The Life and Work of Bessie Head:
A Celebration
of the
Seventieth Anniversary
of her Birth

Edited by
Mary S. Lederer
Seatholo M. Tumedi
Leloba S. Molema
(Gaborone)

and

M. J. Daymond
(Pietermaritzburg)

Originally published by
Pentagon Publishers
Gaborone
Botswana

Original design and layout by Denford Mahachi, Waterstone Publications

This edition

First edition (print) [2008] ISBN 978 99912 487-8-3

Second edition 2022 ISBN 978-99968-64-34-6 (e-Pub)
ISBN 978-99968-64-35-3 (pdf)

Mary S. Lederer
P. O. Box 70401
Gaborone, Botswana

Royalties/proceeds from the sale of the first printing of this book will be dontated to the Bessie Head Heritage Trust, which was established in 2007 to promote the legacy of Bessie Head.

The quotation in the dedication is from “African Religions”, by Bessie Head, published in *A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings* (ed. Craig Mackenzie, Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), page 53.

To the memory of Bessie Head,
to her son Howard Head,
and to her vision of a world
“where each person can feel that he matters infinitely…”.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface to this edition

This electronic version of *The Life and Work of Bessie Head* is overdue, given that the hard copy of the book is no longer in print. There are a few things that have changed in the interim, and this preface to the e-version is meant to address those.

First, a number of contributors have passed away since the original edition was published: Ms Barulaganye Modongo, Dr F.-K. Omoregie, and Mr Patrick van Rensburg. I thank their families for kind permission to include their contributions.

Second, I have been unable to contact Prof. Cecil Abrahams or the family of the late Prof. Mbulelo Mzamane regarding permission to include their contributions to this edition. I have left a page in with the titles of their contributions; if in future I am able to get permission, these will be added to the book.

Third, I have been unable to include the cover of the original edition because I have been unable to locate the original artist. If I am eventually able to track down the artist and the file, I will insert the cover design.

Fourth, I have checked all the hyperlinks. Some of the links no longer work, and those have not been activated, although I have left the addresses in since this e-version is not a revised version but rather a reproduction (more like a facsimile) of the original. (There are other hyperlinks that could be added, but that will have to wait for a revised version.)

Fifth, I apologise for the numerous errors that should have been caught before the book was sent to the printers. Again, I have left them in, since this is a reproduction rather than revision. If, at some point in the future, a revised edition of this book is produced, I will make every effort to ensure that these errors are corrected.

Finally, since copyright remains with the individual contributors, anyone wishing to reproduce an individual text must have permission of that contributor. Any unauthorized use is not permitted. For information about how to reach individual authors or their representatives for such permission, please contact me at the email below.

Mary S. Lederer
mary.s.lederer.ml@gmail.com
Gaborone, Botswana
November 2022

Preface

I first met Bessie Head in 1982. By that time I had read and enjoyed *Maru* and had taught *A Question of Power* to an honours undergraduate class at Ibadan. I was keen to hear "from the horse's mouth" what *A Question of Power* was all about. The answer deflated most of the theories we had tinkered with at Ibadan. "When I wrote that book," said Bessie putting down her glass of beer, "I had gone over the bend. I was mad." That disarming answer was not what I had expected, but then, Bessie Head was not what anyone who meets her for the first time would expect. Here was a disarmingly simple person; her fame has grown by leaps and bounds from the days she began to write to today when she has become a world-wide industry. In the early 1980s I was pleasantly surprised by the number of scholars who were trooping up to Serowe to do research on Bessie Head.

One was the Singaporean scholar Professor Edwin Thumboo, with whom I became close friends. He was not only doing more research on Bessie Head but was in fact trying to organize a conference on Bessie Head. Would I like to attend such a conference? That was how in 1996 Ms Seatholo Tumedi and I ended up attending a lively and well-attended Bessie Head *indaba* in Singapore. That gathering attracted scholars from all over the world.

Then in 1998, the University of Botswana Department of English held a conference that was in some ways a sequel to the Singapore conference, although there were other areas on language and literature that were explored, which again attracted scholars from around the world.

And now in 2007 Botswana has hosted an international symposium devoted entirely to the life and work of Bessie Head, followed closely by another international colloquium in Pietermaritzburg. The papers from these two events are presented here.

It is fitting and proper that scholars and researchers in Southern Africa have taken it upon themselves to do a great deal of work on Bessie Head. We cannot talk about gender issues, feminism, womanism, post-colonialism without in some way acknowledging the fact that Bessie Head was there before many other writers. She was in her own way a pioneer in the many divergent trends that African letters are taking today.

Felix Mnthali
Professor of English
University of Botswana

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Gaborone

The editors wish to thank the English Department of the University of Botswana and Head of Department Prof. Joyce Mathangwane for logistical and moral support, Ray Seeletso and Gabriel Matshego of Pentagon Publishers for their support of the symposium and proceedings, Sarah Mandow for permission to use the symposium group picture, and all the conference participants themselves for their enthusiastic participation and patience in completing these proceedings.

We especially acknowledge the *Journal of the African Literature Association* for permission to republish "The Significance of Bessie Head's Response to 'The Call of the Global Green'" by Sonja Darlington (originally published in volume 1, number 2, 2007) and Howard Head for permission to use the cover sketch.

Pietermaritzburg

The editor wishes to thank Prof. Mbulelo Mzamane, director of the Centre for African Literary Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Pietermaritzburg; John Morrison, Librarian of the Bessie Head Memorial Library in Pietermaritzburg; and Rob Haswell, Pietermaritzburg City Manager.

GABORONE SYMPOSIUM
5–6 JULY 2007

Gaborone Symposium Participants
6 July 2007
(photo credit Sarah Mandow)

The Life and Work of Bessie Head
Gaborone, 5–6 July 2007

When Tom Holzinger first raised the idea in 2005 of marking Bessie Head's seventieth birthday, we enthusiastically agreed and began to consider what we could do in Gaborone to contribute to these regional celebrations. Because of our academic background (we are all members or former members of the English Department at the University of Botswana), we quickly agreed that some kind of conference or forum would be most appropriate. We decided that we would like a very broad, encompassing view of Bessie Head, and so we settled on the symposium title "The Life and Work of Bessie Head".

The response from all sides was very enthusiastic. F.-K. Omoregie, an English Department theatre faculty member and the director of the local theatre group Enigma, immediately began working on a play, "Snapshots", which premiered on the second evening of the symposium. (The play was also performed later at the celebrations in Serowe in the middle of July.) The National Museum generously offered a venue for the premiere. The English Department provided us with facilities and other material support. Abstracts came in from all over the world. We organized a Setswana dinner party at Leloba Molema's house, and we shared a birthday cake on the second day, 6 July 2007, when Bessie Head would have been seventy.

The symposium presentations themselves addressed a wide range of perspectives on Bessie Head's work and life, and the essays are arranged in this volume in the order they were presented. We began with Maria Rytter's recapitulation of events leading to the establishment of the Bessie Head Papers, following which Gillian Stead Eilersen told us of some of her difficulties during her research for Head's biography. We heard from Barulaganye Modongo, the only person (so far) who has translated Bessie Head's writing into Setswana.

With this background, we turned to Head's writing. Many of the presenters offered new ways of looking at Head's writing. Sonja Darlington spoke of her experience teaching *When Rain Clouds Gather* as a work of eco-criticism, suggesting that much of Head's writing could be examined from this perspective. Leloba Molema analysed the way Head uses Setswana and Christian names in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. Charlotte Broad examined the differences between *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* and *Akenfield*, which was suggested to Head as a model for her oral history of Serowe. Sarah Mandow spoke of her experience reading *A Question of Power* and of how that novel challenges readers to examine their own complicity in Elizabeth's madness. Ann Langwadt focused on *The Cardinals* to show how Head constructs an identity for herself in her fiction. F.-K. Omoregie examined narcissism in *A Question of Power*. Tiro Sebina gave a reading of Head's stories as a celebration of libertarian responses to an oppressive social order.

A number of the presentations were comparative. Nono Kgafela compared caste in Mulk Raj Anand and Head. Grant Lilford looked at three writers, Head, McCall Smith, and Plaatje, to examine how Tswana identity is constructed. Bobana Badisang compared prison narratives in Head and a woman from the other end of the continent, Nawal el Saadawi. Two of the presenters discussed aspects of one of Head's most important bodies of writing—her letters. Linda-Susan Beard spoke of how Bessie Head's letters open up new ways of understanding the epistolary art, in particular with respect to African literature. Gwen Etter-Lewis examined how, in her letters, Head "constructs" her own body as shaped by social and political forces.

Not all the perspectives came from literary criticism, however. Bruce Bennett called on his interest in religious history to offer new ways to investigate the religious references in Head's work. And some people spoke more personally. Tom Holzinger issued a challenge about Bessie Head's paternity that provoked a spirited discussion. Cecil Abrahams recalled her visit to Canada and considered the significance of her politics in light of post-1994 South Africa.

Seatholo Tumedi and Motsumi Marobela looked back on Head's first years in Serowe: Tumedi in interviews with Head's former pupils and Marobela in his own reminiscences. Always the discussion was lively—and extended.

We hope that this volume will aid in continuing discussions about the life and work of Botswana's most famous writer. We would like to offer this volume as a tribute as well to the pen-prints she left for us.

Mary S. Lederer
Seatholo M. Tumedi
Leloba S. Molema

Origins of the Bessie Head Archive[1]

Maria Rytter[2]

Let us start with two quotations from letters in which an author expresses the universal problem shared by most artists of the world. Both letters are written to the publisher: "You could certainly oblige me by giving my messenger some money, as at the moment I am in need […]", and the next one to the same publisher, "If you could please, in advance and before printing, see your way clear to giving my messenger, my son, an approximate royalty, it would please him".[3] As you already might have suspected from the archaic wording of these quotations, the begging letters are not from the Bessie Head Papers—they come from another author unknown to most of you. So the messenger is not Howard Head, Bessie Head's son, but Jens Frederik Blicher, who in 1841 had to be messenger for his father—the Danish author St. St. Blicher.

My contribution bears the title "Origins of the Bessie Head Archive", and it will take more the form of an account of what happened than of an academic paper. First, I will explain my motives and background for saving Bessie Head's papers and establishing a writer's archive at the Khama III Memorial Museum in Serowe after her unexpected death on 17 April 1986. The Bessie Head archive seemed for many years as almost established by itself. Who would not rescue her posthumous works and bring them to the nearest museum? Anyone, of course. But someone had to do it, and that someone happened to be me.

There were two factors that drove me to react and to rescue Bessie Head's papers after her death in Serowe. The first factor is to be found in something that happened back in Denmark shortly before I came to Botswana. The second factor is rooted in something terrible which happened in Botswana a year before she passed away.

The quotations with which I opened my lecture come from some letters written by St.St. Blicher, who lived from 1782–1848, and which I discovered in Denmark before my assignment here in Botswana. To the Danes, St. St. Blicher is equivalent to what Robert Burns is to the Scots—and apart from Hans Christian Andersen, who I presume is very familiar, Blicher is for many Danes as important as the famous author of fairy tales.

Before I came to Botswana I was a curator at the St.St. Blichermuseum at Herningsholm, and it was in this position I made a discovery of not just the letters mentioned above, but also two war poems and a short story by St. St. Blicher. The manuscripts were kept in a village by a vicar who had inherited them from his great-grandfather, the publisher F.C. Olsen. The manuscripts were unpublished and therefore unknown, because F.C. Olsen had rejected them. He was famous for his notorious habit of keeping rejected manuscripts and never returning them to their rightful owners.

The Blichermuseum managed to acquire the manuscripts from the vicar in 1981, and as the following year was the year when the whole country was celebrating the two-hundredth anniversary of Blicher's birth, the Blichermuseum caused a sensation by publishing a book with these new and unknown words from the old writer. I learned three things: first, how a writer's undying fame was kept through the preservation of even the tiniest letters or obscure little manuscripts; second, that a writer's manuscripts are valuable not only from the

---

[1] I am grateful to the organizers of the Symposium for inviting me to Botswana and to Tom Holzinger and Scobie Lekhutile of the Khama III Memorial Museum in Serowe for finding me in Denmark and inquiring about the "Origins of the Bessie Head Archive".

[2] Maria Rytter was the first curator of the Khama III Memorial Museum in Serowe (1984–86). She has curated a number of exhibits on Botswana, has made documentary films, and has published a photo biography of Nelson Mandela. She has also lectured at the University of Southern Denmark.

[3] "*Tvillingerne og andre skrifter*" *af Steen Steensen Blicher*. Blichermuseet på Herningsholm 1982.

researcher's perspective but also for a nation's identity; and third, that it was important to make supreme efforts to keep an author's posthumous work together.

I came to Botswana in 1984 with my husband and two daughters. My job was to build up a district museum in Serowe. Already in 1976 Leapeetswe Khama had taken the initiative in beginning to establish a museum in Serowe by founding the Serowe Historical Society. He was the eldest son of Chief Tshekedi Khama, and in 1984 he donated his house in Serowe for the museum. The premises consisted of several buildings. The main house, the so-called Red House, was built *circa* 1905 by Khama the Great; a smaller building of 125 square metres was built *circa* 1970, along with a servants' quarters. In the Red House was kept a small collection consisting of old furniture, uniforms, guns, and Khama the Great's walking sticks. In the house I also found what was left over of an archive from Leapetswe Khama's time as acting Paramount Chief. I still remember a letter from the ILO [International Labour Organisation] in Geneva complaining about the tribal custom of age regiment work. The ILO claimed the custom was out of touch with modern labour regulations and should be regarded as forced labour, which was illegal. Bearing in mind the tremendous positive effects the age regiment work has had on Botswana's development—the building of roads and schools, to give just one example—I was wondering how international laws could ever be applied to societies with different social values.

When I came to Botswana I got in contact with my colleagues Alec Campbell at the National Museum and Sandy Grant at the Mochudi Museum. They put me in contact with the two historians Michael Crowder and Neil Parsons. Already at our first meeting they told me that Leapeetswe Khama possessed a historical archive of Khama the Great. The papers were kept in a rondavel with a thatched roof, and they covered the period between 1875–1950, which is the period between the time of the introduction of written language in Botswana and the banishment of Tshekedi Khama due to what has been called the Marriage Crisis. Neil Parsons had written his Ph.D. thesis based on studies of the archive and had—as I remember it—organized the papers in brown archive boxes. But what especially made an impact on me was Parsons's account of the constant danger of fire threatening these most important national treasures.

A year after my arrival on 19 October 1985, the Serowe Museum was officially opened by the Minister of Home Affairs, Mr. Englishman Kgabo. The efficient Museum Board under the direction of chairwoman Naledi Khama and secretary Vyvyan Watson had managed to raise funds to restore the building next to the Red House. It was the 125-square-metre structure, built as a garage for the Tshekedi Estates. After this came the hard work of raising funds for the restoration of the Red House, which I eventually succeeded in finding at the Norwegian donor agency NORAD.

The beginning of the Khama III Museum was modest. We had one room for temporary exhibitions, a little craft shop, a storeroom for artefacts, and a room that I had converted into a fireproof archive with metal shelves. At the opening of the Museum, this room was empty, waiting for the Khama papers. But Leapeetswe Khama had no intention of moving his papers anywhere. I still can recall my futile appeals to him to persuade him to do something. But should I not have influenced him to place the Khama Archive at the National Archive of Botswana, you may ask? I tried because I knew that this was the most proper solution. But he refused to do so for two reasons. The first was what he said—that the archive in Gaborone had once been flooded and papers had been destroyed, so he did not trust the National Archive. I do not know if this is true. The second is what he did not say—that he was not ready to part with the archive and felt that he would lose his influence on how it was used if it were placed in Gaborone.

But every time I met Leapeetswe Khama I sang a song for the removal of the archive from the rondavel to the fireproof archive room at the Museum. And he smiled politely—and nothing happened.

While this was going on, Botswana was attacked by South African paramilitary troops on 14 June 1985—a horrible, cruel, and humiliating event that became the second factor which influenced me and eventually made me move the Bessie Head papers to the Museum after her death.

The attack on Gaborone came as a shock to my little family. A South African ANC friend of ours escaped death by the skin of his teeth, but an innocent man was killed in his place. The victim's pregnant wife was left wounded inside the house. However, the neigbours managed to pull her out just before a time-bomb exploded and blew up his house. A friend to whom I had talked just a few hours before the attack was killed by a hand grenade thrown into his room.

After the raid I drove our ANC friend to Serowe where we hid him for some time until he could get out of the country. While he was in Serowe, Bessie Head turned forty-eight, and my eldest daughter Laura baked her a cake, which we all brought out to her little house. When we arrived, we found that she was alone with no one to celebrate her birthday, so we immediately invited her to our house for an improvised birthday dinner. Consequently we celebrated Bessie Head's forty-eighth birthday, which no one knew would be her last. How this evening went on and what happened next you can read about in the booklet *A Grave in the Sand*.

Bessie Head died on 17 April 1986 at the Sekgoma Hospital in Serowe, and the following morning I got the sad news from Hugh Pearce. He and his wife Mmatsela Pearce had been at her deathbed the entire day. At first they tried to suggest that she be flown to a better hospital in Harare or Lusaka, but it was too late. Mmatsela was in tears and deeply worried. She kept saying, "We must do something. If we do not do something Bessie will die like a dog." Bessie Head's son and only heir, Howard, had left the country leaving no address behind. For that reason there was no one to conduct the ceremonies which according to Tswana tradition were to start immediately after death.

Although almost a year had passed since the South African raid on Gaborone, I was worried about South African agents and spies. I feared that they would break into her empty house and steal her papers. What would happen if they found something that might compromise her friends or acquaintances? I also feared that they would burn her house down and thus destroy the possibility of being able to study her life and other work apart from her published books.

Mmatsela decided that she would go to Bessie Head's house and clean and disinfect it—Bessie Head had died from the highly contagious hepatitis, and everything had to be cleaned before the funeral services. I volunteered to go with her to save Bessie Head's papers. Hugh knew the correct manner in which to handle this sensitive situation. He advised us to go to the District Commissioner Mr. Sentle and ask him for permission to enter Bessie Head's house. Mr. Sentle could also issue me with legal permission to move Bessie's papers to the archive room at the Museum. You can read more details about our experiences and the conditions at the house in the booklet *A Grave in the Sand*.

