attention, and performance, highlighting the oral tradition's emphasis on moderation, self-discipline, and inner stability as essential virtues for a meaningful life. This lesson resonates strongly in contemporary African contexts, where consumerist pressures, Westernized success ideals, and social media visibility often drive self-worth and identity performance particularly among the youth (Butler, 2024). The story thus functions as a cautionary tale, warning against the spiritual and emotional void that frequently underlies material excess.

The Limits of Performative Identity

Another key lesson in Life is the fragility of identity built solely on external validation. Life's beauty, confidence, and wealth though admired at surface-level and unmoored from deeper emotional or moral grounding. "People admired her clothes, her figure, and the way she walked into a room" (Head, 2013:141) and "she liked to be looked at, admired, envied" (140) underlines how her value is constructed almost entirely through the gaze of others. Her life is performative "her life was a stage, and she was always acting" (p. 139) and when that audience disappears, "when the eyes turned away, she seemed to shrink into herself" (p.142). This dependence on external affirmation mirrors the folkloric warning against false or superficial identities those not rooted in character, humility, or community. In many oral tales, prideful or deceptive figures eventually expose their inner emptiness and are undone by it (Balint, 2021; Irele, 2021). In the village, "her ways puzzled and unsettled people" (p.139), marking the cultural test that ultimately exposes her fragility. Her downfall, once removed from the constant affirmation of city life, reveals that identity unmoored from communal belonging is inherently unstable. This aligns with African oral traditions that uphold internal integrity, humility, and self-knowledge over status or appearance. In contemporary contexts where image-driven cultures and social media encourage performance over authenticity Head's critique highlights how such identities often collapse under sustained moral or cultural scrutiny.

The Role of Community in Moral Policing

Life conveys a lesson about the role of community as moral arbiter and the mechanisms of moral policing in both traditional and contemporary African societies. The village does not merely observe Life's behaviour, it actively constructs her as a symbol of moral decay, interpreting, judging, and condemning her. "The people began to talk about her in every household" (p. 142) and "they said her house will be destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah" (p. 139). This captures how her life becomes the subject of constant moral scrutiny. This dynamic mirrors the choral voice in oral tradition, where collective wisdom affirms societal values and defines the

boundaries of acceptable conduct. In this way, the villagers' voice operates as both narrator and judge, reinforcing a communal identity rooted in shared ethics and highlighting the public, rather than private, nature of morality in many African contexts. However, the story also dramatizes the power and peril of communal morality. While shared moral cohesion helps maintain order, it can quickly silence difference and suppress individuality. "It was agreed that she was a bad influence" (p. 139) and "the women said she was setting a bad example" (p. 141) illustrate how consensus can solidify into exclusionary judgment. Such moral policing reflects the folkloric function of the community as an agent of boundary enforcement through gossip, storytelling, and public condemnation but, as Oyewumi (1997) noted, community cohesion is often preserved at the expense of tolerance and personal complexity. Life's eventual death underline the dangers of moral absolutism when wielded without empathy. "Her name was spoken in whispers, as though it was a curse" (p. 143) and "no one would speak to her anymore" (p. 143) signal her complete social isolation, showing how communal morality can dehumanize and ostracise. The lesson is twofold: while collective moral frameworks are essential for stability, unchecked moral policing can reproduce injustice, stifle moral growth, and turn moral cohesion into a tool of exclusionary control. Head's narrative thus challenges the community to critically reflect on the ethics of collective judgment and the social costs of enforcing conformity without compassion.

The Tragic Consequences of Emotional and Moral Disconnection

Perhaps the most haunting lesson in Life is that emotional disconnection leads to moral and existential collapse. Life's inability to connect meaningfully with others in the village, and her growing sense of suffocating boredom and alienation after marriage, reflects a deeper truth common in African oral traditions: "No one noticed the expression of anguish that had crept into Life's face. The boredom of the daily round was almost throttling her to death" (Head, 2013:143). In the community, fulfilment is rooted in belonging, purpose, and reciprocity (Törrönen et al., 2023). "She felt that she did not belong to anyone or anything" (p. 144) this depicts her detachment, showing how her urban identity offers no bridge to meaningful integration into village life. In many oral tales, characters who fail to engage in communal life often become spiritually or physically lost. Life's inability to find solace in marriage or companionship "Her marriage brought no comfort or joy" (p. 143), mirrors Head's folkloric motif, where disconnection from moral and emotional roots precipitates psychological decline. Her final descent is marked by "a terrible emptiness that nothing could fill" (p. 143), symbolizing personal despair and the final rupture between the individual and the community. This reflects a modern existential dilemma: how do individuals survive in moral landscapes that no longer accommodate their values or identities? Life's inner disintegration parallels the experiences of many African women navigating conflicting cultural scripts, where neither progressive nor traditional worlds offer full acceptance (Brown, 2022; Patel, 2021).

Moreover, the lesson here is that emotional disconnection is not merely a private psychological matter but a social and structural issue, shaped by the community's willingness or failure to foster inclusion, empathy, and moral coherence. Head's narrative warns that without emotional rootedness and moral integration, individuals face not only isolation but also the erosion of dignity. In this way, the story urges African societies to address both the emotional and moral needs of their members as essential to sustaining a meaningful life.

How Can the Lessons from Life Be Applied to Contemporary African Society?

Bessie Head's Life reimagines the functions of folklore within a modern narrative, using allegory, moral judgment, and symbolic characterisation to critique social realities in postcolonial African society. While Head does not reproduce folklore literally, she channels its didactic and regulatory functions, moral instruction, social cohesion, and identity shaping into a contemporary setting. The tragedy of Life, the protagonist, becomes not only an individual downfall but also a reflective critique of social rigidities: the alienation of returning migrants, the rigidity of communal morality, and the absence of psychological support. These insights, though transmitted through a folkloric structure, offer practical lessons that can and should be translated into policy frameworks, social services, education systems, and grassroots activism across the African continent.

Bridging Cultural Hybridity and Reintegration

Life's failure to navigate urban modernity and rural tradition highlights the challenge of cultural hybridity in contemporary Africa. "She swept into the village like a bright, dazzling bird from another world" (p. 137) captures the conflict between her urban identity and village expectations, while "She could not find a way to fit into their ways" (p. 138) underlines her inability to adapt. This dramatizes the risks of cultural dislocation, where individuals shaped by one world struggle to reintegrate into another. In the contemporary, return migration from cities or the diaspora often produces similar alienation, leaving people unmoored from both the modern environments they leave and the traditional communities they re-enter (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2015). The lesson warns against societies that refuse to accommodate evolving identities. Community-based reintegration frameworks are essential.

Local governments and NGOs can establish dialogue circles and cultural mediation programs where returnees share their experiences and communities negotiate the integration of new values. Platforms modelled on indaba systems should be inclusive and intergenerational, pairing urban youth with traditional elders to promote mutual understanding rather than antagonism (Manyeli & Thabane, 2023). Such dialogue ensures cultural hybridity is mediated constructively, reducing the risk of fragmentation and supporting nation-building through diverse yet interconnected identities.