Here I will consider what I moved away and what I did not move. Being a historian and social anthropologist with a museum background, I had never established an archive before. So what did I do? And what did I find? To my surprise I found that Bessie Head seemed to have always copied her letters with carbon paper on her typewriter and kept them. On her bookshelf I found files with her letters organised by year. Cards and other greeting letters were in her drawers and so was her collection of personal photographs. Under her bed were boxes with theses dealing with her authorship and sent from all corners of the world from students and professors. This I packed in boxes together with the rest of the papers and manuscripts. I also took her typewriter, chair and maybe the little desk? But I worry that I left the little

personal notes and small newspaper cuttings that decorated her walls at her writing desk. In any case, I am not sure today if I removed them.

Bessie's house consisted of only two rooms, so I took care not to remove too much. I did not want to expose Howard Head to the shocking experience of coming home to an empty place. So I did not move all her books to the Museum, only those with written comments in them or with inscriptions and greetings from the author. I seem to remember that I filled the Museum car. But I do not know if this is true. In my head I had the idea that this could be the first step towards an archive preserving her letters, manuscripts, papers, and photographs for future studies and research. But my main concern was the immediate danger of destruction or stealth. I never considered removing any of her personal belongings to the Museum. Those of you who knew Bessie Head will remember her Nigerian dresses, which would have been wonderful to have today. It might seem odd that a museum curator did not care for keeping any of her personal belongings, but I had only one excuse for moving anything from her house to the Museum, and that was to save her papers, not her personal belongings.

When Howard Head returned from South Africa for the funeral, he warmly welcomed the idea of establishing a Bessie Head archive. So together with the Museum Board we decided that the Museum from that date also should house a writer's archive. I persuaded Howard to receive a proper payment for the papers because I had approval to do so from the Danish Volunteer Service in Gaborone. I cannot recall today the amount.

To this very moment I do not know what I saved on that day of 18 April 1986. Only once have I looked through her papers and that was when searching for information to write her obituary. I was so busy with my Museum work that I never again went over the material. The only thing I did for the archive was to apply for money to have the material catalogued. This we received from the Danish donor agency Danida. As I recall, it was at the Museum's last board meeting before my departure in October 1986 that we employed librarian Ruth Forchhammer to start the registration and cataloguing of the Bessie Head Papers.

So instead of the Khama Archive, the Bessie Head Papers were installed on the shelves. There was still plenty of space for the Khama papers, but I began to fear that time was running out. Then a short time before I was due to leave—and without any notice—a lorry drove up into the Museum yard, and behind it drove a fancy car with a driver, and Leapeetswe Khama sitting on the back seat. "Here you are", he smiled, while his men carried all the brown boxes of the Khama Archive into the Museum. Why he had changed his mind he never revealed to me.

You can make the most exceptional discoveries in an archive. When I saw the brown boxes arriving I already knew that somewhere there would be a begging letter from 1920 to King Khama III for money "for the starving children of Europe". In "The Word of Khama", Neil Parsons quotes one single line from this letter which had aroused my curiosity: "It seems so terrible to think of the great sufferings of these poor children when we in Africa have all that we require" (24). I found the letter in a box labelled "Miscellaneous".[4] Inside there was a file with the word "WAR" in front, with several begging letters from Europe. King Khama donated eighty pounds to the Starving Austrian Children's Fund. It is striking how the global situation has changed during less than a century. Botswana's history is full of surprising examples.

Let me finish my account by returning to Bessie Head. Bessie Head was very poor in her last years in Serowe, yet she was the most generous person, willing to share her poetic wisdom with the world in her writing, but also in her home face to face. I am grateful that I came to Serowe when Bessie Head was still a part of the life of this beautiful village.

[4] The letter is reprinted in its entirety in "When Africa Gave Aid to Europe" by Maria Rytter (*New African* 277 [1990]: 43).

Works Cited

Parsons, Q. N. *The Word of Khama*. Lusaka: National Education Co. of Zambia, 1972.
Rytter, Maria and Gillian Stead Eilersen. *A Grave in the Sand: Celebrating the Life of Bessie Head*. Gaborone: Botswana National Museum, 2007.

Miss Marpling Around Southern Africa: The Confessions of an Amateur Researcher

Gillian Stead Eilersen[1]

Biography as a genre—poised between history and literature—has grown tremendously in popularity during the last century: people seem to need to study the way other people live their lives in order to make more sense of their own. With roots going back to Plutarch and the Roman historians, with landmarks such as Johnson and Boswell, who combined scholarly thoroughness with wit and vivid detail to produce works that set the standard for two centuries, and with Lytton Strachey, at the end of the Victorian age, finally freeing the genre from the inhibitions of seriousness and respectability, biography was able to take off in the twentieth century.

No longer is it considered the biographer's task to reflect and reveal the character and thoughts of the subject in some neutral way. Instead the biographer has a scope and freedom that approaches that of the novelist, allowing two biographies of the same person their own space and perspective.

The tradition is long and impressive; the choices are varied. Nonetheless, there seemed very few guidelines for me to follow as I approached the challenge of writing the biography of Bessie Head. There were so few basic details of Bessie Head's early life in South Africa. Her personal background was enigmatic; very little was known of her years at school and her early life as a journalist. Before I could understand the writer I had to get to know the young woman. This required serious investigating.

My own position did not make my task easier. Though South African by birth, I have lived almost two-thirds of my life in Denmark. I worked as a part-time lecturer at the English department of Odense University for fifteen years. The fact that I started studying again and subsequently took up an academic career after caring for four children and learning the Danish language meant that the permanent positions at universities never came my way—I was too old! After a six-month period I always faced the possibility of not being re-appointed. There were no openings to attend conferences or do paid research in my contract.

The daily demands of a growing family, the rather haphazard path of my "academic" career with the need to make many adjustments as regards the material I worked with, and the often very large classes bringing with them varied and interesting contact with many students, all gave my life a pragmatic turn: I spent a great deal of time sorting out everyday problems and trying to bring some form of order into the complexities of living.

To compensate for this situation and to return to my own roots in a meaningful way, I plunged into researching Bessie Head's background. Admittedly it seemed doomed to failure, and I would have to finance it myself; admittedly my own life could hardly have been more busy and demanding. As a reaction to Head's unexpected death in 1986, I felt I had to do it.

***

In all, I made three trips to Serowe, in 1987, 1988, and 1991.The first was simply to reconnoiter. The next year, having raised a study grant from the Scandinavian Institute of African Studies in Uppsala, Sweden, I spent seven weeks there. In 1991, now with a grant from Danida, the Danish International Aid organization, I returned as part of a round trip to do further

[1] Gillian Stead Eilersen is a writer and academic, and author of *Bessie Head. Thunder Behind Her Ears: Her Life and Writing*, republished by Wits University Press in 2007. She lives in Denmark.

research into Head's correspondence. For me, however, the period of seven weeks I spent there in 1988 formed the core of the research. I suddenly began to believe in my project.

In between the visits to Serowe, I fitted in visits to Natal, where I began to uncover information about Bessie Head's schooling. She had never named the boarding school she had attended, but quite soon it became apparent to me that it could only be St Monica's Diocesan Home for Coloured Girls at Hillary. I had no sources to refer to apart from help from friends. I utilized a primitive sleuthing technique. I mentioned my problem. Someone suggested a name. I took a chance and phoned that person. I was very seldom turned away. Naturally people were anxious: some journalist woman suddenly phoning them up and asking questions about events that went back nearly forty years. But if I was able to keep the person talking long enough to convey a genuine respect for the situation, I usually received the help I needed. This is particularly true in regard to finding St Monica's. A former head of the Little Flower mission school in Ixopo suggested the name, and having found the school, I phoned the office. A very pleasant secretary listened to my story with amazement and promised to investigate for me. The next day she confirmed that they had had a Bessie Emery at school there during the given period. She had found a thick file relating to her school days in their basement.

After that I began a protracted correspondence with the principal, asking permission to copy the file. He was naturally very reluctant, with the situation unimproved by the fact that I was writing from abroad. A year later the same friend finally made it possible for me to get the necessary permission, and another friend made a special journey to Durban to copy the whole file. I later learnt that the secretary had remembered our conversation and taken special care of it when they began tidying the basement shortly after I'd spoken to her. There were termites in the papers and they would normally all have been thrown out after so many years!

I shall never forget the feeling of excitement tinged with relief when I finally opened the parcel in Denmark. The file consists of over 200 pages and includes documents such as Head's birth certificate, school reports and examination certificates, an extensive correspondence with the welfare society which had placed her in the home, and letters from her foster mother, Nellie Heathcote. There are two sets of papers of even greater importance. The first correspondence concerns Bessie's maintenance at St Monica's. From January 1950 until August 1951, Bessie's fees were paid out of her mother's estate. It was suggested that the school try to get a government grant for her so that the £40 remaining in her mother's estate could be used later. For Bessie to be declared a child in need of help, she had to have a court order placing her in the custody of St Monica's Home. Then the school would receive a monthly government grant to pay for her maintenance. As I worked through these papers, it slowly began to dawn on me that I was reading the other version of the incident described so vividly in Head's writing:

> She hauled me off to the missionary principal's office and that lady in turn bundled me into a car and straight to the juvenile section of the Durban magistrate's court. There a young man read something out in a quick gabble, most of which I didn't hear except that he insisted that my real mother was a white woman, not the Coloured foster-mother I'd grown up with. (qtd. in Eilersen 24)

Because she had been so poorly prepared for this visit to the magistrate's court, and because the truth about her real mother had to come out at this stage without any preparatory information from the headmistress, Bessie had misunderstood the whole situation.

The second group of letters were some Bessie wrote to Margaret Cadmore, the new principal, after she left the school. These are lively and informative and open up the whole period of Head's life as a young journalist in Cape Town in an excellent way.

After my second visit to Serowe in 1988, during which I worked long hours each day on the massive correspondence, the first researcher to do so, I began to feel that I was beginning to make progress. However, I had still no new information on Head's own family background. Back in Denmark, I once again applied for study grants. After many refusals, I finally struck it

lucky. A large grant from Danida made it possible for me to take six months' study leave as well as take another comprehensive trip to Southern Africa.

Shortly after Bessie Head's death, in an unusual obituary entitled "'Don't Ask for the True Story': A Memoir of Bessie Head", Professor Susan Gardner revealed information about Bessie Head's mother and quoted a file number in the State Archives in Pretoria. On my third trip, in April 1991, I was determined to test out her statement that "if there is anything ironically to be said in favour of South Africa's bureaucracy, it is that we are all identified and docketed—in other words, eminently traceable" (122). I went to the State Archives in Pretoria. I had been hopeful, but had never expected to be handed so large a file. Because Bessie Amelia Emery, the mother, was committed to the Pretoria mental hospital in 1933, her mother, Alice Birch, had conducted a lengthy correspondence with the hospital authorities as well as with the Master of the Supreme Court, as she managed her daughter's financial affairs. All this had been preserved. The papers revealed the name of Bessie Head's half-brother and the family name, shrouded in mystery in Gardner's article, because it "would immediately reveal her identity to those familiar with South African 'higher society' circles" (129, note 48). I took as many relevant photocopies as I could manage from the files, and went home to plan my next move. I needed to find Bessie Head's half-brother, Ronald Emery.

My most immediate problem was that I was due to fly to Serowe in two days. My final day in Johannesburg I spent studying telephone directories. Bessie Amelia Birch had many siblings, but I could hardly expect them still to be alive. So, apart from hoping to find Ronald Emery's name in the directory, I had to hope for the names of nephews and nieces. Although I had no precise information about any of them, I collected all the names of the older Birch generation that I could find. Then I chose the addresses from the more prosperous parts of Johannesburg and tried to match names. I was not successful. What is worse, I could find no trace of a Ronald Emery. I ended up taking photocopies of the relevant pages in the telephone directory, and dashing off to Serowe. On one of my first days at the Museum, where I had been given the same work space, I returned to the quest for Ronald Emery. Making use of the logical help I had, I selected about ten different Birch addresses. But I needed to cut down on this number, I felt, because I was moving into rather tricky territory and I did not want to broadcast my own project unnecessarily. So, having highlighted the ten names, I now focused quietly and intently on them and selected three.

I spent some hours composing the letter I was to send. I had long worked out that the key to solving this mystery was to be found in the common name shared by mother and daughter. That had been the wisest and most sane gift Bessie Amelia Emery had given the baby Bessie. So I wrote introducing myself and explaining my research in general terms. I made sure to place the name Bessie Amelia Emery as centrally as possible and tell the reader that Bessie Emery had a daughter who was a world-acclaimed author. For someone who was not familiar with the name, the letter would seem strange and uninformative. For someone in the know, however, it would probably arouse his curiosity. I gave a contact telephone number in Johannesburg and sent off the letters.

When I returned to Johannesburg, with just four days at my disposal for some important interviews that I had set up earlier before returning to Denmark, my friend met me at the airport and soon mentioned that there had been quite a few phone calls for me. I nodded as she listed them: calls I had been expecting, apart from one from an elderly woman who did not know what I was writing about and why I had contacted her. I shrugged ruefully. "Oh, yes," she said. "There was one more. A very bad connection. The man was ringing from Nelspruit. He said his name was Emery, Ronald Emery."

I knew immediately that I had to get to Nelspruit within the next four days. But several hindrances now arose. Whereas I had been amazingly lucky in finding Ron Emery, things did not work too well as regards meeting him. The problem was Nelspruit.

I tried to phone him straight away. The line was down, I was told, and would only be repaired the next day. After several attempts the next day, we finally made contact. I could hear that Ronald Emery was puzzled, wary, and curious. He described how he had been contacted by his cousin, Alan Birch who told him that he had just received the strangest letter. "To tell you the truth, Ron, I cannot make head or tail of it, and it would have landed directly in the wastepaper basket were it not for the fact that it names your mother—her full name, too—and speaks about a daughter she had who is now a famous novelist." I asked if I could interview him as soon as possible. He very kindly agreed and invited me to spend the night with him and his wife Mary, as there was only one bus connection a day between Nelspruit and Johannesburg. I decided to leave the same day and rang the coach station to book a ticket. But alas, the coach was full. I booked for the next day but went down to the station and stood by hopefully, thinking that I might get a seat after all. No. I had to wait, but did finally get to Nelspruit to tell Ron Emery the story of his unknown sister. (He admitted knowing it after a while.) Thus started a contact with the Birch/Emery family which lasted for many years. It was from Ronald that I first heard about the truly tragic death of his brother Sam and the reason for his mother's mental instability. He also gave me a great number of family photos and told me the story of his father, Ira Emery, the sportsman and Olympic committee member. Through Ronald Emery, I contacted Kenneth Birch, Bessie Amelia's youngest brother.

I say that I contacted Kenneth Birch. In fact, my early correspondence went via his attorney. Gradually he thawed to me. Though appalled by the idea of some "little detective lady"—as he called me in one of his letters—nosing around in his family affairs, he was also curious to know more about his talented niece. We ended up corresponding for five years, a colourful exchange consisting of over seventy pages. I sent him the section of the biography relating to the Birches and he made adjustments, which I accepted because by this time he had given me a great deal of extra information. Most of it was labeled "Confidential", incidentally, so that when I wanted to use something from the confidential sections, I made a specific request to do so each time, either to him or his lawyer! It was after our long discussions of the family fortunes that he wrote the article published in *English in Africa* in May 1995.[2] I never met him, though my mother and son did. He attended the launching of the first edition of the biography in Pietermaritzburg in 1995.

As the material began to be organised and I began to gain better insight into it, my research took on a more respectable form: interviews, library research, and much correspondence. In fact, looking at my files again for the first time in many years, I realize that I have a fine collection of letters from a great many of the people who played an important part in Bessie Head's life. It strikes me that like hers, my record can also be found in the letters people wrote me. Each one represents a willingness to take part in the project, a helpfulness, and a friendliness which I valued. As it turned out, useful hints, guesswork, instant deductions, intuitive decisions, and other sleuthing activities only form a small part of the final result. Nonetheless, I feel that such methods play a larger role in traditional research than is generally admitted. They certainly helped me make important breakthroughs in my attempt to make accessible the life and writings of one of Africa's finest women writers.

[2] Kenneth Stanley Birch, "The Birch Family: An Introduction to the White Antecedents of the Late Bessie Amelia Head" (*English in Africa* 22.1 [1995]: 1–18). This article was subsequently republished in 1997 as a pamphlet with the same title by the University of the Witwatersrand Library.

Works Cited

Eilersen, Gillian Stead. *Bessie Head. Thunder Behind Her Ears. Her Life and Writing*. 1995. Johannesburg: Wits UP, 2007.

Gardner, Susan. "'Don't Ask For the True Story: A Memoir of Bessie Head." *Hecate: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Women's Liberation* 12.1–2 (1986): 110–29.

Fa Maru a Pula a Kokoana: Translating Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* into Setswana

Barulaganye (Thedi) Modongo[1]

Introduction

Bessie Head and I both hail from Serowe. She was born and brought up in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, and later lived in exile in Serowe, the setting, though fictionalized, of most of her novels and short stories. I was born and bred in Serowe, and I like to claim that I can identify with her concern about inequalities of power in Botswana. I was a student at Swaneng Hill School from 1968–72 and met Bessie Head then. She lived not far from our school. Our English teacher, Michael Kromberg, invited her several times to come and talk to us. We were studying *To Kill a Mocking Bird* by Harper Lee and *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck, and these novels, dealing respectively with white racism in the ex-slave-states of America and the displacement of rural populations in California, resonated with what Bessie Head herself was working on. *When Rain Clouds Gather* had been published in 1969 and she read to us from it. She also read to us typed passages from *Maru*. I, for one, was very much aware that Bangwato (the ethnic group to which I belong) seriously discriminate against Basarwa, but the heated debates that followed her readings took place in the dormitories, not in the classroom.

Heinemann, the publisher of the full text of *When Rain Clouds Gather*, is also the publisher of the abridged version of this text, which was prescribed reading in Botswana's community junior secondary schools, where English language and literature in English are compulsory subjects. I was approached by Heinemann to translate the abridged version of *When Rain Clouds Gather* into Setswana. I am contemplating translating the full text, too.