Restructuring Moral Surveillance into Inclusive Community Dialogue

The story critiques the exclusionary nature of communal morality, where conformity is enforced through gossip, labelling, and eventual isolation. Life is not simply observed, she is actively constructed as a symbol of moral decay. "The people began to talk about her in every household" (p. 142) highlights gossip as a mechanism of surveillance, while "They said her house was like Sodom and Gomorrah" (p. 138) shows how her lifestyle is framed as a collective threat. The culmination "No one wants to speak to her anymore" (p. 143) signals the exclusionary endpoint of such judgment, where social cohesion is preserved at the expense of individuality. This dynamic mirrors real-life practices in African societies, where differences, especially regarding gender, sexuality, or lifestyle is often suppressed through communal scrutiny (Oyewumi, 1997). While such systems maintain order, they can also silence diversity and perpetuate injustice. Rather than dismantling communal moral systems, which serve vital social functions, they should be restructured into inclusive, empathetic forums. Community dialogue platforms modelled on traditional indaba assemblies can be adapted to acknowledge and negotiate differences rather than punish it. Facilitated by trained mediators, such forums would foster respectful disagreement, cultivate pluralism, and shift communal morality from exclusionary control toward constructive engagement (Kornioti & Antoniou, 2021).

The Unsustainability of Hedonism and Excess and The Limits of Performative Identity

In Life, Bessie Head critiques both the lure of hedonism and the fragility of performative identity, showing how excess and surface-level validation leads to collapse. Life embodies the archetypal "trickster-turned-tragic" figure from African folklore (Akinyemi & Falola, 2021). "She spent her days visiting and entertaining, dressed in the latest styles" (p. 139) illustrates her immersion in conspicuous consumption, while her motto "live fast, die young" (p. 140) epitomizes her reckless pursuit of pleasure. The community's shifting perception "After a while the glitter wore off and people began to talk" (p. 142) reveals the inevitable hollowness of a lifestyle rooted in material excess and fleeting spectacle. Her collapse highlights the folkloric warning that gratification without moderation leads to ruin, a lesson that resonates in contemporary Africa where consumerism and digital culture often promote success as image rather than substance (Poster, 2021).

Equally, Life's identity is fragile because it is constructed on performance and external validation rather than internal depth or communal grounding. "People admired her clothes, her figure, and the way she walked into a room" (p. 137) shows how her worth is measured through the gaze of others. Yet "Her life was a stage, and she was always acting" (p. 138) underlines the performative nature of her existence, and "When the eyes turned away, she seemed to shrink into herself" (p. 143) exposes the emptiness beneath her carefully curated persona. This dynamic reflects the folkloric archetype of prideful figures undone by superficiality (Butler, 2024; Irele, 2021). In contemporary contexts, it mirrors the pressures on African youth to project idealized identities on social media, often at the cost of emotional well-being and authenticity. These lessons call for interventions that prioritize authenticity, resilience, and inner substance over spectacle. Policies and community initiatives should invest in mentorship programs that cultivate emotional intelligence and purpose-driven identity formation. Schools should integrate life-skills curricula focused on self-reflection, balance, and mental wellness (Patel, 2021). Governments and NGOs can expand access to culturally sensitive psychological support, while public discourse should actively celebrate service, humility, and substance rather than visibility and wealth. Community platforms, both online and offline, must affirm authenticity over image, providing counter-narratives to consumerist and performative pressures. In this way, Head's moral vision offers a transformative framework for addressing the crises of value and identity in modern African societies.

Recognising and Addressing Mental Health in Context

Life's psychological unravelling underlines the dangers of neglecting emotional and mental well-being in contexts where such struggles are stigmatized or ignored. Her inner collapse is marked by alienation, disconnection, and despair: "She felt that she did not belong to anyone or anything" (p. 143) captures her sense of isolation; "Her marriage brought no comfort or joy" she remarks to the women: "'I think I have made a mistake. Married life doesn't suit me'" (p. 143) illustrates the absence of emotional support and signals the depth of her psychological decline. These moments highlight societal failure to respond to inner suffering with compassion or intervention,

leaving Life vulnerable to despair and destruction. This narrative reflects a pressing crisis in contemporary Africa, where mental health services remain underfunded, under-resourced, and culturally misaligned (Patel, 2021). Just as Life's suffering is met with silence and ostracism, many today endure emotional distress without adequate support, constrained by stigma and limited access to care. The lesson demands investment in culturally competent mental health care, particularly at the community level. This includes training community health workers and faith leaders to recognize signs of emotional distress and refer individuals for support. At the same time, societies can draw on culturally grounded practices such as storytelling therapy, collective healing rituals, and peer support networks to provide accessible, locally resonant forms of care (Atilola et al., 2021). Schools and youth programs should integrate mental health education to normalize seeking help, reduce stigma, and foster resilience in younger generations. By combining modern interventions with culturally embedded practices, African societies can begin to address the deep emotional needs portrayed in Life and prevent the kind of existential collapse experienced by the protagonist.

Head uses moral structure of folklore in Life to illuminate the social, psychological, and gendered tensions of African society. These lessons, rooted in cautionary storytelling are not relics of a bygone oral tradition but blueprints for social transformation. If applied practically, they urge contemporary African societies to develop inclusive reintegration processes, restructure moral surveillance, and recognize emotional well-being as public health. In doing so, the folkloric insights in Life are not confined to literature; they become guiding principles for building empathetic, resilient, and equitable communities.

CONCLUSION

Bessie Head's Life demonstrates how folklore, when reimagined in modern literature, transcends its function as a repository of ancestral wisdom to become a tool for critiquing and reconstructing contemporary African realities. The story embodies the enduring relevance of oral tradition's moral, didactic, and regulatory functions, even within the framework of modernity. Head uses symbolic characterisation and incorporates themes that are deeply rooted in the folkloric tradition, Head positions Life as a parable that conveys cautionary lessons, highlighting the social consequences of neglecting values such as humility, communal accountability, human dignity, moderation, empathy, and belonging. Head does not present folklore as a static inheritance but reshapes it into a dynamic lens for interrogating the contradictions of postcolonial Africa. Her narrative offers a reflective mirror for addressing the tensions between tradition and modernity, community and individuality, freedom and conformity. The analysis of Life reveals several key lessons that resonate with the challenges of contemporary African societies. The story depicts the perils of cultural dislocation, it critiques the exclusionary force of communal morality, warning that while collective moral systems are vital for cohesion, they can become destructive when mobilised as tools of exclusion and silencing, it portrays the unsustainability of hedonism and performative identity, cautioning against the emptiness of lives built solely on wealth, visibility, and external validation. The story also highlights the tragic consequences of emotional and moral disconnection, as Life's collapse illustrates the psychological toll of alienation, and the absence of compassionate support systems issues that parallel Africa's urgent mental health crisis. Moreover, these insights reveal that folklore, as adapted by Head, is not nostalgic repetition but an incisive framework for diagnosing Africa's ongoing struggles with identity, gender, morality, and emotional well-being.

The moral economy of Life demands translation into practical action: policies, programs, and cultural interventions that draw from folklore's wisdom while addressing the needs of contemporary society. In practical terms, the lessons of Life point toward several pathways for transformation. Thus, addressing the challenge of cultural hybridity requires societies to construct frameworks of reintegration that do not view migrants as moral threats but as cultural bridges. Dialogue forums inspired by traditional indaba systems can serve as spaces where elders and urban youth negotiate their identities and values in ways that are mutually respectful rather than antagonistic. Such reintegration not only reduces the risk of alienation but also strengthens the nation-building by affirming diversity as a source of cohesion rather than conflict.

The story also compels African societies to reflect on the dual-edged power of communal morality. While gossip and communal surveillance preserve social cohesion, they can also silence individuality and perpetuate injustice. Rather than dismantling these systems, they should be transformed into inclusive platforms of dialogue, facilitated by mediators trained to foster empathy and tolerance. Furthermore, Head's critique of hedonism and performative identity resonates with the experiences of African youth negotiating consumerist and digital cultures. Life's downfall illustrates the fragility of identities rooted solely in spectacle and external validation. To counter this, societies must invest in mentorship programs, school-based curricula, and community initiatives that nurture authenticity, resilience, and purpose-driven identity formation. Public discourse, too, must shift toward celebrating humility, service, and substance over wealth and visibility. The most urgent lesson from Life lies in its portrayal of psychological unravelling and alienation. The absence of emotional and psychological support in Life's world reflects the neglect of mental health across Africa. Tackling this crisis requires investment in culturally sensitive mental health services, particularly at community levels. Training faith leaders, teachers, and health workers to

identify and respond to distress, alongside integrating collective healing rituals and peer-support systems, can bridge the gap between modern psychology and traditional healing practices. Schools and youth programs should normalise conversations around mental health, reducing stigma and opening pathways for early intervention.