Translating a work of literature from one language into another is a serious challenge because the language of literature contributes to the way readers perceive and receive a text. In my paper I will refer to the challenges that I faced, including the hazardous nature of what I call the double identity of the translated text. I will also talk about the joys of translating Bessie Head into Setswana

The Challenges of Translating Bessie Head

Translating Bessie Head meant capturing the sense of her words and presenting them in Setswana without distortion. Here I was faced with a two-fold problem. Firstly, certain precise meanings in Bessie Head's English demanded equally precise renditions in Setswana. For example, right on the first page, she describes Makhaya Maseko's feelings in this way: "His nerves weren't so good, too easily jangled by the irritations of living. In fact, the inner part of him was a jumble of chaotic discord, […]" (7) The word for "nerve" in Setswana is *tshika*— which is also the word for blood vessel, tendon, and colloquially any raw, dangly, stringy bits, including certain expressions of male sexual desire.

What also makes translation difficult is the dynamism that has caused the two languages to develop in unique directions in response to societal change. For example, the whole gamut of machine-age agricultural English is not readily replicable in Setswana, and I had to resort to *terekethara* for "tractor".

Also very challenging was the problem of the double identity of the Setswana text, in the sense that, firstly, when Bessie Head wrote the original work, she must have been fully

[1] Barulaganye Modongo is a former head of the Tonota College of Education and has worked for UNESCO. She translated the abridged version of *When Rain Clouds Gather* into Setswana.

engrossed in it, responding to the unique, urgent sensations and instincts that must have driven her to write it, and that must have made equally unique and intense demands on her skills with language and structure. I think that this is what writers mean when they say that their works have written themselves. I, as a translator of her text and not being similarly driven, may have failed to find the words, sentences, rhythms, and tones that convey the precise thoughts she must have had and emotions she must have felt and captured in English. Because of the intangibility of what lay behind Head's driven-ness, I could do no more than imagine myself into it, which, taken together with the translated word itself, has resulted in what I call the double identity of the translated text. I do not think that this problem arises when writers translate their own works; for example, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o from Kikuyu into English or André Brink from Afrikaans into English or Okot p'Bitek from Acoli into English. I doubt that they even translate as such. They probably re-write their texts with as equal intensity as the first time.

Other challenges pertained to time constraints. I started translating whilst in Botswana, but later relocated to Edinburgh, Scotland, to pursue further studies, and could not devote as much time to translation as before. In addition, the general unavailability of computer technology at the time (1990–91) meant that the lines of communication with Heinemann Botswana were slow because they depended on the postal system.

The Joys of Translating Bessie Head

Translating Bessie Head was, for me, an occasion for a kind of metonymic nostalgia for my school days at Swaneng Hill, and in particular, I giggled thinking about our chief cook, who, in keeping with the principles of the school, was hired from the community in which the school was located. His English, which he picked up by osmosis in adulthood in the places where he had worked, was a joy to us and endeared him to us. We nicknamed him "Hundred" because of the incredibly good mass-meals that he produced under what were trying circumstances equipment-wise. The Setswana word *tala* refers to both the colour green and to raw food, and the word *metsi* refers to water as well as wetness, and our chief cook, made desperate by the weather conditions, declared once, "The food is green because the wood was water, and now a hundred people come *paparapapara* behind me" (*paparapapara* imitates the sound of many feet running). The second cook to be hired we called "Fifty," and the third, "Twenty-Five," in order of experience, skill, and rapport.

As a translator, I approached both the full and abridged versions of *When Rain Clouds Gather* with greater maturity and understanding than when I was a fifth-form or an undergraduate student. I was, for example, now in a position to appreciate the autobiographical nature of Head's work and continue to be intrigued by the manner in which she generalizes her experiences without sounding ridiculous. I see Makhaya Maseko as Bessie Head in fictional form, male figure though he is. He is an exile just as she was. His insights into the injustices of South African apartheid are her insights, she having been the skeleton in the cupboard of the white side of her family ("Notes from a Quiet Backwater I" [3]). Makhaya's perceptions of such dodgy chiefs and politicians as Sekoto, Matenge, and Joas Tsepe are her perceptions, and his standpoint against them is her standpoint too.

The setting of *When Rain Clouds Gather* is reminiscent of Serowe, where Head lived and died. Gilbert Balfour's experimental farm at Golema Mmidi recalls Vernon Gibberd's Bamangwato experimental farm in Radisele, where Head worked for a time, and Gilbert Balfour himself seems a mixture of two people: Vernon Gibberd, the agriculturalist, and Patrick van Rensburg, the founder of Swaneng Hill School and driving force behind the education-with-production "Brigades".

The group of women led by Paulina Sebeso, who take over the new tobacco-growing project and who build the curing sheds, is reminiscent of the Boiteko project on which Head worked, in the garden section. The women she singles out for specific comment in *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* are potters and weavers, though, not arable farmers. But the same air of triumphant forging ahead that attaches to the new breed of potters, and the totally new skill of the weavers, also attaches to brand-new tobacco growers like Paulina Sebeso.

Relations between black people and white people in Golema Mmidi are very much like those existing in Swaneng of the time. Patrick van Rensburg had resigned his job as a South African diplomat in the Congo, and had with his ideas of education with production attracted an array of idealistic people to help fulfill this dream. We celebrated at least one mixed marriage of the Gilbert/Maria type (an expatriate Danish teacher married his ex-student), not to speak of the various permutations of boyfriend and girlfriend relationships, nor forgetting the variety that, though full of desire, simmered in vain in the wings.

A question arises is this: given Botswana's settler, bully-boy neighbours like Rhodesia and South Africa, was Bessie Head perhaps going too far by making the white man, Gilbert Balfour, the bearer of all things good, and the Africans beholden to him—as the racial stereotype has it? My answer to this question is twofold. Firstly, Bessie Head was concerned with expressing an idea of community that would contrast strongly with the communities from which her protagonists flee: that is, a community which, if utopian, then utopian only in so far as it is made up of chastened people ("the god with bare feet") who respect one another's experiences and who struggle for subsistence in a drought- prone environment. Secondly, it is a fact that white people like Patrick van Rensburg and Vernon Gibberd have made far-reaching contributions to the development of Botswana, partly because they defined themselves in opposition to the hegemonic ideologies and practices of their own governments. It would be dishonest and shameless of us not to acknowledge their work just because of their race. For these reasons I have no problems with Bessie Head giving Gilbert Balfour "blue eyes" and "giant footsteps" because he is definitely not the sort of arrogant, Aryan, killer god that Adolf Hitler and Hendrik Verwoerd mistook themselves for, only to find out the hard way that they were just poor forked worms like everyone else.

I have, of course, honed my skill in translation, and have in the process added a whole range of dictionaries and grammars to my library. I do not forget to thank the living, two-legged dictionaries in my own family and elsewhere who, although they can neither read nor write, are inspired performers of the Setswana language when they speak. I am looking forward to translating the full text of Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* with the backing of the Bessie Head Heritage Trust, and hope profoundly that with the Trust operating in lobby mode, this new translation will be taught in Setswana classes all over Botswana and South Africa.

Works Cited

Head, Bessie. *Fa Maru A Pula A Kokoana*. Trans. Barulaganye Thedi. Gaborone: Heinemann, 1991.

———. "Notes from a Quiet Backwater I." *A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings*. Ed. Craig Mackenzie. Oxford: Heinemann, 1990.

———. *When Rain Clouds Gather*. London: Heinemann, 1968.

———. *When Rain Clouds Gather*. 1968. Ed. Margaret Tarner. Oxford: Macmillan Heinemann ELT, 1989.

The Politics of Naming in Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*

Leloba S. Molema[1]

Introduction

In several of her texts, Bessie Head makes her characters speak English not with her own native-speaker fluency, but in the manner that Botswana people speak it. For example, in the short story "The Special One", a character gossips about her neighbour that she "pestered her husband day and night for the blankets" (84), meaning she pestered him for sexual intercourse, and another character in the same story speaks of having "found" love (86) instead of "falling" into it. In the short story "The Collector of Treasures", Kenalepe says about her husband Paul that "he is an honest somebody" (95). Head translates (or has people translate for her) common Setswana phrases into English; in another example in the story, "The Deep River: A Story of Ancient tribal Migration," she renders an ideophone,[2] typical of Setswana usage, in English: "Monemapee ruled the tribe for many years as the hairs on his head *were already saying white!* by the time he died" (1, emphasis added). The ideophone in italics reflects a Sotho-Tswana figurative structure that is both onomatopoetic and rigidly structured using the verb *re* (said).

Sometimes Head gets the Setswana grammar wrong, the most frequently noted instance being her confusion of the singular/plural forms *Mo-*/*Ba-*, and *Le-*/*Ma-* in *Maru,* where the younger Margaret Cadmore is addressed as "a Masarwa", the English equivalent of which would be "a Bushwomen" (plural), incorporating all the negative connotations of both words in the southern African context except, perhaps, in academic circles, in which the English word has ameliorated and is a collective term for the various sub-groups that compose the San. A grammatical mistake of the same kind occurs in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, when Head writes, "a Batswana man" (19, 61).

Some critics have associated Bessie Head's Setswana grammatical mistakes with issues about her identity; for example, Nobantu Rasebotsa says about Head that "The simple, straightforward English she writes in *Maru* is not even 'Setswana-sounding-English' " and posits this as a sign of Head's "imperfect understanding of cultural conditions in Botswana" (27). Mompoloki Bagwasi also argues along similar lines, pointing out that "Margaret Cadmore describes herself as 'a Masarwa' and makes a linguistic error where her identity, which is the central theme of the novel, is concerned" (88). Bagwasi goes on to explain why "a Masarwa" is a grammatical mistake, and argues that "This kind of error casts suspicion and doubt on Margaret Cadmore's authenticity and originality in the matter of her ethnicity, […]" (88).

I see these grammatical mistakes as merely an editorial failure on the part of Bessie Head's publisher, Heinemann. A competent Setswana speaker could have been hired to proofread and rectify things for the very reason that Head lacked native-speaker fluency in not only Setswana, but also all the other indigenous languages of Botswana. Secondly, my own impulse is not to seek to define the "authenticity" or "perfect understanding" of Botswana cultures, including at the level of language, for the same reason that Négritude poets got into trouble for speaking about African cultures in essentialist terms. It seems to me that precisely because Bessie Head was foreign to Botswana, she holds up to view aspects of Botswana to which we, as Batswana,

---

[1] Leloba S. Molema is a senior lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Botswana. She has written on the introduction of literacy in Lesotho and is one of the editors of *Women Writing Africa, Vol. 1: The Southern Region* (2003).

[2] See Desmond Cole about ideophones: unlike the onomatopoeia of European languages which describes only sound, they also describe state, manner, appearance, intensity, colour, and action. Ideophones, being vocal images, are more often than not accompanied by gesture and grimace to give them maximum emotional or dramatic effect (370).

are perhaps too close to see, and which, like the ones we name "authentic", are subject to change. In fact, in the place name, "Golema Mmidi" (to raise maize) in *When Rain Clouds Gather,* Bessie Head has a telling metaphor for her own position in Botswana. Maize is foreign to Botswana, yet it is a staple food of the people of Botswana, and as such, it is an "authentic" part of their eating culture. We can describe Bessie Head as the sort of maize that we eat with the mind's mouth.

There is evidence in Bessie Head's notebooks and publications that she was interested in Botswana names for people and things; for example, in the notes pertaining to her non-fictional book *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind,* she drew a cross-section of a wooden mortar used for stamping grain with a pestle (KMM 467 BHP box R1, page 135). Above the drawing, doubly underlined, she scribbled the Setswana name for this household item, *kika*. In the section entitled "People's Names" in the introduction to *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, Bessie Head writes, "no one has a meaningless name […]. Anything is grasped upon in the surroundings by which to name a child—a year of good rain and a plentiful supply of corn; a touching history of suffering or struggle or quarrels and strife between relatives" (xxii).

Bessie Head was aware of the significance of naming, and I argue that the way in which she names reflects and supports the overall structure and thematic concerns of her novel as much as it reflects and supports her own concerns with particular social, economic, and political practices in her adopted country Botswana. This paper is divided into two sections: the first discusses the symbolism of some of the names, including the place name Golema Mmidi, in *When Rain Clouds Gather,* and the second discusses naming as an act of authority and identifies the social meanings that arise from that act. In the second section, I am indebted to Simone de Beauvoir's understanding of the concept of the "Other" in the introduction to her book, *The Second Sex* (1949).

The Symbolism of the Place Name Golema Mmidi

Golema Mmidi, the village where the action of *When Rain Clouds Gather* takes place, has great symbolic value when taken together with the "Rain Clouds" of the title. Literally, Golema Mmidi means "to plough corn" or "to grow maize or mealies". Bessie Head translates it as "to grow crops" (22). Corn (or maize or mealies) is a staple food of the southern African region, alongside other grain crops such as sorghum and millet. The place name Golema Mmidi, then, highlights the villagers' dependence on subsistence agriculture. It highlights, too, the climatic conditions in which the villagers practice such agriculture; hence, in the novel there is a constant fluctuation between rain and drought. The title of the novel is an incomplete sentence which hints at what will happen when clouds gather and it actually rains. There will ultimately be all sorts of blooming, of course, but until then, there is the "sun", "a pulsating ball of fire", "dryness", "bleakness", and "sandy wastelands" (32), "windblown sand and thornbush" (11), all of which are manifestations of the "severe drought" first mentioned on page 29, but which plays itself out only towards the end of the novel—"huge columns of sand" sweep the sky, "the odour of death" attracts vultures (161), "trees die from the root upwards" (165).

It is possible to classify the characters in *When Rain Clouds Gather* according to whether they are verdant land or a wasteland or both. "The old hag" at the beginning of the novel, who pimps her granddaughter to passing men (9), is an example of an internal desert. Golema Mmidi, too, is a village where people carry their rains and droughts inside themselves. Matenge, who terrorizes the people of Golema Mmidi, is also an example of an internal desert. His Ikalanga name means "buyer" and is derived from the same root as the Nguni word, *tenga*, i.e., "to buy".[3] In terms of the colonial administration of Botswana just before independence (the period

[3] I am grateful to Mr. Gobe Matenge and to Mr. Chakabaka Matenge for this insight.

in which *When Rain Clouds Gather* is set), Matenge is the subchief or headman of the ward called Golema Mmidi, reporting to his elder brother, Paramount Chief Sekoto, who presides over the main *kgotla*, or traditional assembly, a little distance from Golema Mmidi. A ward is that section of a village where, in ethnographic terms, all the extended families comprising a clan reside, complete with a *kgotla* for settling family disputes, and sometimes a cattle kraal supplying milk for everyday use, or meat for great family feasts, and headed by older males.

Golema Mmidi, with its assortment of refugees from life's tragedies, follows the Setswana pattern of establishing wards to accommodate people displaced especially by war; a real-life example are the Herero of Botswana's Central District, who set up their own wards after fleeing genocide by German troops in Namibia in 1904. What goes on inside the fictional Golema Mmidi, however, differs very much from what went on inside such a historical ward, in which Herero governance structures were left intact, with ready-made Herero chiefs and headmen reporting to the main Ngwato *kgotla*. Bessie Head's conception of human relations in Golema Mmidi challenges in several ways the division and uses of power in such historical, hierarchically organized systems, because they are notorious for quite often giving rise to and sustaining people like Paramount Chief Sekoto and his brother Subchief Matenge.

Matenge is not called "buyer" for nothing. He speculates in cattle and he and his side-kick, the politician Joas Tsepe, embody everything that Head finds reprehensible both in Africa's feudal and in its nationalist leaders. Matenge swindles the villagers, for example, by buying their cattle cheaply because they cannot afford to transport them by railway truck, and then selling the same cattle to the abattoir for up to more than twice the price (20). He is a negative and mean-spirited, like *Othello*'s Iago, and is never satisfied unless he is plotting someone's downfall.

Chief Sekoto, is a desert too, but with some oases here and there, or, in the Botswana context, fossil water from old, old rains, caught in igneous rock below the sand and brought to the surface by means of boreholes. He puts his brother in charge of Golema Mmidi but at the same time seeks to rein him in, limiting the damage that he can do. But Sekoto himself, in the indirect rule circumstances of the time, is generally ineffective, his burdens of state having largely to do with drinks and women.

The old people of Golema Mmidi such as Mma Millipede and Dinorego have overcome the tragedies of their lives without a residue of bitterness, and because they have survived the inner deserts that threatened to dry them up, they have become pools of water from which others like Paulina Sebeso, Makhaya Maseko, and Gilbert Balfour drink, during their own hour of crisis, and so drive back the desert within that threatens to overwhelm them.

As mentioned previously, the maize that is a staple food of the people of Golema Mmidi is indigenous to neither the country nor the region in which this village is located, but originates from Mexico. This staple, on which they depend, typifies not only their creator, Bessie Head, but also themselves as characters. They too are not natives of Golema Mmidi but an assortment of "misfits" who have fled there "to escape the tragedies of life" (16). The new lives that they lead in Golema Mmidi are a model for what ought to be a staple of social interaction in Botswana generally.

The people of Golema Mmidi are not only misfits, but also cause a misfit with respect to existing structures. A pertinent example, besides their sorting out of Subchief Matenge, is that Golema Mmidi experiments with new agricultural methods and has consequently become unlike other villages. The people of Golema Mmidi are "permanently settled on the land" (16). Why this simple fact interferes with chiefly authority can be explained with reference to an observation of Bessie Head in the story "The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration". She writes,

> Although the people were given their own ploughing lands, they had no authority to plough them without the chief's order. When the people left home to plough, the chief

> sent out the proclamation for the beginning of the ploughing season. When harvest time came, the chief perceived that the corn was ripe. He gathered the people together and said: "Reap now, and come home." When the people brought home their crops, the chief called the thanksgiving of the harvest. (1)

In other words, no migration between village (*motse*) and lands (*masimo*) means that there is neither an occasion for the chief to proclaim the ploughing and harvest seasons, nor an occasion for him to preside over the rituals of thanksgiving and renewal that are a manifestation of his authority at such times.

These misfits and causers of misfit of Golema Mmidi are engaged in a struggle with the land and with themselves, the nature of which gives rise to the community in which they live their lives with dignity. Bessie Head calls Golema Mmidi "a unique place" (16) because of the people who live there. They are an example of what she means when she talks of "the God with no shoes" who "continued to live where he always had—in the brown birds of the bush, in the dusty footpaths, and in the expressions of thin old men in tattered coats" (182).