This study has shown that Bessie Head's Life transforms folklore into a lens for critical social reflection and reform. It warns against cultural rigidity, moral absolutism, superficial identity, and neglect of emotional well-being. More importantly, it offers practical lessons that can be applied across contemporary Africa: building reintegration frameworks for migrants, transforming communal morality into inclusive dialogue, reshaping youth identity formation, and investing in mental health. Head's narrative is, therefore, not a nostalgic reproduction of folklore but a clarion call for using its wisdom as a guide to reimagine African societies into a more inclusive, empathetic, and resilient in the face of modern challenges.

REFERENCES

Achebe, C. (1966). A Man of the People. Penguin UK.

Akinyemi, A., & Falola, T. (Eds.). (2021). The Palgrave handbook of African oral traditions and folklore. Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-55517-7

Akinyemi, A., & Falola, T. (Eds.). (2021). The Palgrave handbook of African oral traditions and folklore. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Armah, A. K. (1970). Fragments. London: Heinemann.

Armah, A. K. (1988). The Beautyful Ones are not yet Born. London: Heinemann.

Arora, S. K. (2020). Postcolonialism: Theory, Issues and Applications. Presentations of Postcolonialism in English New Orientations, 47-62.

Atilola, O., Stevanovic, D., Moreira, P., Dodig-Ćurković, K., Franic, T., Djoric, A., ... & Knez, R. (2021). External locus-of-control partially mediates the association between cumulative trauma exposure and posttraumatic stress symptoms among adolescents from diverse background. Anxiety, Stress, & Coping, 34(6), 626-644. https://doi.org/10.1080/10615806.2021.1891224

Atkinson, S. (2011). A Living Life, A Living Death: Bessie Head's Writing as a Survival Strategy. Journal of Medical Humanities, 32(4), 269-278.

Bahari, S. F. (2010). Qualitative versus quantitative research strategies: contrasting epistemological and ontological assumptions. Sains Humanika, 52(1). https://doi.org/10.11113/sh.v52n1.256.

Balint, P. (2021). Dialogues of judgement and dream interpretation in folk tales: Royal advisers and dream interpreters. Boletín de Literatura Oral, (11), 117-145. https://doi.org/11.17561/blo.v11.6041

Barber, K. (2005). Text and performance in Africa. Oral tradition, 20(2), 264-277.

Bastet, T., & Houlbrook, C. (2023). Folklore: cultural roadmaps to creating, perpetuating, resolving and evolving peace and conflict. Peace Review, 35(2), 187-194. https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2023.2222667.

Bawa, K., Essobiyou, S. and Likambantién, K., 2023. Folklore and Cultural Identity: a Study in Chinua Achebe'S Things Fall Apart. European Journal of Literature, Language and Linguistics Studies, 7(2). http://dx.doi.org/10.46827/ejlll.v7i2.451.

Beard, L. S. (1991). Bessie Head's Syncretic Fictions: The Reconceptualization of Power and the Recovery of the Ordinary. MFS Modern Fiction Studies, 37(3), 575-589.

Ben-Amos, D. (1975). Folklore in African society. Research in African Literatures, 165-198.

Bhandari, N. B. (2022). Homi K. Bhabha's third space theory and cultural identity today: A critical review. Prithvi Academic Journal, 171-181. https://doi.org/10.3126/paj.v5i1.45049

Bhati, A. (2023). What can postcolonial theory contribute to the study of social equity?. Public administration review, 83 (1), 203-209. https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13523

Brown, S. J. (2022). Refusing compulsory sexuality: A Black asexual lens on our sex-obsessed culture. North Atlantic Books.