The Symbolism of some Characters' Names

Makhaya Maseko

In the Bantu languages, of which Zulu is one, it is possible to arrive at several nuanced meanings just by taking into account word formation. For example, the root of the Zulu word Makhaya is -*khaya*, from which, by adding prefixes, we can derive the following meanings, all of them metonymically relevant to the purpose of this paper. One says *khaya/makhaya* (home/homes) when directly addressing the home or homes as if they were people, as in some praise poetry. In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, the character Makhaya has no home or homes that he might address declamatorily and panegyrically in this manner because they have been soured by apartheid. Bessie Head has him explain his name: "it is for one who stays at home" (2)—but here he is in Botswana, on his way to Golema Mmidi, as it turns out, where he, in the beginning, sees himself as merely "passing through" (24). *Ikhaya* and *amakhaya*, the singular and plural forms of the buildings in which people make their homes, can be contrasted with the slums in which Makhaya has lived (121). *Ngekhaya* and *emakhaya* are singular and plural locatives respectively, "at home" and "at the homes", when the speaker is close to them. *Umkhaya* is informal and means "home girl" or "home boy". Makhaya has never been really close enough to anyone to call him or her home boy or home girl, and even if he were, he has now left them behind, and the challenge is to create them in Golema Mmidi.

Makhaya's surname "Maseko" is closely associated with "home" as well. Maseko refers to the three stones that people use to balance the rounded bottom of a clay cooking pot over a fire in the hearth of the home. His full name may match the English collocation "home and hearth", the two bringing together suggestions of story-telling around the fire and feelings of warmth, security, and belonging. His name contrasts with the uprootings and imprisonments he has undergone because of apartheid.

Makhaya Maseko is acutely aware of the irony of his name, and reference to the factors that destabilize him to the point of living on a "touch-and-go line with his sanity" (121) suggests an uprooting that is the start of a painful physical and spiritual journey in search of "peace of mind" rather than fame (24). His reasons for going into exile are simple: he cannot marry and have children in a country where black men are called "boy" and "dog" and "kaffir" (10). He struggles to subdue the apartheid-induced demons in him such as his extreme "loneliness" (21, 24, 26, 61), his "distrust and dislike of white people" (27), the "complexity of hatred and humiliation that had dominated his life" (67), his "horror of life" (93), the "hollow feeling inside" (124), "the ashes, frustrations and grief" of his life (183). Shortly after crossing the

border into drought-stricken Botswana, he thinks to himself that perhaps "all this dryness and bleakness amounted to home and that somehow he had come to the end of a journey" (11). It is not until he is in the enabling atmosphere of Golema Mmidi that he really finds a home.

Gilbert Balfour

All the misfits of Golema Mmidi have undertaken journeys of a similar kind to Makhaya's, and in Gilbert Balfour's case, the destabilization that uproots him occurs in England in his upper-middle-class family (98). Bessie Head describes his background in just two paragraphs, referring to women wearing pearl necklaces and brittle smiles, conversing in polite tones and suffering from boredom (98). She mentions the acquisition of mansions, and Gilbert's suicidal, neurotic mother, from whom her son flees by going to live in a tent in the forest for a year, where he learns the "humility and tenderness" that makes him "not compatible with the great causes of the world" (99). This experience prepares him for life in Golema Mmidi. He is called "my son Gilbert" by the old man Dinorego (24), even before he marries Dinorego's daughter Maria. He enjoys goat meat and sour-milk porridge, and is generally what in disapproving colonial language would be called a "nigger lover" or in Afrikaans a "kafferboetie".

The Germanic name Gilbert is made up two elements: "Gil" (from *gisel* or *gisa*, meaning "pledge") and "bert" (from *beraht* or *beorht*, meaning "bright").[4] So one can see Gilbert as Golema Mmidi's "bright pledge" regarding agricultural innovations. In addition, one of Gilbert's namesakes is a twelfth-century missionary, Gilbert of Sempringham, who founded monasteries and the first convents in England, and established a holy order called the Gilbertines—operating contemporaneously with the Cistercians and the Benedictines. Gilbert is a driven missionary of sorts too, and contrasts very strongly with the pompous, ignorant Reverend-Smith-and-Father-Drumont type missionaries immortalized by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* and Mongo Beti in *The Poor Christ of Bomba*.

In the same vein, Gilbert's surname Balfour induces one to contrast him with Lord Balfour, prime minister of England from 1902–05, who oversaw the end of the South African War in 1902 and had much to say about extending the vote to South African "Natives" at the time of the passing of the Act that gave South Africa dominion status in 1910:

> You cannot give them equal rights without threatening the whole fabric of civilization. Red Indians are gradually dying out. The Australian aborigines are even more clearly predestined to early extinction. But with the black races of Africa, for the first time we have the problem of races as vigorous in constitution, as capable of increasing in numbers in contact with white civilization. (qtd. in Murphy xiv)

Balfour seems to say here that if black people do not die of disease and alcohol like the Native Americans and the Native Australians, then other means than giving them civil rights must be found that will ensure their demise and secure white civilization. Bessie Head rejects this kind of specious arrogance by counter-posing it to the practice of Gilbert Balfour's life in Golema Mmidi. The people of Golema Mmidi, battered by life though they are, are "gener[ous] of soul and mind" (120), and their relationship is one of "continuous give and take, and who took and who gave and when and how was never counted up" (128).

Paulina Sebeso

Paulina Sebeso is named for all the people of Golema Mmidi who have undergone a "Pauline experience" or are yet to undergo it. The allusion refers to Saul of Tarsus in the bible, who, although a Jew, was hired by the Romans to do their dirty work for them. Saul persecuted

[4] <www.behindthename.com/phpfind.php?name=gilbert> and <www.kungunde.ch/HMG.htm#gngilbert>, accessed 30 June 2007.

other Jews—until one day when he was struck off his horse by a shining light, and Christ's voice, emanating from the horse, asked him why Saul was persecuting him. Thereafter Saul took the name of Paul and became a fervent, vigorous founder of new Christian churches in Asia Minor, in modern-day Turkey.

The "misfits" of Golema Mmidi go on similar painful journeys to self-knowledge, in the process of which they shed their old selves and emerge renewed and more mature in their emotions and judgments than before. This new sense of self is formidable because the mere fact of its existence contains an unstated ultimatum that Subchief Matenge, for example, recognizes very well: he must either undergo a "Pauline experience" himself and learn to respect the lives of the people of Golema Mmidi, or they will challenge him constantly by the mere fact of being. When Matenge summons Paulina Sebeso to see him about the death of her son at her cattle post, the people of Golema Mmidi accompany her. Matenge misreads their calm moral support as a revolt against him, and, seized by fear, he goes into his house and hangs himself.

Paulina's surname Sebeso means "sacrifice". Her ten year-old son Isaac calls to mind the biblical Abraham and his son, also called Isaac, whom he nearly sacrificed as a sign of his love for God. Paulina, in her attempts to lead an independent, dignified life, has to make tough decisions—like leaving her boy to herd eighty cattle all by himself. We are told that her lips are "compressed" and her eyes are "hard, realistic" (138). She visits him on foot "every three or four months" (156–57) to bring him food rations and check whether he is well. She is too poor to hire an older person (137), and explains that her cattle "are all that [stand] between her children and herself and outright starvation" (137). Paulina's statements offer a small insight into the exploitation of boys' labour power in cattle herding, insofar as it militates against early schooling because of its long hours in the open. That Paulina is a "resourceful woman" (147) is evident in the fact that she has penetrated the Botswana male domain of cattle owning, but here, she is not the enthusiastic implementer of Gilbert Balfour's innovations in arable agriculture; she is as conservative as any male pastoral farmer who counts his wealth in cattle and is loath to exchange them for cash. "A Motswana without any cattle at all might as well be dead" she exclaims in shock at the idea of selling her cattle (138). An unforeseen result is that the child's hitherto unnoticed tuberculosis, is exacerbated by drought and malnutrition, and so, unlike Abraham's Isaac, who is saved by an angel just as his father's knife is about to descend on him, Paulina's Isaac dies a lonely death at his mother's cattle post, a sacrifice on the altar of her independence and will to survive.

Naming as an Act of Authority

Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* (1949) observes that contrast is a basic thought pattern, and when we engage in it, we set ourselves up as "the One", "the subject", "the essential", and everyone else as "the Other", "the object", "the inessential". Reciprocally, those whom we set up as "the Other" in turn constitute themselves as "the One" and see us as "the Other". She argues that it is this kind of reciprocity that makes it possible for workers, or blacks, or Jews to contemplate massacring the ruling class or slave owners or fascists (19). She writes,

> No subject will readily volunteer to become the object, the inessential; it is not the Other who, in defining himself as other, establishes himself as the One. The Other is posed by the one in defining himself as the One. But if the Other is not to regain the status of the of being the One, he must be submissive enough to accept this alien point of view. (18)

She then asks the following question: how is it that some people do not reciprocate by defining themselves as "the One" but rather accept the "alien point of view that they are 'Other'" (17)?

She answers herself by listing what it is that makes this possible: for example, not having the concrete means to organize and agitate in such a way as to confront the correlative unit; not having a past, a history, a religion of one's own (or if one does, not recognizing its existence or not believing in it); not having "solidarity of work" (19) such as, for example, in workers' organizations; not having a sense of "community feeling" (19) of the kind that developed amongst American slaves and ghetto Jews even in the face of attempts by slave-owning and fascist regimes to visit social death upon them.

Simone de Beauvoir was, of course, talking about European women under patriarchy in much the same terms as John Stewart Mill when describing their socialization into femininity in Victorian times (*The Subjection of Women*, 1869)—some eighty years before her. But the same question arises in any situation where there is a gross inequality of power. David Diop, in his poem "The Renegade" for example, castigates his "brother" for accepting French colonialism's definition of himself as Other. Okot p'Bitek's Lawino condemns her husband as "a dog of the white man" (115). And Bessie Head in *When Rain Clouds Gather* has her protagonist Makhaya Maseko raise the same question about apartheid south Africa: "Things would not have been so bad if black men as a whole had not accepted their oppression, […]. But all black men did it. They did it. But why? Why not be shot dead? Why not be shot dead rather than live the living death of humiliation?" (121).

What kind of naming can we recognize, then, in *When Rain clouds Gather* that is an act of self-definition and that reciprocally invites counter-naming and is both a mark and a measure of autonomy? I will deal with two types: the first pertaining to the Makhaya's self-perception in response to his ethic, class, or national background, and the second pertaining to the statements of the omniscient narrator of the story, who, in some instances, is indistinguishable from Bessie Head, the author.

Naming and Counter-Naming in Response to Ethnic, Class, or National Background

A prime example of this type of naming and counter-naming in *When Rain Clouds Gather* is Makhaya Maseko. Zulu society has laid down the ideals, standards, and goals of masculinity that he is expected to strive towards by those who are responsible for his primary socialization in his home, his parents.

There are two systems against which Makhaya defines himself. The first one is the customary Zulu one of his "tribalist" (10) parents, the military history and masculinist prescriptions which he rejects. For example, he laughs "sarcastically" (3) at himself for describing himself as a Zulu, and adds, "Since the days of Shaka we've assumed that the whole world belongs to us" (3). Furthermore, he sees no reason why his sisters should threat him with "exaggerated respect" (10) just because he is the first-born in his family and male. Instead of enjoying the status, privileges, and prestige accorded him by custom as a man, he asks, "Why should men be brought up with a false sense of superiority over women?" (10).

These sentiments of Makhaya's are linked to his experience of apartheid, the second system that he defines himself against. The anguish that its injustices cause him makes him not to flee blindly into the refuge of Zulu culture but to question some of its similarities to apartheid. For one thing, empire building, no matter where, necessarily demands the conquest and subjection of foreign peoples, and one can certainly choose to stand on the side of the conquerors or of the conquered with all that such a position entails—the arrogance of power to name the conquered, the acceptance of this naming by the conquered, or rebellion against this temerity to name on the part of the conquered. Makhaya places himself on the side of the conquered, and his rebellion against apartheid leads him to a consciousness of, and rebellion against, the injustices of his own Zulu culture.

Makhaya, having come this far in defining himself, is hardly the sort of man who will bend to Subchief Matenge's apartheid-like machinations, foreigner and refugee under Matenge's jurisdiction though he is. His names for him are choice: "lout, cheat, dog" (127). He goes on: "'I've had enough of swines. I've had enough of those tin gods called white men, too. […] I'd like to kill if I had to […]'" (127). He does not stop with Matenge in Golema Mmidi only. He singles out the Matenges of Africa as well: "'Matenges everywhere get themselves into a position over the poor'" (127). But not only Africa—Europe, too: "six million Jews had quietly died" (130). And America, with its "strange animal they tarred and feathered and hung up from a tree to die" (129).

In short, to use Simone de Beauvoir's terminology, Makhaya refuses to inhabit the "alien point of view" that he is "Other". He reciprocates by positing himself as "the One", thus confronting face to face the white Matenges and the black Matenges with the necessary correlative unit.

The Omniscient Narrator as Namer

The omniscient narrator of *When Rain Clouds Gather* (sometimes indistinguishable from Bessie Head as author) is satirical when it comes to the portrayal of the "two-penny-ha'penny politicians who sprung up everywhere like mushrooms in Africa these days" (63)—"these days" meaning after 1958, the year in which Ghana became the first African country to achieve independence from colonial rule. A definition of satire is that it is a weapon for cutting down to size people, beliefs, and practices. It is topical, singling out for attack explicit things in a society with which the satirist is disgusted. It goes beyond noting abuses because its points of reference are high and lasting moral standards, which expression may be humorous or reviling. All these features of satire are present in the portrayal of Joas Tsepe.

Joas Tsepe is said to come "from a certain tribe of the Kalahari Desert who were still regarded as slaves" (58): whether called a "slave" or a "servant" or a "retainer", this little detail identifies him as a Mokgalagadi or a Mosarwa. But instead of exercising reciprocity in Simone de Beauvoir's sense of the word, he betrays his own dignity and sense of self by not being the sort of person who "stop[s] and examine[s] himself" (69). For this reason he kow-tows to Matenge; he has a mind as "crooked" (60) as Matenge's, and he has no words with which to confront Matenge's contempt for him. He is bullied by an "inferiority complex" that is "the driving force of his life" (68).

Joas Tsepe's manner of speaking is described as "loud chatter" (58) and he himself as a "parrot" (43)—which reflects on the integrity of his actions as a politician of the Pan-African (42) or African socialist (43) or African nationalist (42) stamp. He sees himself not as one of the "nonentities raised up from the dust […] who now reigned supreme in the local government councils" (54) but as "the minister of finance in the shadow government" (43). He undertakes all sorts of "VIP trips" (43) and laps up the "VIP treatment" as befits his position as the "undersecretary general of the Botswana National Liberation Party" (42) engaged in the "liberation struggle" (43).

Bessie Head uses farce to describe the election campaign in which the "sons of slaves", like Joas Tsepe, are pitted against "the sons of chiefs", like Sekoto and Matenge perhaps (59). Whereas the sons of chiefs are better educated and issue "manifestos about how they will deal with the problems of water, agriculture, cattle development" (59), the sons of slaves blare into microphones: "'Mr Chairman and fellow delegates …'" (58), and denounce the "'imperialists and neo-colonialists' who were still skillfully manipulating the affairs of an oppressed people" (59) and whose pamphlets are full of spelling mistakes: "'Do not stamble'" (59) and "ignorant disease" (59) instead of "ignorance about disease", and the sons of chiefs latch onto these errors and asked rhetorically whether such men can rule a country. In retaliation the sons of slaves

accuse the sons of chiefs of all having syphilis (59), for which defamatory statements they are punished, and Joas Tsepe himself is jailed for vote-rigging (60).

Bessie Head laughs at Botswana's opposition parties of the time and, through them, certain types of modern African leadership generally, that are given to, as she says, "all the filth, and lies and hypocrisy" (183). Through Chief Sekoto and Subchief Matenge, Bessie Head does not spare traditional leadership either—whether in its "ghoulish" (183) form, Matenge, or in its benign form, the "charming halfwit […] Paramount Chief Sekoto" (182) whose burdens of state are questionable even in an indirect rule chief, for they consist largely of "fast cars, good food, and pretty girls. All the good food ha[s] made him very fat, so that he [gives] the impression of waddling like a duck when he walk[s]" (45).

Through satire Head makes no bones about certain leadership practices in Botswana that she finds wanting and that are as "authentically" Botswana as the people who indulge in them, uncertain identity or not. Her use of satire allows her to assert a clear moral position. Her demand, though unstated because it depends on irony for effect, is that all the "filth, lies and hypocrisy" must stop if everyone is to benefit from Botswana's impending independence from Britain. It is also equally clear what sort of benefit she has in mind. The barefoot people of Golema Mmidi live it. It is impossible to imagine them electing Joas Tsepe as "Councillor for Golema Mmidi"(184) because they are a community of self-defined people.

Conclusion

Naming in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, I have argued, is important. Place names as well as the names of characters reinforce theme and aspects of structure at symbolic levels. In addition, I have sought to demonstrate how naming as an act of authority is essential to self-definition, and therefore protest, or in Simone de Beauvoir's words "reciprocity". Finally Bessie Head as author also names by resorting to the conventions of satire. In this way, she makes politics in its broadest definition a central aspect of her work.

Works Cited

Bagwasi, Mompoloki. "Identity and Race in Bessie Head's *Maru*." *Writing Bessie Head in Botswana: An Anthology of Remembrance and Criticism*. Eds. Mary S. Lederer and Seatholo M. Tumedi. Gaborone: Pentagon, 2007. 87–95.

de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. 1949. Trans. H. M. Parshley. London: Picador Classics, 1988.

p'Bitek, Okot. *Song of Lawino*. 1966. London: Heinemann, 1984.

Cole, D. T. *An Introduction to Tswana Grammar*. 1955. Cape Town: Longman, 1975.

Diop, David. "The Renegade." *Modern African Poetry*. Eds. Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier. London: Penguin, 1984. 244.

Head, Bessie. *When Rain Clouds Gather.* Oxford: Heinemann. 1969.

Head, Bessie. *The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana Village Tales*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1977.

———. "The Collector of Treasures." *The Collector of Treasures* 87–103.

———. "The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration." *The Collector of Treasures* 1–6.