Butler, S. (2024). Young people on social media in a globalized world: self-optimization in highly competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life. Frontiers in psychology, 15, 1340605. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1340605

Cappelli, M. L. (2017). Decolonizing female consciousness in Bessie Head's A Question of Power. Journal of the African Literature Association, 11(2), 159-168. https://doi.org/10.1080/21674736.2017.1375655.

Clayton, C. (1988). A world elsewhere: Bessie Head as historian. English in Africa, 15(1), 55-69. https://doi/pdf/10.10520/AJA03768902_258.

Comaroff, J., & Comaroff, J. L. (2015). Theory from the South: Or, how Euro-America is evolving toward Africa. Routledge.

Drichel, S. (2008). The time of hybridity. Philosophy & Social Criticism, 34(6), 587-615. https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453708090330.

Easthope, A. (1998). Bhabha, hybridity and identity. Textual practice, 12(2), 341-348. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502369808582312

Ferris, W. R. (1973). Folklore and the African novelist: Achebe and Tutuola. The Journal of American Folklore, 86(339), 25-36. https://doi.org/10.2307/539266.

Finnegan, R. (1970). A note on oral tradition and historical evidence. History and Theory, 9(2), 195-201. https://doi.org/10.2307/2504126.

Finnegan, R. (1970). A note on oral tradition and historical evidence. History and Theory, 9(2), 195-201. https://doi.org/10.2307/2504126.

Finnegan, R. (2012). Oral literature in Africa (p. 614). Open Book Publishers. https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0025

Gagiano, A. (1999). Memory, power and Bessie Head: A question of power. Journal of Postcolonial Writing, 38(1), 42-57. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449859908589311

Gérard, A. (1970). Preservation of tradition in African creative writing. Research in African Literatures, 35-39.

Guha, S. (2016). Wole Soyinka's redeployment of Yoruba folklore in the Strong Breed. International Journal of World Literatures and Cultures, 2(1), 2423-2454.

Head, B. (1974). A question of power (No. 149). Heinemann.

Irele, F. A. (2021). Isidore Okpewho–an intellectual portrait. In Oral Literary Performance in Africa (pp. 233-235). Routledge.

Kamal, S. S. L. B. A. (2019). Research paradigm and the philosophical foundations of a qualitative study. PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences, 4(3), 1386-1394. https://doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2019.43.13861394.

Kato Bukenya, T. (2025). The Role of Folklore in Modern Culture. Research Invention Journal of Law, Communication and Languages 5(2):66-71.

Kornioti, N., & Antoniou, K. (2021). Social Mediation as a grassroots method fostering sustainable community collaboration. International Modern Perspectives on Academia and Community Today, 2.

Köseoğlu, B. (2017). The Immigrant Experience in VS Naipaul's The Enigma of Arrival and Z. Smith's White Teeth: An Exploration of Homi Bhabha's Postcolonial Theory. People's Movements in the 21st Century-Risks, Challenges and Benefits.

Köseoğlu, B. (2017). The Immigrant Experience in VS Naipaul's The Enigma of Arrival and Z. Smith's White Teeth: An Exploration of Homi Bhabha's Postcolonial Theory. People's Movements in the 21st Century-Risks, Challenges and Benefits.

Kumar, M. P. (2009). Review essay: Humanism and its other: Difference and disjuncture in postcolonial theory. Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory, 10(1), 87-99. https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2009.9672743.

Manyeli, T. F., & Thabane, S. (2023). Community solidarity and intergenerational relationships in the care of older people in Africa. In Ubuntu Philosophy and decolonising social work fields of practice in Africa (pp. 137-149). Routledge.