———. "The Special One." *The Collector of Treasures* 81–86.

Head, Bessie. *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1981.

Murphy, Dervla. *South From the Limpopo: Travels Through South Africa*. London: John Murray, 1997.

Rasebotsa, Nobantu. "*Maru* and Bessie Head's Place in Botswana." *Current Writing* 5.1 (1993): 25–35.

The Depiction of the Caste System in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and Bessie Head's *Maru*

K. N Kgafela[1]

Maru and *Untouchable* depict the caste system as a blot on religious and social institutions across societies of different racial backgrounds. The system perpetrates structural and moral sins committed against the marginalized groups in the society, which leads to physical and moral barriers between the upper and lower castes: between the Tswana and Basarwa in *Maru* and the Brahmin and Untouchables in *Untouchable.* This division impacts negatively on the underdog socially, religiously, and psychologically.

The caste system is based on a belief (and practice) that hierarchy is part of the natural order. This kind of argument reinforces the notion that it is natural that some people are born masters and others servants in order to maintain the societal status quo. This idea of a "divine" order can be found in many cultures, regardless of geographical place. In a more rigid caste system, there is little or no upward mobility, and caste is often a matter of social standing and ritual pollution rather than one of wealth or influence (class). A person is born into a caste and remains within that caste until s/he dies. In addition, members of higher castes consider the lowest ones to be unclean. In Africa, the *Osu* caste in Nigeria, the *Yibir* in Somalia, and the *Basarwa* in Botswana (to mention but a few) have been relegated to an inferior status of outcastes. The common feature that all these outcastes share is being regarded as impure and hence being ostracized from the mainstream society.

In his novel *Untouchable,* Mulk Raj Anand fictionalizes the reality of the caste system in Hinduism and its dehumanizing effects on the outcastes. He opens his novel by portraying the living conditions of the untouchables:

> The outcastes colony was a group of mud walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries, and separate from them. There lived the scavengers, the leather workers, the washermen, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grass cutters and other outcastes from Hindu society. A brook ran near the lane, once with crystal clear water, now soiled by the dirt and filth of the public latrines situated about it, the odour of the hides and skins of dead carcasses left to dry on its banks, the dung of the donkeys, sheep, horses, cows and buffaloes heaped up to be made into fuel cakes, and the biting, choking, pungent fumes that oozed from its sides. […] made it an "uncongenial" place to live in. (9)

From the excerpt, one understands the separation of the untouchables from the mainstream society, and the most unhygienic conditions they find themselves in. Anand here clearly depicts the cruelty of the caste system that perpetrates the oppression. Their environment is filthy, and one wonders about the health risk they are exposed to, which is of no concern to the upper castes. Rajendra Prasad understands this characterization in Anand's novel as follows:

> The locale and the society of untouchables conform to the canons of realism in the sense that scavengers and sweepers are pariahs in a society dominated by absolute outworn caste morality. […] Anand [exploits] the tensions in Indian society, and makes the reader see for himself the poverty, suffering, sincerity, and humanity of the sweeper boy. (14)

Anand also depicts the untouchables as performing unpleasant tasks that include cleaning latrines. Bakha is insulted for not cleaning the latrines for the upper castes:

---

[1] K. N. Kgafela is a lecturer in English at the University of Botswana. Her research interests cover English Romantic poetry, Commonwealth literature, and cultural studies.

> "Why aren't the latrines clean, you rogue of a Bhake! There is not one fit to go near! I have walked all round! Do you know you are responsible for my piles? I caught the contagion sitting on one of those unclean latrines!"
>
> "All right, Havildar ji, I will get one ready for you at once," Bakha said cautiously as he proceeded to pick up his brush and basket from the place where these tools decorated the front wall of the house. (15)

In his introduction to Anand's novel, E. M. Forster says about the occupations assigned to untouchables that

> The sweeper is worse off than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties and may even become free, but the sweeper is bound forever, born into a state from which he cannot escape and where he is excluded from social intercourse and the consolations of his religion. Unclean himself he pollutes others when he touches them. They have to purify themselves, and to rearrange their plans for the day. (qtd. in Anand iv)

Forster makes clear that there is no social mobility in the caste system; if one is born into untouchability, no education, wealth, or religion can redeem one.

Anand also depicts the fact that untouchables cannot share walls with upper castes:

> The outcastes were not allowed to mount the platform surrounding the well, because if they were ever to draw water from it, the Hindus of three upper castes would consider the water polluted. Nor were they allowed access to the near-by brook as their use of it would contaminate the stream. […] Perforce they had to collect at the foot of the caste Hindus' well and depend on the bounty of some of their superiors to pour water into their pitchers. More often than not there was no caste Hindu present. (22)

In *Untouchable,* untouchables are not allowed to enter houses of higher castes. When Bakha wants to buy bread from the "holy mother" he cannot enter the house, "For being an outcaste he could not insult the sanctity of the houses by climbing the stairs to the top floors where the kitchens were, but to shout and announce his arrival from below" (67–68).

Bakha is not allowed to enter the temples. When he wants to see the inside of the temple during one of his cleaning jobs,

> He realized that an Untouchable going into a temple polluted it past purification. […] But the edge of curiosity became more and more acute as he stood there. He suddenly dismissed his thoughts and with a determined, hurried step went towards the stairs, looking to this and that, with a tense, heavy head, but unafraid. […] But soon he lost his grace in the low stoop which the dead weight of years of habitual bending cast on him. He became the humble, oppressed under-dog that he was by birth, afraid of everything, creeping slowly up, in a curiously hesitant, cringing movement. (58)

It is important to note that by going up the temple's stairs (and symbolically expressing his desire for upward mobility), Bakha has committed a sin against the upper castes—he has defiled the temple; he has polluted the temple, and while he listens to the melody from the inside of the church building,

> a cry disturbed him: "Polluted, polluted, polluted." A shout rang through the air. […] "Polluted, polluted, polluted!" shouted the Brahmin below. The crowd above him took the cue and shouted after him, waving their hands, some in fear, others in anger, but all in a terrible orgy of excitement. One of the crowd struck out an individual note.
>
> "Get off the steps you scavenger! Off with you! You have defiled our whole service. Now we will have to pay for the purification ceremony. Get down, get away you dog!" (61)

In regions where the attitudes towards the untouchables are more severe, not only touching them is seen as polluting, but also even contact with their shadow is seen as polluting. Any contact of upper caste with an untouchable renders the upper caste defiled, and he must immerse or wash himself with water to be purified. In Anand's novel, when Bakha accidentally touches one of the Brahmins, the latter shouts,

> "Keep to the side of the road, you low caste vermin!" He suddenly heard someone shouting at him "why don't you call you swine and announce your approach! Do you know that you have touched me and defiled me, you cock-eyed son of a bow legged scorpion! Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself. And it was a new Dhoti and shirt I put on this morning." (46)

Bakha's reaction to this verbal attack shows the helplessness of the outcastes in the face of the powerful upper castes:

> Bhakha stood amazed, embarrassed. He was deaf and dumb. His senses were paralysed. Only fear gripped his soul, fear and humility and servility. He was used to being spoken to roughly. […] Bakha's mouth was open. But he couldn't utter a single word. He had already joined his hands instinctively. (46)

However, Bakha questions the system at some point:

> "Why are we always abused? The sentry inspector and the sahib that day abused my father. They always abuse us. Because we are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it too. That's why I came here. I was tired of working on latrines everyday. That's why they don't touch us, the high castes. […] for them I am a sweeper, sweeper—Untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That's the word! Untouchable! I am an untouchable!" (51–52)

This is a moment of simultaneous disillusionment and acceptance of his place. Bakha however continues to announce his approach, "posh, posh, sweeper coming". Anand writes,

> Like a ray of light shooting through the darkness, the recognition of his position, the significance of his lot dawned upon him. It illuminated the inner chambers of his mind. Everything that had happened to him traced its course up to this light and got the answer. The contempt of those who came to the latrines daily and complained that there weren't any latrines clean, the sneers of the people in the outcastes' colony, the abuse of the crowd which had gathered round him this morning. It was all explicable now. (52)

P. K. Rajan observes that "The event opens Bakha's eyes, and Bakha realizes with a sudden shock what he really is in the society" (105), and that "Anand portrays how the external environment of the protagonist changes him gradually, makes him give up his earlier position of utter submissiveness, gives him a critical faculty, helps him assume an aggressive posture and sets him on an endless search into infinite future" (107). This kind of self-understanding is an important component of what Bessie Head describes for her protagonist Margaret Cadmore in *Maru*.

Maru also touches on issues of caste. Like India, Botswana has social divisions which uphold the status of some tribes over others. Bessie Head did not write *Maru* in a vacuum since she was aware at the time of social stratification in Botswana. Bolaane states that

> When Bessie Head arrived in *Ga-mmangwato* […] countryside, she very soon identified a social stratification of the Ngwato society which ran along internal divisions: first according to social position at birth as an aristocrat or noble (*wa letso la bogosi*), commoner (*motho fela*) or immigrant (*mohaladi*), or serf (*motlhanka*); second, according to where one lived (wards, ethnic group); and third, according to totemic group. (64)

It is historically evident that social inequalities were prevalent in Botswana based on ethnicity, social standing, and economic power. One has to point out that economic power was skewed towards aristocrats (in this case, the Tswana-speaking tribes), and those born into serfdorm (such as Basarwa) remained poor. Bessie Head fearlessly writes about such divisions, which many could have taken for granted as being natural. According to Leloba Molema,

> With her novel *Maru*, [Bessie Head] started a debate that reverberated throughout the country, for she dared to touch the subject of the unequal relationship between Batswana and Basarwa (and, by extension, other subject groups, so-called *Makgalagatsana* and *Makoba*). And why not? After all, she was a fugitive from apartheid, and her South African experience most certainly primed her, programmed

her to light without fail upon certain special, unspoken of peculiarities of our seemingly placid society. (2)

In *Maru,* the narrator provides a clear picture of how the Basarwa were perceived by powerful:

> 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 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. (7)

On forms of inequalities portrayed in the novel Bolaane writes,

> In her novel *Maru*, Bessie the social critic discusses issues about inequalities in race, gender, and social class in the village of Serowe. It is about domination of those who are weak by those who are powerful, women by men, and those who are poor by those who have wealth and material possessions. (69)

The protagonist Margaret is born to a Mosarwa woman (an outcaste to the local people), who dies during child-birth. She is raised by the wife of a missionary who instills in her European values which cause many to mistake her for a "colored", but to the people of Dilepe, she is a "Masarwa", something less than a human being. As a child she is always teased by other children:

> What was a Bushman supposed to do? She had no weapons of words or personality, only a permanent silence and a face which revealed no emotion except that now and then an abrupt tear would splash down out of one eye. If a glob of spit dropped onto her arm at playtime hour, she quietly wiped it away. If they caught her in some remote part of the school buildings during the playtime hour, they would set up the wild, jiggling dance; "since when did a Bushy go to school? We take him to the bush to eat mealie pap, pap, pap." (17–18)

As an adult she becomes a teacher and when she first takes up a teaching job in Dilepe, for a while she is thought to be a "coloured" (who has more status), but once she declares that she is a "Masarwa", hell breaks loose. When Dikeledi asks what her name is she says, "Margaret Cadmore was the name of my teacher. She was a white woman from England. I am a Masarwa" (19).

Dikeledi's response shows her fear of what Margaret's identity could do to her and she urges her not to disclose her identity:

> Dikeledi drew in her breath with a sharp hissing sound. Dilepe village was the stronghold of some of the most powerful and wealthy chiefs in the country, all of whom owned innumerable Masarwa as slaves. "Don't mention this to anyone else," she said, shock making her utter strange words. "If you keep silent about the matter, people will simply assume you are a coloured. I mistook you for a coloured until you brought up the other matter."
>
> "But I am not ashamed of being a Masarwa," the young girl said seriously. (19–20)

Margaret's presence in Dilepe, where the Batswana customarily look down on a Mosarwa, generates an upheaval. She will be accepted, even adored, in Dilepe if only she lives the fiction of a "coloured" identity. Margaret's insistence on declaring her ethnic background together with the questioning of the caste custom by three notable members of Dilepe's ruling elite (Dikeledi, Moleka, and Maru), constitutes the promise of a recognition within the society: not only among the oppressor elites, but also the Basarwa's awareness of their own rights.

Dikeledi's fear of Margaret's ostracism by the society is confirmed by the latter's encounter with the principal of the school where she is to work:

> "Excuse the question, but are you a Coloured?" he asked.

> "No," she replied. "I am a Masarwa."
>
> The shock was so great that he almost jumped into the air. Why, he'd be the sensation of the high society's circle for a week! He controlled himself. He looked down. He smiled a little. Then he said: "I see." […] He kept noting out of the corner of his eye that the Masarwa (she was no longer a human being) seemed extraordinarily friendly with Dikeledi, who in his eyes, was royalty of royalty. Should he warn Dikeledi that she was talking to "it"? "It" surely had all the appearance of a Coloured. "There has been some chicanery," he muttered, over and over again. (35)

The principal cannot believe that a Mosarwa could ever be sent to a place like Dilepe to teach Batswana pupils; it must have been a mistake! This kind of attitude shows the intolerance that goes hand in hand with discrimination of every sort. The reaction of school pupils (who are coached by the principal) to Margaret being a Mosarwa summarises the society's general feelings about the outcast. Bessie Head writes,

> A boy at the far end of the room had his hand raised. She knew there was something wrong. For the first week they had been restless, absent-minded. They had hardly noticed her, being involved in their adjustment to their new situation. Now they all stared at her with fascination and attention. A cold sweat broke out, down her back.
>
> "Yes?" she asked, unsmiling.
>
> The boy shook his head and laughed to himself. "I am thinking about a certain matter," he said. Then he looked directly into her face with an insolent stare: "Tell me," he said. "Since when is a Bushy a teacher?" […] From a distance their voices sounded like a confused roar : "You are a Bushman," they chanted. "You are a Bushman." (40–41)

The incident leaves Margaret shocked and helpless; "the room heaved a little and a whole classroom of children blanked out before her. Yet she still stood upright with wide open eyes" (41). To add salt to the wound, the principal accuses her of not being able to control her class. The treatment of Basarwa by chiefs (upper caste) is clearly outlined in Moleka and Maru's conversation about "Masarwa":

> "I'm not like you Moleka," [Maru] said with heavy sarcasm. "I still own the Masarwa as slaves. All my one hundred thousand cattle and fifty cattle posts are maintained by the Masarwa. They sleep on the ground, near outdoor fires. Their only blanket is the fire. When the fire warms them on one side, they turn round and warm themselves on the other side. […] I want the bed you loaned to the Masarwa teacher returned, immediately." (55)

A number of observations can be drawn from Maru's speech: first that the Basarwa and Batswana are not equals; second that they are slaves of the Tswana-speaking tribes. Like the untouchables, they are outcastes, who live on the remains from the plates of their masters. Hierarchy is natural, and therefore education is not enough to give Margaret the status of a respectable teacher. Serfdom becomes a kind of birth mark of the Basarwa the same way it is for the untouchables. I agree with Bolaane when she observes that "as a way of forcing us the Botswana society to come to terms with the stereotypes and prejudice associated with the BaSarwa, Bessie links the ethnicity of the character Margaret Cadmore to some poor and shabby- looking dead woman whose language or place of origin are unknown" (69–70).

In conclusion one may argue that the caste system, as Gandhi suggests, is a blot not only on Hinduism, but on any custom or culture that condones it, since it creates a barrier between groups of people and ostracizes, humiliates, and oppresses the underdog. Any form of discrimination gives privileges to one group of people and not to the other. This leads to the oppression and marginalization of the other, leaving marks of trauma and dehumanization that may not even be erased by the passage of time. Bessie Head and Mulk Raj Anand, though in different cultural contexts, have successfully portrayed the suffering of the under-privileged at the hands of the religiously and tribally advantaged groups and societies.

Works Cited

Anand, Mulk Raj. *Untouchable*. 1933. New York: Penguin, 1986.

Bolaane, Maitseo. "Bessie Head and the Dynamics of Social Relations in Serowe: A Historical Perspective." *Writing Bessie Head in Botswana* 61–73.

Head, Bessie. *Maru*. 1971. Oxford: Heinemann, 1995.

Lederer, Mary S. and Tumedi, Seatholo M., eds. *Writing Bessie Head in Botswana: An Anthology of Remembrance and Criticism.* Gaborone: Pentagon, 2007.

Molema, Leloba. "'The end is where we start from': A Tribute to Bessie Head." *Writing Bessie Head in Botswana* 2–3.

Rajan, P. K. "Psychology of Aggression in Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and Anand's *Untouchable*." *The Novels of Mulk Raj Anand*. Ed. R. K. Dhawan. New Delhi: Prestige, 1992. 105–09.

Rajendra Prasad, V. V. N. *Five Indian Novelists: B. Rajan, Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, Arun Joshi, Anita Desai.* New Delhi: Prestige, 1990.

The Significance of Bessie Head's Response to "The Call of the Global Green"

Sonja Darlington[1]

What is nature? Where does one find it? What is nature writing? In Karen Winkler's "Scholars Embark on Study of Literature about the Environment," Winkler educates the general academic community about questions related to the environment during the 1990s, when green cultural studies began to discuss fundamental problems in the field. Particularly as the new group, the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), embarked on organizing scholars around these very questions, Winkler's reaching out to a broader audience was timely. However, early on the examination of ecocriticism and ecoliterature included only a few parts of the international community, such as Japan, South Africa, Russia, and Australia. Thus, the problems of the eco-related groups had even more facets and more fundamental aspects to address creatively, so that the approaches to ecocritism and ecoliterature would be less limiting. Thoughts about situating the Botswana writer Bessie Head in the center, rather than the periphery, of this call for global green occurred as a result of reading William Slaymaker's article "Echoing the Other(s): The Call of the Global Green and Black African Responses", in the *PMLA* of January 2001.

While reading this article, in preparation to teach a course on "Agrarian Perspectives in African novels and Contemporary African Economic Policies" at Beloit College, I became determined to use this course and its students to address his call. In the article, Slaymaker identifies a few black African writers and critics who write ecological literature and criticism, and he hopes that future African writers will contribute more to the field of ecoliterature and ecocriticism. According to Slaymaker, Nigerian poet Niyi Osundare is "the best example of a black African writer, critic, and academic whose creative energy is focused on environmental and ecological issues" (134). Yes, Osundare's poetry in *Eye of the Earth* is environmentally friendly and worthy of the highest praise, but to say his writing is the pinnacle of environmental and ecological writing, as Slaymaker suggests, is a statement that clearly incites further investigation.

Slaymaker's analysis of black African responses calls into question and problematizes the reductive notion that "Black African critics and writers have traditionally embraced nature writing, land issues, and landscape themes that are pertinent to national and local cultural claims […]"(132), and are not part of the discussion of ecocriticism and ecoliterature. By the fallacy of omission, Slaymaker assumes that black Africans are not in the class of "a world literary tradition of writing about nature and the environment [which includes] Wordsworth, Thoreau, Li Po, and Basho, [as] among the best known examples" (129). Unabashedly, critics such as Slaymaker create their own top tier of ecoliterary writers and expect their authority to be credible for a wide-ranging international audience. My discussion of Bessie Head's writing is to propose that Head's influential voice on the environment was not heard in her time, and the occasion of celebrating her seventieth birthday is an auspicious moment to redefine her environmental concerns before the international public. It is also a time to re-engage ecocritics and ecoliterature writers to keep the earth's precarious sustainability as their primary focus of conversation with an *inclusive* global community.

---

[1] Sonja Darlington is professor and chair of Education and Youth Studies at Beloit College. She has taught courses on African literature, with an emphasis on gender, ecology, development theory, and interdisciplinary perspectives Her research focuses on women writers in African literature, and with study grants in Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda, she concentrated on encouraging young women writers to publish.

To bring Bessie Head's gift of environmental acuity to the forefront is possible in three ways: one, by describing what contemporary (2006) college students at Beloit College identify as the themes and issues in Head's writing on the environment; two, by referencing what scholars theorize on Head's environmental writing craft; and three, by producing textual evidence that reflects Head's thinking on the environment. All of these aspects include a heavy reliance on the close reading of *When Rain Clouds Gather* and are interwoven to suggest the remarkable intricacies in which this text addresses environmental issues at the level of complexity that assuages concerns about it as simply about landscape, land issues, or nature during precolonialism. Before heading into the complex territory of Bessie Head's writing, the point must be reiterated that the criteria used in order to respond to Winkler's questions—What is nature? Where does one find it? What is nature writing?—will remain contestable. Winkler's questions evoke strong and disparate arguments about environmental ecocriticism and ecoliterature. For example, on the one hand, the criteria for distinguishing what is considered nature and/or environmental writing can be traced back to William Rueckert's 1978 essay entitled "Literature and Ecology", back to the beginning of literary theory, or even back to the anthologies in the 1990s, such as *The Norton Book on Nature Writing*, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, and *Sisters of the Earth*.

On the other hand, in terms of a historical foundation outlined by the international scholar Evan Mwangi, a "big boost" was given to African ecology by the environmentalist Wangari Maathai, the Nobel Prize winner from Kenya. Mwangi suggests that Maathai's environmental work is no less valuable to ecoliterature than, say, Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart,* Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*, and Zakes Mda's *Heart of Redness*. Mwangi maintains that these authors all wrote with an emphasis on the natural environment and its history, a core concept upon which eco-criticism and ecoliterature is founded. In order to further this position and to make Bessie Head part of the broader ecological literary canon, my purpose is to open up the discussion of who ought to be included as an ecoliterature writer and to provide evidence to support the idea that Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* responds directly to the "Call of the Global Green". If a group such as ASLE is serious in its endeavor to debate the terms of ecocritism and ecoliterature, and challenges such as Slaymaker's critique of African responses exist in primary journals, then it seems justifiable to follow through on an examination of how Head meets the high bar set by those who claim they represent the dialogue within the academic community.

To begin an investigation into the merits of Head's writing as representative of ecoliterature, one approach is to begin with Lawrence Buell's work *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, written in 1995. In this formative piece, Buell asserts that four defining features are necessary for environmental writing. They are the presence of natural history in human history, open spaces for other interests aside from human, a textual ethic that makes human beings responsible for the environment and accountable for its health and continuation, and a process rather than a static model of nature for understanding its changes and transformations. Another viable approach is to examine Gioia Woods's questions about literary texts, which ask how nature is represented, how gender is linked to landscape, what roles science and/or nature history play, how environmental ethics is involved, and how landscape can be a metaphor. While eco-literature may be ably critiqued by either method, critics in the field, aside from Buell and Woods, provide any number of other suggestions. For example, Cheryll Glotfelty in her *Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* has presented a very broad criterion. She theorizes that ecological criticism shares the principle that human culture is connected to the physical world, changing it and changed by it. Eco-criticism focuses on the interconnectedness between nature and culture, particularly the cultural artifacts of literature and language.

However, if just Buell's and Woods's approaches are applied to *When Rain Clouds Gather,* there is sufficient evidence to consider Head an ecolit writer. For when undergraduate students at Beloit College read the text, they implicitly wrote about Buell's criteria, as they elaborated on Head's themes and focus.[2] Students found that Head dealt with the natural history of Golema Mmidi, the privileging of rural open spaces for nonhumans, the individual and tribal accountability for a healthy environment, and the environmental changes noted by the community. For example, Kayla Svoboda makes the case that Bessie Head writes evocatively about the natural history of Golema Mmidi in her description of eastern Botswana where the thornbush is surrounded by a vast expanse of sand and scrub. Head depicts the thornbush in close detail, commenting on its tall, straight trunk like a tree, branches short like rough wild grass, "white thorns", and "clusters of pale olive-green leaves" (*When Rain Clouds Gather* 17). Allisa Boge notices Head's attention to the kinds of millet that is grown by the villagers, the parasitic witchweed that lives off the roots of maize and sorghum plants, and the weaver bird, "that lives off sorghum seed and caused heavy damage to crops each year […]" (41). Boge also references Head's comments on the over grazing of cattle and goats, which turned the village land into "sandy waste lands" and killed off the carrot seed grass, a significant indigenous species (37). As Head depicts it, knowing about soils, germinating seeds, or modern machinery could not defeat the land. "The great stretches of arid land completely stunned the mind" because of the "vast ocean of desert" (115).

Next, the privileging of open spaces for nonhuman interests is recognizable in Head's emphasis on the specific qualities attributed to the vast expanses of dry land with its cattle, birds, lizards, plants, and trees. For example, Christine Morse takes note of the profoundly significant interrelationship of the animal life and examines Head's observations of the small brown speckled-breasted birds, which live in huge colonies in Botswana. As the character Dinorego explains, their fat little bodies are dependent on "the soft juicy bodies of white ants, which inhabit the ground just beneath the surface of the earth" (*When Rain Clouds Gather* 137). The nonhuman interests are of such importance that they are duplicated in the miniature village created out of ordinary mud by Paulina Sebeso's young daughter. Heather McGee remarks on a particular investment in nonhuman interests via this parallel village, in which Head describes the goats, cattle, and even the "little grooved footpaths people all walk on" (107). Of significance is also the fact that Makhaya provides little trees for the young girl's village made out of the natural resources: wood and pitch.

Krista Eichhorst comments on environmental ethics of Head's novel, when she concludes in her paper that by the end of the novel, Gilbert discovers that his motive for staying in Botswana has changed from thinking primarily about how he can help Africans keep up with the industrialized world to one where maintaining the integrity of the land also really matters. Makhaya has also changed his attitudes in that he experiences the restorative qualities of the land and recognizes how it helps to heal the wounds of the racism and bigotry from his past in South Africa. As important, Eichhorst also examines how the land figures in prominently by having three functions in the novel. Land is a refuge from the personal tragedies suffered by the three main characters Gilbert, Makhaya, and Paulina. Land offers a purpose, a reason to strive, and hope for the future, particularly for Makhaya, the protagonist who throughout the novel is trying to escape his disillusionment in society. And land is a bridge through which the characters who work on the land are able to reconnect with others in the village and build a viable community. In essence, Head seems to be saying that land can transform humanity, if people are willing to heed nature, despite a relentless sun, infrequent rain, raging pestilence, and ravaging hunger. Perhaps worship is too strong a stance to describe the relationship

[2] The students were enrolled in a first-year seminar during the fall semester of 2006. Their work will be referred to in the discussion that follows.

between human beings and nature, but Head scrutinizes this reverence and its concomitant problems.

Finally, understanding natural changes and ecological transformations is an aspect of Head's novel that Margaret Canneff sees clear support for in a passage that elaborates the qualities of the carrot-seed and the wind-blown eragrostis. The eragrostis is a lush sweet grass that has a long frail, feathery stalk and crowds out the carrot seed. Aside from what Head specifies about the grasses, she writes a detailed observation of the "interesting changes that took place on this border strip" (*When Rain Clouds Gather* 36): "Within two years, this type of grass had gained dominion over the border strip area, crowding out the carrot-seed grass, which by then had ceased to grow" (36), and this amazing development has been closely observed by the character Gilbert in his homemade laboratory:

> He noted that carrot-seed showed a preference for impoverished soil, but once the burr casing had liberated the tiny seed, it rotted, forming a humus layer in the soil. Thus while not liking the soil, it had the ability to build up the humus layer in impoverished soil and was the tough pioneer which paved the way for a more fragile species of grass to gain its hold on the soil again. (37)

The author also takes note of other changes in the border strip, such as the minute star faces of the wildflower, the pale-pink blossoms, the yellow-gold of the freakish daisies, and a strange gourd. In addition, Head notices that the local thornbush may be the only plant that holds that dry, sandy soil together.

Bessie Head's enormous depth of understanding about her environment is commensurate with her writing craft. Her careful observations of nature's representation in contrasting figurative language, her descriptive scientific details of farming and cattle raising, her enthusiastic support for women's cooperative farm management within a sustainable environment (perhaps a utopia), her metaphoric images of nature as healer and transformational agent, and her unreserved demand for revering the natural environment and working within its limitations, serve as magnates to which her writing craft is boldly attached. These precise qualities of Head's writing figure prominently in a discussion about how her novel directly responds to Gioia Woods's literary questions about text: how nature is represented, how gender is linked to landscape, what roles science and/or natural history play, how landscape can be a metaphor, and how environmental ethics is involved. For each of these questions have been posed in contemporary books and journals, and respected scholars provide evidence from Head's work.

A recent example is Desiree Lewis's *Living on a Horizon,* in which she earmarks Head's text as having a three-part structure and in this analysis indirectly responds to Woods's questions. She notes first that Head represents nature as a powerful agent that directs the action of the people in Golema Mmidi. Second, Head organizes *When Rain Clouds Gather* around women agriculturalists and their gendered world-view and location, thus examining how gender is linked to landscape. And third, Head records the transformation of the environment by recording the environmental changes of the farming community in Golema Mmidi. Aside from assessing the environmental aspects of Head's work in the structure of the text, Lewis also investigates the robotic-like character Gilbert, whom Head makes out to be a pragmatist who finds better living conditions in the rural village than in the so-called "cultivated" London. In an insightful reflection on Gilbert, Lewis notices Head's affinity for scientific observation and demonstrated competence in writing about irrigation projects, tobacco farming, and livestock improvement. Head's description of Gilbert as a "storage house of facts" is just one way that Head's acute awareness and validation of the significance for scientific discovery is made apparent.

Woods's question as to how the landscape works as a metaphor is addressed by all of the readers/critics/interpreters mentioned thus far. One metaphor that Lewis identifies with Head

in this novel is that of the wandering nomad who is in a state of constant placelessness and finds it liberating to refuse a fixed home. Ironically, the nomad Makhaya is juxtaposed with Golema Mmidi, a metaphor for nature, which is a nonhuman entity that can provide stability of place. In a sense, Lewis is correct in maintaining that Head's style appears to celebrate a "pre-modern" sense of place. Indeed, Lewis and many other scholars who have written about this novel have identified *When Rain Clouds Gather* with a pastoral theme (Cohen 8). However, Lewis theorizes that Golema Mmidi is a symbolic refuge, and Makhaya and Gilbert are rebellious visionaries within this environment. Idealistic Makhaya wants to unburden himself of narrowly drawn ethnicities, rural patriarchal traditions, and customary women's dependencies. Gilbert seeks to escape his tightly woven family ties, cultural baggage of high society, and lack of a more nature-based environment.

Both men resist stability in their past social circumstances and seem to be searching for a place where they can be part of a healthier environment. Lewis suggests that in the metaphor of the river, Head's own vision is the constructive aspect of the "rivers inside us", where people nurture their creativity and hope. Amidst all of the tribulations of life, there is the possibility to re-create ourselves. Amidst all of the environmental degradations, as in the depletion of soils and loss of native trees and plants in Golema Mmidi, there is the opportunity to restore what is natural and nonhuman. Head's creative aesthetic works in sharp contrast to the challenges in both the social and natural world, which the restless Makhaya and Gilbert actually encounter.

Thus, Head's metaphors work for and against the things they represent. Lewis argues, "As the story progresses, it returns remorselessly to the harshness of the environment" (147). The awareness of the unyielding descriptions of Head's sense of reality can be seen in earlier critics: Cecil Abrahams has referred to Head's "nitty-gritty face to face action" (8); Craig McKenzie has identified Head's predilection for "grass roots activity" (35), and Maureen Fielding has even described "transforming trauma" (11). Clearly, Head does not constrain herself to the pastoral or the folktale-like qualities of orature. She is equally adept at working language so that it falls into the definition of what Erwin Panofsky calls "hard" pastoral, an admission that rural life is difficult. James Garrett makes a useful attribution in his discussion of Head's narrative politics: "It is a realistic narrative of labor and endurance" (127). He writes, "Thus when we apply the pastoral to *When Rain Clouds Gather* we do not need to ignore those elements of the narrative that speak to the harshness of life, such as the drought, the loneliness of the cowherd's life, and the suffering and death of Isaac Sebeso […]" (127). Therefore with the pastoral qualities of Head's novel, which may be distinguishable by celebratory, challenging, and even nostalgic qualities, the nature metaphors in this text are full of complexities that attest to Head's deeply rooted understanding of her natural, as well as social/political, environment. For, as Garret and Lewis both note, Golema Mmidi is a metaphorical place, which represents material and spiritual aspects, traditional and contemporary challenges, and rural and urban development. Furthermore, as Nigel Thomas says, it is precisely Head's "use of contrast" that accounts for her brilliant artistry of *When Rain Clouds Gather* (99).

Beyond what students and critics say about Head's novel, which suggest that it is ecoliterature, Bessie Head's interest in the environment is well documented in her own epistolary writing. In a letter to Randolph Vigne on October 27, 1965, Head writes, "I am interested in botany with a view to doing plant research. I thought this could be useful knowledge for food production […]'' (*A Gesture of Belonging* 11). In January 1966, Head writes again about her interest in the connection to land. She comments, "I met the most fascinating man. He runs a farm of the tribe about 50 miles from Serowe. He has the answer […] to what grows and so on. […] I would like to go there. I could learn a lot. Bechuanaland is entirely agricultural country. I need that kind of background; […]" (21). Then a month later, Head meets Mr. Erickson, an agriculturalist, who gives her odd jobs. As she notes, "At the

moment I am harvesting Turkish tobacco—which is an experimental venture to see if it could possibly become a cash crop" (29). The following year on January 25, 1967, Head writes to Vigne that she has already started the first two chapters of *When Rain Clouds Gather* and she has created the setting based on the Bamangwato Development Association farm, founded by Chief Tshekedi Khama and Guy Clutton-Brock, where she stayed. There, as Head chronicles, she collected information about agriculture and "wrote little notes about wildflowers and all the pretty and amazing side of Botswana life" (*A Gesture of Belonging* 50). The depth of Head's interest continues, as she takes a correspondence course in agriculture. During this time, she writes a fascinating section on how she sees that the power of nature is a stronger draw for her than contemporary debates about racialism, tribalism, capitalism, and communism. As she writes,

> Plants are actually a very superior form of life. They are economically viable. They are the only form of life, which manufactures its own food, in its own factory in a silent, self-absorbed way. I am just studying a thunderous description of this whole process, and it is the self-absorbed habits of plant life, which so touch and fascinate my heart. No care about anything, just this inner concentration on creating energy and releasing it. (*A Gesture of Belonging* 68–69)

Clearly, the extraordinary communication by Bessie Head about her environment, particularly the native birds and plants, goes beyond what most people understand, much less can describe. Critic Peter Nazareth notes that Head's characters, like her, were able to "communicate and be part of nature, the elements, the universe, and Life" (222). Nazareth hones in on how Head knows the intricate patterns of birds and can understand and depict their language. In *When Rain Clouds Gather,* he points to the passage about vultures that communicate with one another, "sending for reinforcements to remove all the dead cattle" (222). In another of Head's novels, *Maru*, Nazareth points out the extent to which the author knows how goats think and what they say. Head's communicative powers appear to be unlimited, as she is also able to portray the growing of vegetables with "an elemental understanding of life" (222) in *A Question of Power.* Anissa Talahite addresses Head's adroitness with botany, in her article on Cape gooseberries and giant cauliflowers; she finds that Head uses these particular plants to study transplantation, hybridity, and growth. Images of the garden in this novel, as well as in the description of the miniature village that Paulina's daughter (*When Rain Clouds Gather*) creates, mimic concepts of transplantation and hybrid growth.

Furthermore, an assertion that Talahite aptly begins with in her article is that "One of the functions of the garden image in Western literary tradition has been to examine the relationship between nature and culture in the context of social change" (141). Here Talahite makes the important connection between Head's environmental consciousness and the interconnectedness of biodiversity and multiculturalism that has been emphasized by current environmentalists. By using Talahite's analysis, the child's village in *When Rain Clouds Gather* then represents the larger garden, known as the village of Golema Mmidi. The garden is a metaphor for the place in which nature and culture meet and recreate the meaningful place where interactions between human life and nonhuman life take place. Rather poignantly, Talahite points out that this novel "describes a South African exile's efforts to set up a cooperative farm in Golema Mmidi, a village in the semi-desert land of South Eastern Botswana" (143). The metaphor it suggests is "the garden [as] an agricultural project bringing together a multicultural group of volunteers from different countries" (143).

In bringing back the discussion on how Head's writing is commensurate with current definitions of ecological literature, Michael Cohen maintains that Glen Love and Cheryll Glotfelty have it right when they argue that "the ecocritic […] speaks for literature as if it had trees in it, for good reasons, as if the nonhuman environment were an actor" (Cohen 16). Admirably imagined and constructed by Head, it is serendipitous that she makes this equation.