Masilela, N., & Jordan, C. (2007). The modern world of Xhosa folklore. New African Movement website.

McKee, A. (2005). The public sphere: An introduction. Cambridge University Press.

Megbowon, F. K., & Uwah, C. (2020). African literature: A tool for societal regeneration. Imbizo, 11(1), 1-17.:// https://doi.org/10.25159/2663-6565/6432

Megbowon, F. K., & Uwah, C. (2022). Decolonisation Through Indigenisation in African Literature: an Exploration of Proverbial Language in Achebe's Things Fall Apart. Gender and Behaviour, 20(4), 20363-20374.

Mervis, M. (1998). Fiction for development: Zakes Mda's Ways of dying. Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa, 10(1), 39-56. https://doi.org/10.1080/1013929X.1998.9678031.

Moonga, N. U. (2022, March). Once were stories: A celebration of black African folklore. In voices: A world forum for music therapy (Vol. 22, No. 1).

Mwita, K.M. (2022). Factors influencing data saturation in qualitative studies. International Journal Of Research In Business And Social Science, 11(4), 414-420. http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4889752.

Okpewho, I. (1992). African oral literature: Backgrounds, character, and continuity (Vol. 710). Indiana University Press.

Okpewho, I. (2003). Oral tradition: Do storytellers lie?. Journal of folklore research, 215-232.

Osei Nyame Jnr, K. (2002). Writing Between 'Self'and 'Nation': Nationalism, (Wo) manhood and Modernity in Bessie Head's The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales. Journal of the Short Story in English. Les Cahiers de la nouvelle, (39), 91-107.

Osei-Tutu, A. A. (2023). Developing African oral traditional storytelling as a framework for studying with African peoples. Qualitative Research, 23(6), 1497-1514. https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941221082263.

Otiono, N., & Akọma, C. (Eds.). (2021). Oral literary performance in Africa: Beyond text. Routledge.

Oyewumi, O. (1997). The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourses. University of Minnesota Press.

Paschal-Mbakwe, D., & Okoronkwo, E. J. (2024). The Relevance of Folktale as a Genre of Folklore and Stimulus for Moral Lessons in African Society. Awka Journal of English Language and Literary Studies, 11(1), 120-136.

Patel, D. (2021). Experience of gender role expectations and negotiation in second generation desi couples. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, Antioch University, England.

Poster, M. (2021). Consumption and digital commodities in the everyday. Cultural Studies Vol18 Issue 2, 409-423.

Pucherova, D. (2011). A romance that failed: Bessie Head and black nationalism in 1960s South Africa. Research in African Literatures, 42(2), 105-124. https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafrilite.42.2.105.

Rask Knudsen, E., & Rahbek, U. (2022). 12 Postcolonial Theory. The Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory, 30(1), 207-226. https://doi.org/10.1093/ywcct/mbac014.

References

Sackey, E. (1991). Oral tradition and the African novel. MFS Modern Fiction Studies, 37(3), 389-407.

Scheub, H. (1970). The Technique of the Expansible Image in Xhosa" Ntsomi"-Performances. Research in African Literatures, 119-146.

Scheub, H. (1985). A review of African oral traditions and literature. African Studies Review, 28(2-3), 1-72.

Shukla, S. S. D. S. (2025). Page A Comparative Study of Folklore and Oral Traditions Across Cultures. Scholar'Digest: Journal of Arts & Humanities, 1(1), 55-74.

Sone, E. M. (2018). The folktale and social values in traditional Africa. Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies, 4(2), 142-159.https://doi.org/10.1080/23277408.2018.1485314

Soyinka, W. (2013). The Strong Breed. London: Oxford University Press.

Törrönen, M., Munn-Giddings, C., & Vornanen, R. (2023). Existential well-being among young people leaving care: Self-feeling, self-realisation, and belonging. Ethics and Social Welfare, 17(3), 295-311. https://doi.org/10.1080/17496535.2022.2140176.