Perhaps most clearly this is denoted when Makhaya finds vituperous vultures claiming the body of Paulina's son. His isolation is compared to "[the] thousands of people [who] lived like this, like trees, in all the lonely wastes of Africa, cut off from communication with their own selves" (166). When Paulina meets the villagers at home following the trip to the cattle post, she finds that the death of her child has the impact of everyone "not talking but just sitting in heavy silent groups, like the trees" (167). At this climactic moment the trees exist immersed, as are the people, in silent acknowledgement of death and grief. In an earlier passage, as Makhaya asks whether he can add on to the miniature village created by Paulina's daughter, he adds the trees, a basic symbol of life, beauty, and garden. And, again when Head, the omniscient narrator, describes Gilbert's environmental proclivities, she notes that he preferred not to live in a house but rather amongst the trees. In these scenes, the trees have parts in the narrative, albeit as symbols of human actors.

If the idea of trees in Head's novel is not enough evidence for nature as actor, then the concluding section of the book may be more powerfully emphatic on this point. Here the parched earth has been seared by the "whitish film, through which the sun poured out molten heat in pulsating waves from dawn to dusk" (159). The sun has the power to obliterate any development that the villagers, Gilbert, or Makhaya make on the land. Worse yet, the sun kills thousands of cattle, as it periodically does in eastern parts of Botswana. And the sun murders Paulina's son. Though the sun is responsible for enormous destruction, it is also able to act benevolently by showering the landscape with rich colors of gold. Ironically, as Head writes, where it is semi-arid the people worship the rain, and where it is cloudy and misty people worship the sun (169). Yet, to whomever humans entreat and pray, it is most obvious that nature is a critical force in the lives of the villagers in Golema Mmidi.

While the sun does have far-reaching abilities, Head also spends time describing the imperial aspect of the rain. Throughout the novel rain is the "character" that provides nourishment, and without it, as is repeatedly told, plants cannot exist and animals and people cannot be replenished and survive. The importance is not underestimated by Head, who writes, "That is why all good things and all good people are called rain" (168), and even more importantly why the novel is entitled *When Rain Clouds Gather*. The action of the rains is what keeps nature, i.e. , the environment, livable. Therefore it is unequivocal that Head values nature and depicts its power to control local and global spaces. She provides a heavy accent on this point by also writing that rivers may not loom large in the Botswana landscape, but they are the source that keeps people spiritually alive. Her apparent suggestion is that rivers of goodness and generosity are what keep individuals, like Makhaya, from becoming the wild dogs that are so abhorrent to African society.

All of Bessie Head's works deserve re-examination for their contributions as ecoliterature. *When Rain Clouds Gather* is a literary *tour de force*, which responds to Winkler's questions of what nature is, where one finds it, and what nature writing is. Nature is many things: the biological and geographical world of Botswana, the metaphors representing an imaginary BaRolong village, and the environment of nonhumans surrounding the Tswana people. Nature is found in semi-arid deserts, inside the hard fat of goats, among the wind-blown eragrostis, in the cured Turkish tobacco, and amidst the howls of a jackal. *When Rain Clouds Gather* is nature writing *and* ecoliterature. It is the ringing of orature, identifying of botanical samples, investigating of genetic connections, conserving of species, and wrestling with the ethical concerns of the environment. Nature writing is a major aspect of Bessie Head's talent. She is welcome as part of the tribe. Among her kin are Niyi Osundare, Wangari Maathai, Okot p'Bitek, Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Zakes Mda. The challenge to the call of the global green is to bring her legacy to the forefront of imagining. She deserves the acclamation of an ecoliterature writer and ought to be part of a greater effort to respond to Slaymaker and others like him.

Works Cited

Abrahams, Cecil, ed. *The Tragic Life: Bessie Head and Literature in Southern Africa*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990.

———. "The Tragic Life of Bessie Head." *The Tragic Life* 3–10.

Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996.

Cohen, Michael. "Blues in the Green: Ecocriticism under Critique." *Environmental History* 9.1 (2004): 9–36.

Fielding, Maureen. "Agriculture and Healing: Transforming Space, Transforming Trauma in Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*." *Critical Essays on Bessie Head*. Ed. Maxine Sample. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003. 11–24.

Garret, James. "Writing Community: Bessie Head and the Politics of Narrative." *Research in African Literatures* 36.1 (1999): 122–35.

Glotfelty, Cheryll, ed. *The Ecocritism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens, U of Georgia P, 1996.

Head, Bessie. *A Gesture of Belonging: Letters from Bessie Head, 1965–1979*. Ed. Randolph Vigne. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1991.

———. *When Rain Clouds Gather*. 1969. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1986.

Lewis, Desiree. *Living on a Horizon: Bessie Head and the Politics of Imagining*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007.

MacKenzie, Craig. *Bessie Head*. Twayne's World Authors Series. No. 882. New York: Twayne, 1999.

Mwangi, Evan. "Nobel Prize: A Shot in the Arm for African Eco-Criticism." *The Nation*. 24 October 2004. 16 February 2007 <http://www.asle.umn.edu/archive/intro/mwangi.html>.

Nazareth, Peter. "Path of Thunder: Meeting Bessie Head." *Research in African Literatures* 37.4 (2006): 211–19.

Panofsky, Erwin. "Et in Arcadia Ego." *English Literature* 17.4 (1986): 39–47.

Rueckart, William. "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." *The Ecocriticism Reader*. 105–23.

Slaymaker, William. "Echoing the Other(s): The Call of Global Green and Black African Responses." *PMLA* 116.1 (2001): 129–44.

Talahite, Anissa. "Cape Gooseberries and Giant Cauliflower: Transplantation, Hybridity, and Growth in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*." *Mosaic* 38.4 (2005): 141–56.

Thomas, Nigel. "Narrative Strategies in Bessie Head's Stories." *The Tragic Life* 93–104.

Winkler, Karen. "Scholars Embark on Study of Literature about the Environment." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 9 August 1996. 16 February 2007 <http://www.asle.umn.edu/archive/intro/chronicle.html>.

Woods, Gioia. *Graduate Handbook*. 1996. 16 February 2007 <http://www.asle.umn.edu/pubs/handbook/lit.html>.

Translating, Writing, and Gendering Cultures: Bessie Head's *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*

***Charlotte Broad*[1]**

> There are some stones that open in the night like flowers
> Down in the red graveyard where Bessie haunts her lovers.
> There are stones that shake and weep in the heart of night
> Down in the red graveyard where Bessie haunts her lovers.[2]

In 1965, Bessie Head described herself as a Southern African woman—"not as a black woman but as an ordinary and wryly humble woman" ("For Serowe: A Village in Africa" 31). *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* celebrates at once the ordinary but by no means apolitical spaces in a community from the perspective of an African woman writer who was an insider and an outsider,[3] and her tentative reconciliation with her new home. By this time she had discovered how to write and "translate" the culture/s of a community, if still estranged from it. Speaking about her stories of the early 1970s, Tom Holzinger, also an outsider, argues: "she picks up Tswana materials and rearranges them. She weaves new themes, even heroic themes, into the familiar village music" (48). Although she "never learned more than a smattering of any of the languages of Botswana", she "clearly had a good ear for a tale in speech", Margaret Daymond writes[4]: "This ability to hear the poetry of others is like her ability to see into the beauty of the land and, in some respects, the way of life around her" (xiv). Exploring different strategies to expand and to resist canonical western literary models, Head offers another framework for "new imaginings", as Elleke Boehmer puts it (47). The physical, historical, biographical and poetic space of a village is the setting in which this narrative evolves.[5]

I had originally proposed to challenge the premise that Head's *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* "speaks for itself", as one critic put it, by discussing the interrelated issues of translating, writing, and gendering cultures. Incensed by this dismissive remark of a book that provides an extraordinary insight into the transitions in this particular community, I overlooked the other meaning of this expression: this text does indeed speak for itself. Head suggests historians would not be interested in this village—"they do not write about people and how strange and

---

[1] Charlotte Broad is lecturer in English in the College of Modern Letters at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. Her publications generally discuss aspects of twentieth-century literatures in English, and particular areas of specialisation include literary theory, translation studies, and gender studies.

[2] Jackie Kay (13). This is part of a series of poems about the great blues singer Bessie Smith.

[3] Significantly, she wrote this after her three novels, *When the Rain Clouds Gather* (1969), *Maru* (1971), and *A Question of Power* (1974), all attempts to find that gesture of belonging Elizabeth claims to have discovered at the end of *A Question of Power*, banned in South Africa until after the elections of 1994 (Larson 122).

[4] There are at least twenty-two distinct languages spoken in Botswana. Setswana is spoken by about 90% of the population either as a mother tongue or as a second language. Thus, Setswana is the *lingua franca* of the country. When Nyati-Ramahobo wrote her study, language policy inferred that "Setswana is the national language of the country", that is, the language of national pride and unity, of cultural identity. English is the official language—that of the government and business. It appears, however, that some government documents refer to Setswana as both an official and a national language (80–83). Head's failure to learn Setswana left her in an unenviable position; "she had no other choice except to stick to an almost prescribed role of being a person with no-one-to-talk-to" (Rasebotsa 57).

[5] Mutero Chirenje explains that Serowe is in the northeastern province of Botswana, called the Ngwato Reserve, in his *Chief Kgama and His Times* (1978), and his map is reproduced at the beginning of Head's book. For some of us, these maps, and others we might obtain, are our only source of the location of this village within the country, which has been represented and named in different ways throughout the centuries.

beautiful they are"—but creative artists can tell its story ("For Serowe: A Village in Africa" 30). Combining biographical accounts with testimonials and depicting a partially imagined community, she constructs the narrative of Serowe around three of its leading figures, their "contributions to the community and the response of that community to their ideals and ideas" (*Serowe* x), thereby paying tribute to her adopted home, and, above all, to the people of the community. Generically speaking, it presents different ways of transcribing the oral or "speakerly" text into a written form, destabilises auto/biography and H/historical narratives by changing perspective constantly, and blurs the borders between poetry and prose. This intermingling of genres, languages, and details suggests that Head and her translators are in the process of writing culture(s), each from his or her own perspective. It raises, moreover, the question of the subject and its positioning within the variety of discourses used by the interviewer and the different interviewees. All cultural statements are constructed in a space that Homi K. Bhabha calls the "Third Space of enunciation", a contradictory and ambivalent space in which the identity of culture is said to emerge; although a premature conclusion, this is what he terms "in-betweenness" (37–38). The sense of contradiction and ambivalence is central to Head's work.

My main interests here are the different approaches of Head and Ronald Blythe (in *Akenfield. Portrait of an English Village*) to local history writing,[6] and certain issues concerning the interviews with local residents, which lie at the heart of both texts. In Head's text, the combination of the perspective of the writer, an out(in)sider, and that of her interpreter/translator and the interviewees, who belong to the linguistic and cultural community, raises interesting questions regarding translation and gender studies. The covert focus on the fraught enterprise of translation is significant in that it represents changes from one place, state, or condition to another; that is, we perceive the interlingual or intralingual process of translating the *dict*, and its subsequent transcription to the *script*, paradoxically in a colonial tongue (Schipper 64). It seems that the interviews are transferred from one set of cultural codes to another, but they really remain in that third space, so difficult to locate in translation or writing practice. The condition of writer/translator is also of "continuous transition", as he or she absorbs "influences, ideas and experiences, subtle and shocking, from the altering physical, social, intellectual, historical and emotional environment in which the individual exists" (Murray 6). These filters complicate the question of authorship, so to speak, and the translation process challenges the authenticity of the final product, as it studies Head's translation strategies, which are insensitive at times.

Showing how complicated this process is, T. J. Cribb writes, "Criticism should make it its business to assess the qualitative outcomes of such translations and interactions, and that entails command of an adequate quantity of knowledge" (12). Since English occupies an "immense variety of language positions in literature" (Cribb 12) and a variety of undesirable discourses, it is essential that both writer and critic acknowledge the different languages and cultures involved in the acts of narration, interpretation, and rewriting. Before going on, we should give a moment's thought to culture, a concept so difficult to define briefly. The Manifesto of the Organisation of African Unity's First All African Cultural Festival of 1969 affirms that "Culture starts with the people as creators of themselves and transformers of their environment. Culture, in its widest and most complete sense, enables men to give shape to their lives" (qtd. in Young, *Postcolonialism* 8). Thus, we could think of it as "the complex everyday world we all encounter and through which we all move" (8), which does not mean that we all move in the same culture—the conflict between diverse cultures is a constant, although some key issues affect us all (power, law, knowledge, etc.). Agriculture and horticulture are fundamental to a

[6] Some prefer the term "social narrative", but I find this too restrictive for the approaches adopted by these writers.

culture; for Robert Young, "colonization rests at the heart of culture, or culture always involves a form of colonization, even in relation to [its meaning as] the tilling of soil" (*Colonial Desire* 30–31). For others, the ability to construct and to use "language" which embraces all sign systems is the most important aspect (Edgar 102).[7]

Always a transgressor, Bessie Head undermines literary conventions, colonial and urban values, and challenges patriarchy with delightful touches of humour at times, but generally with great anguish. The debate among Africana women scholars concerning the use of feminisms in studying African literatures opens up the theoretical possibilities rather than containing them in preconceived theoretical frameworks. For instance, Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi argues in favour of and names a "critical theory which is African, melding it with western feminist theory and coming out with an overarching theory that enriches both western and African critical perspectives"; "a truly liberating force", because it breaks "the cycle of dependency on western critical theory" (21). This approach even hints at a solution to various contradictions Head struggles with in her writing. Huma Ibrahim attempts to relocate Head's position as an icon of Western feminism: "Head's interests reside in the particular exploration of exile, gender, and resistance emanating from usually silenced voices" (3). There is no doubt that Head explores these issues, which inspire her to write back to her (m)other country: "What happens to the dreamer and storyteller [who is] born into a dead world of such extreme cruelties that [no] statement of love can alter them?" ("Dreamer and Storyteller" 141). In her writing, she interrogates gender roles and identities, defying those stereotypical patriarchal figures that torment her at night. Her internal colonisation is, in her opinion, at least four-fold: she is a "coloured" (neither African nor European) woman exile and a writer. Gender discrimination under the Botswana constitution has now been effectively challenged by, for example, Unity Dow with the support of the women's group *Emang Basadi*.[8] Even if Head found peace at last, the hostility she encountered at first is hardly surprising. This contradiction seduces the reader to accompany her on her quest, each from his or her own perspective.

Head's rewriting of history creates a "beautiful" story, which has "a long thread" (*Serowe* xiv). In his Foreword to her text, Blythe writes from his white British perspective: "These black voices tell of a remarkable transition from the ancient tribal culture to a British Christian culture, and cover the whole period between the setting up and the dismantling of white colonialism" (*Serowe* v). Head, in turn, explains that it "was this peaceful world of black people simply dreaming in their own skins that I began slowly to absorb into my own life. It was like finding black power and black personality in a simple and natural way" ("Social and Political Pressures" 72).

---

[7] Maria Olaussen gives Robert Young's description: "'Culture' comes from the Latin cultura and colere, which had a range of meanings: inhabit, cultivate, attend, protect, honour and worship" (283). These meanings diverged with Christianity so that "worship" and "inhabit" came to take on different meanings, "the 'inhabit' meaning became the Latin colonus, farmer, from which we derive the word 'colony'—so, we could say, colonization rests at the heart of culture, or culture always involves a form of colonization, even in relation to its conventional meaning as the tilling of soil". According to Young, "[t]he culture of land has always been, in fact, the primary form of colonization, the focus on soil emphasizes the physicality of the territory that is coveted, occupied, cultivated, turned into plantations and made unsuitable for indigenous nomadic tribes"(*Colonial Desire* 30–31).

[8] "Citizenship: An Open Letter to the Attorney General" was written by Athaliah Molokomme, Leloba Molema, Opha Dube, Motsei Madisa, Ruth Motsete, and Onalenna Selolwane. See *Women Writing Africa, Vol. 1: The Southern Region*, eds. M. J. Daymond, et al. (New York: Feminist Press, 2003. 386–89). As Leloba Molema and Mary Lederer explain in the headnote to the letter, *Emang Basadi*, a phrase from the national anthem, means "Stand up, women!" and this group raised funds from organizations overseas for its first project: a test case brought by Unity Dow, a woman with Botswana citizenship whose children were refused the same right because she was married to a U.S. citizen. The case *Unity Dow v. The Attorney General of the Republic of Botswana* (Msc 134/90) which challenged gender discrimination, was eventually resolved in favour of the applicant on June 11, 1991 (Dow 257). Significantly, Dow became Botswana's first female High Court judge and is an accomplished novelist.

Recommended as a model for Head's work, *Akenfield. Portrait of an English Village* (1969) recalls, somewhat ironically in our context, the *Little Domesday Book* (1086).[9] According to David Hey, White Kennett's *Parochial Antiquities* of 1695 is the first modern example of local history writing in England, which established the conventions of this genre.[10] Not until 1902 did H. Rider Haggard—of all people—determine "to adopt a new system—that of the interview"—in his *Rural England*,[11] however inappropriately he used this method. In the award-winning *Akenfield*,[12] Blythe returned to Kennett's idea of writing as an insider: his only real credentials, as he said, were that he "was native to its situation" (8) and "had only to listen to hear my own world talking" (18). The world echoes his world, even if he states that his book "is the quest for the voice of Akenfield, Suffolk, as it sounded during the summer and autumn of 1967" (18). Head's contestatory work is of a very different order, inspired, first and foremost, by a real African village rather than by two villages in Suffolk, renamed by Blythe as Akenfield. Her purpose is, in part, to write a collective history of a community who had moved from one place to another and to link her own exploration of migration to this silenced history. Her rewriting emerges, Ibrahim suggests, from rememorying and (re)envisioning the past (207). Even the title is significant: "I write best if I can hear the thunder behind my ears. Not even *Rain Clouds* was real thunder yet. Some of my letters to friends are faint rumblings of it" (qtd. in Eilersen i). Her storm brews in the silent creativity of letters within this text and beyond it. Blythe, in turn, feels he has to explain himself: "The book is more the work of a poet than a trained oral historian, a profession I had never heard of when I wrote it" (8). Whereas the wind moving the apple trees of *Akenfield*, which "has done more to shape the character of the people" than anything else (21), has been translated into more than twenty languages, as well as inspiring "an elegaic, fictionalised film by another Suffolk man, Sir Peter Hall" (Taylor xii), Head's thunder has been out of print for many years. Has it *ever* been translated?

However much these texts may differ, starting with the concept of the village (the population of Serowe was around 40,000 and of Akenfield precisely 298), Head's text might be thought to resemble Blythe's portrait in certain ways. Her "cunning" and her desire to be "a pioneer blazing a new trail into the future" are never far below the surface, however ("Some Notes on Novel Writing" 64). The opening lines of the Introduction give us one good example:

> His name was Harold M.[N.] Tel[e]maque. His poem, the title of which I cannot remember, appeared unexpectedly in a magazine [*Transition*] of the sort I used to read then – hoarsely and violently asserting blackness. I cannot survive in the heat of the moment, and I remember the peace with which my mind latched on to one line of Telmaque's poem…

---

[9] Another work recommended as a model was Jan Myrdal's *Report from a Chinese Village*, first published in Swedish in 1963 and published in an English translation, done by Maurice Michael, in 1965 by William Heinemann Ltd. "One of the prerequisite conditions for travelling in China today", Myrdal writes, "is that you accept interpreters and guides" (xxii). He gives his interpreters full acknowledgement and describes them and the method in depth.

[10] Hey mentions that Richard Gough does not mention among his antiquarian writings "the first local (as distinct from county) history to be published in this country, namely White Kennett's *Parochial Antiquities attempted in the history of Ambrosden, Burcester and other adjacent parts*, which appeared in 1695" (7). According to Bandinel's "Advertisement" at the opening of the first volume of the 1818 edition, the Delegates of the Clarendon Press have given to the Public "an enlarged and improved edition, at a time when the original one was become [sic] so scarce, as almost to have disappeared". Will we have to wait a similar length of time for the republication of Head's work?

[11] The full title is *Rural England. Being an Account of Agricultural and Social Researches Carried out in the Years 1901 & 1902*.

[12] It won the W.H. Heinemann Award of the Royal Society of Literature and the Silver Pen Award of International P.E.N. in 1969, and was the Literary Guild choice for June 1969. Moreover, Blythe has been made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. There can be no doubt of his credentials…

> Where is the hour of the beautiful dancing of birds in the sun-wind?
>
> All time stands still here and in the long silences the dancing of birds fills the deep blue, Serowe sky. Serowe people note everything about nature:
>
> "The birds are playing," they say, more prosaically. (ix)

Blythe opens in quite a different fashion:

> The village lies folded away in one of the shallow valleys which dip into the East Anglian coastal plain. It is not a particularly striking place and says little at first meeting. It occupies a little isthmus of London (Eocene) clay jutting from Suffolk's shelly sands, the Coralline and Red crags, and is approached by a spidery lane running off from the "bit of straight" as they call it, meaning a handsome stretch of Roman road, apparently going nowhere. (13)

One major difference we observe immediately is that Head brings the text to the audience by situating the reader in the realm of imagination and the writer's response to her subject, and Blythe brings the audience to the text by typically mapping a space in historical and geographical terms (Tymoczko 29). Head's intimacy makes her seem a much more committed insider than Blythe. But she has a double-edged perspective, as Valerie Kibera calls it, "an outsider's clear sightedness, an insider's intimacy and the very real risk of misinterpreting" what she sees (325).

These lines hint at Head's intention to revise the ideological assumptions created by Eurocentric studies of Botswana, although this is not her only purpose. Political and literary rewritings go hand in hand, Judie Newman argues; the postcolonial writer may decide to revise the work of predecessors "in order to deconstruct images of the colonial situation" (24). So as to lay claim to their own stories, to possess their own realities, women writers may, she suggests, "employ intertextual strategies, repositioning the text in relation to its point of origin or offering revisions of canonical texts" (24). Telemaque's "The Poet's Post" opens this text to other possible readings, including the meditation Head had written on it, which she called a *cris de coeur*, and Dennis Brutus called "the beginning of a gold-mine", as she wrote to Randolph Vigne (*A Gesture of Belonging* 23). Telemaque's "sun-wind" acts, moreover, as another framework for this hybrid text about the community where she had discovered "a gesture of belonging" (*A Question of Power* 204). We might argue that intertextuality is integral to Head's postcolonial stance.

Like Blythe, she conducts and transcribes interviews, but it is never clear—in either case—whether they are the actual words of the interviewee. In relation to dialect, Blythe, the insider, was "at home" writing "Suffolk" "even if it is thought to be notoriously hard to get right". He eventually decided "to keep to what was being said, and to a certain personal rhythm in each speaker" (10). In her various roles, Head faces further difficulties, which she only refers to indirectly. Seldom is the interpreter mentioned and only on one occasion does she name a translator: Martin Morolong, who translated "The Old-Style Calendar". She does, however, give special thanks to Mary Kibel, Thato Matome, and Bosele Sianana, "who contributed advice and aid for all my work" (*Serowe* x). As we know, Bosele Sianana, who had been taught English by Head, is the cornerstone of this text. Could it have been written without her? Acting as a guide to the village wards and negotiator in the interviews, she would go "through the long series of introductory greetings and patiently extract the account that Bessie wanted", while Head took notes (Eilersen 158–59). Did Head depend on her, for example, to clarify linguistic and cultural issues when transcribing an interview? Did the writer transform the interviewees' stories or did she reproduce their ambiguity without attempting to clarify it? Later, the informant would hear (or read) the transcription "as a form of verification" (Eilersen 159). The whole process gives us an insight into the complexities of intercultural translation. Head found

this project so exasperating[13] that she decided to compile a collection of stories inspired by her interviews with women in the village, creating other problems of a similar nature, another intertext and, perhaps, explaining why she transcribed relatively few interviews with women.[14]

A glance at the opening lines of each text shows the difference in approach, despite superficial similarities—principally of presentation. Head's Introduction offers details of life in this particular village[15], while Blythe centres mainly on individuals, who seemingly all perform a significant role. Head's emphasis on the building schemes in Serowe, which involve everybody, reveals how she resists the hierarchical assignation of roles: "This intimate knowledge of construction covers every aspect of village life", including gossip, that is, storytelling (*Serowe* xii). Cooperative construction is an appropriate symbol for Head's narrative practice in this text, in which the interviewees provide information which complements and, at times, counters her research sources. "For [Head] the transition from the collector and writer of village tales to the research historian did not", Ibrahim argues, "present any conflict" (200). Certainly a topic in *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, a translator is composed, as Margaret Sayers Peden (who translates, principally, from Latin American Spanish into English) has often responded, of creative writer, scholar, archivist, innovator, and, often a large portion of masochist—to which we should add listener, reader, critic, and editor.

Each author observes circularity in the respective village, which is again treated differently. Fusing collective and lyrical spaces, Head develops this trope by concluding her narrative with "A Poem to Serowe". After listing all the "small joys she had had", she compares them with her favourite books, "to be indulged in over and over" (*Serowe* 179). Serowe does speak for itself; its pleasures become books to be read, appropriated and interpreted. Blythe's work ends with a section under the title of "In the Hour of Death", revealing the method adopted by this author. It ends with the words of William Russ, the gravedigger: not a reader but a talker, he declares, "I want to be cremated and my ashes thrown in the air. Straight from the flames to the winds, and let that be that" (286–87).

The bird outside her window at dawn reminds Head that time, for example, is not ruled by the "Julian calendar" but "continues to be denoted by whatever convenient units are locally available" (*Serowe* ix). This is a "matter of cultural form", as is the sense of space: "spatial relationships are indicated by what is available, and by what suits specific needs", Chinweizu *et al* observed in the late 1970s (103–04). Head indicates the postcolonial reality of the villagers' agricultural needs: the land is now "stark, rocky, goat-eaten and soil-eroded" (*Serowe* xi). Her sensuous description of the elements and nature is by no means coincidental: in "South Africa", she wrote in 1975, "the white man took even the air away from us—it was his air and his birds and his land" ("Preface to 'Witchcraft'" 27). Observing the beauty of this "uniquely black man's country" ("Social and Political Pressures" 71), she feels free to reread, rename, rewrite and even colonise it; "No one laid any particular claim to [my bird]", she writes, "so I am able to confide, to the whole world, that he sings like this, […] without some white man or woman

[13] It took her some seven years to complete and publish. She had to wait for months to conduct some of the interviews, and when she took her version to the informant, she had to be very tactful—"They first say they like girls and then they don't like to see it in print […].", she wrote to Nikki Giovanni (Eilersen 160). She even contemplated fleeing to a country "of snow and escalators" (Norway), as she once put it, but found she could not leave Serowe.

[14] She later said this collection dealt "specifically with information given to me about women and their position in society" (Eilersen 168), a statement that does not do justice to these stories.

[15] Head mentions the *Tkharesetala* ("A Green Tree"), ideal for hedging, the village dogs, the calendar, people's names, and marriage and death ceremonies (information provided by Thato Matome). As Eilersen points out, *Transition*, the East African journal, was the first to publish a Serowe piece, "The Green Tree" (78–79). This tree appears to have adapted itself to local conditions but is actually concerned with the silent fight for survival. She links this tree with a stranger in the village, a woman figure who reappears in other stories under different guises disrupting local life. The autobiographical gesture is clear.

snickering behind my ear: 'Why, you people don't appreciate things like *that*!'" ("Preface to 'Witchcraft'" 27–28).

Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind is as much a story of a village as it is of Head's tenderness for her new home. Having lived most of her "life in shattered bits", she finds solace in the spatial "sense of wovenness and wholeness of Serowe life" (*Serowe* xii). In relation to the autobiographical thrust in her work, might we substitute "placeless imaginings of identity" (Gilroy 111) for the powerful claims of "roots and territory" and think about movement as an alternative to the "sedentary poetics of either blood or soil", as Paul Gilroy suggests (128)? Moving beyond nation and genealogy, he takes the modern African diaspora as his model for this new way of thinking about identity and identification, in which contingent and temporary linkages enable us to perceive "new understandings of self, sameness and solidarity". These linkages transform notions of space and identity; they create "new possibilities and new pleasures" as we are challenged to apprehend the "mutable forms that can redefine the idea of culture through a reconciliation with movement and complex, dynamic variation" (Gilroy 129–30). In Gilroy's opinion, this diaspora model allows us to valorize forms of kinship other than those national and familial forms (127). Head, a representative autobiographical subject in this text, is cast adrift from her patriarchal origins and arrives in another community, where she manages to reinvent herself through her interaction with Serowe and creates alternative frameworks for new or different imaginings. Like most of her interviewees, she is an imaginative trespasser, but the question is: does she read the signs in the same way as they do? (*Imaginative Trespasser* x).

Works Cited

Bandinel, B. "Advertisement." *Parochial Antiquities Attempted by the History of Ambrosden, Burchester, and Other Adjacent Parts in the Counties of Oxford and Bucks*. By White Kennett. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1818. n.p.

Bhabha, Homi K. *Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 2004.

Blythe, Ronald. *Akenfield. Portrait of an English Village*. 1969. London: Penguin, 1999.

Boehmer, Elleke. "Endings and New Beginnings: South African Fiction in Transition." *Writing South Africa. Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970–1995*. Ed. Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. 43–56.

Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubike. *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature. African Fiction and Poetry and Their Critics*. 1980. London: KPI, 1985.

Cribb, T. J. Introduction. *Imagined Commonwealths. Cambridge Essays on Commonwealth and International Literature in English*. Ed. T. J. Cribb. London: St Martin's Press, 1999.

Daymond, Margaret. Introduction. *The Cardinals*. By Bessie Head. Oxford: Heinemann, 1995. vii–xvi.

Dow, Unity. "Gender Equality under the Botswanan Constitution." *Putting Women on the Agenda*. Ed. Susan Basilli. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1994. 256–61.

Edgar, Andrew and Sedgwick, Peter. *Key Concepts in Cultural Theory*. London: Routledge, 1999.

Eilersen, Gillian Stead. *Bessie Head. Thunder Behind Her Ears: Her Life and Writing*. Claremont: David Philip , 1995.

Gilroy, Paul. *Between Camps: Race Identity and Nationalism at the End of the Colour Line*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000.

Haggard, H. Rider. *Rural England. Being an Account of Agricultural and Social Researches Carried out in the Years 1901 & 1902*. London/New York/Bombay: Longmans, Green and Co., 1902.

Head, Bessie. "Dreamer and Storyteller." *Tales of Tenderness and Power*. Ed. Gillian Stead

Eilersen. Oxford: Heinemann, 1989. 141–43.
———. "For Serowe: A Village in Africa." *A Woman Alone* 29–31.
———. *A Gesture of Belonging. Letters from Bessie Head, 1965–1979*. Ed. Randolph Vigne. London: SA Writers, 1991.
———. *Imaginative Trespasser. Letters between Bessie Head, Patrick and Wendy Cullinan 1963–1977*. Ed. Patrick Cullinan. Johannesburg/Trenton NJ: Wits University Press/Africa World Press, 2005.
———. "Preface to 'Witchcraft'." *A Woman Alone* 27–28.
———. *A Question of Power*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1974.
———. *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*. London: Heinemann, 1981.
———. "Social and Political Pressure that Shape Writing in Southern Africa." *A Woman Alone* 65–72.
———. "Some Notes on Novel Writing." *A Woman Alone* 61–64.
———. *A Woman Alone. Autobiographical Writings*. Ed. Craig MacKenzie. Oxford: Heinemann, 1990.
Hey, David. Introduction. *The History of Myddle*. 1834 [c 1700-1706]. By Richard Gough. Ed. David Hey. London: The Folio Society, 1983. 7–26.
Holzinger, Tom. "Conversations and Consternations with B Head". *Writing Bessie Head in Botswana. An Anthology of Remembrance and Criticism*. Eds. Mary S. Lederer and Seatholo M. Tumedi. Gaborone: Pentagon Publishers, 2007. 35–57.
Ibrahim, Huma. *Bessie Head: Subversive Identities in Exile*. Charlottesville and London: UP of Virginia, 1996.
Kay, Jackie. "The Red Graveyard". *The Other Lovers*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1993
Kennett, White. *Parochial Antiquities Attempted by the History of Ambrosden, Burchester, and Other Adjacent Parts in the Counties of Oxford and Bucks*. 1695. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1818.
Kibera, Valerie. "Adopted Homelands: The Novels of Marjorie Macgoye and Bessie Head." *Motherlands. Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*. Ed. Susheila Nasta. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1991. 310–29.
Larson, Charles. *The Ordeal of the African Writer*. London: Zed Books, 2001.
Murray, Barbara. Preface. *Transitions. Botswana, Namibia, Mozambique, Zambia, Zinbabwe 1960-2004*. London: The Africa Centre, 2005.
Mutero, Chirenje, J. *Chief Kgama and His Times*. London: Rex Collings, 1978.
Myrdal, Jan. *Report from a Chinese Village*. Trans. Maurice Michael. London: Pan Books, 1975.
Nfah-Abbenyi, Juliana Makuchi. *Gender in African Women's Writing. Identity, Sexuality, and Difference*. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1997.
Newman, Judie. "The Untold Story and the Retold Story: Intertextuality in Post-Colonial Women's Fiction." *Motherlands. Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*. Ed. Susheila Nasta. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1991. 24–42.
Nyati-Ramahobo, Lydia. *The National Language. A Resource or a Problem*. Gaborone: Pula Press, 1999.
Olaussen, Maria. *Forceful Creation in Harsh Terrain. Place and Identity in Three Novels by Bessie Head*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1997.
Rasebotsa, Nobantu. "*Maru* and Bessie Head's Place in Botswana." *Current Writing* 5:1 (1993): 25–35.
Schipper, Mineke. *Beyond the Boundaries. Text and Context in African Literature*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee. 1989.

Taylor, Craig. *Return to Akenfield. Portrait of an English Village in the Twenty-first Century*. London: Granta, 2006.
Tymoczko, Maria. "Post-Colonial Writing and Literary Translation." *Post-colonial Translation. Theory and Practice*. Eds. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi. London: Routledge, 1999. 19–40.
Young, Robert J. C. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. London: Routledge, 1995.
———. 2001. *Postcolonialism. An Historical Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001.

Ecumenical Readings of Bessie Head

Bruce S. Bennett[1]

It is well known that Bessie Head had a long-standing interest in religion. Critical studies of her work do not always seem to give this the prominence one might expect. It seems to me an under-studied area.[2]

The original inspiration for this paper[3] was the observation that although those who had studied her life and had a detailed biographical knowledge of it were aware of her critical attitude toward Christianity—her own religious identification being with Hinduism and perhaps also to some extent with Buddhism—readers who were not aware of this fact and had read (in particular) *When Rain Clouds Gather* had a rather different impression.[4] In the course of looking at the issues, I came to the view that Bessie Head's religious vision was in many ways a universal one, beyond any simple limitation. It seems to me that religious dialogue, as much as literary criticism, may be an appropriate response to a work on the scale of *A Question of Power*. To try to explain what I mean, let me begin with a quotation from another, quite different, religious novel, C. S. Lewis's imaginative reconstruction of ancient European paganism, *Till We Have Faces*. A Greek philosopher tries to challenge the Priest of Ungit (in front of the King) over apparently inconsistent statements about the gods. The Priest replies,

> "They [Greeks] demand to see such things clearly, as if the gods were no more than letters written in a book. I, King, have dealt with the gods for three generations of men, and I know that they dazzle our eyes and flow in and out of one another like eddies on a river, and nothing that is said clearly can be said truly about them. Holy places are dark places. It is life and strength, not knowledge and words, that we get in them [...]. Why should the Accursed not be both the best and the worst?"[5]

A Question of Power is a story, or a myth, of an encounter with such gods. Why should someone not be both God and the Devil? Elizabeth goes into the dark places, struggles through, and comes out. In such intense meaning, nothing that is said clearly is said truly. In order to approach it, I suggest that we need the resources of more than one religious tradition.

Firstly, though, I will deal with the original issues of this paper.

When Rain Clouds Gather, etc.

In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Bessie Head uses images of God drawn to a large degree from Christianity and the Bible. Notably, near the end of the novel, Mma-Millipede muses on two biblical visions. One is that of Solomon, the great and splendid king of Israel, with his splendid palace: "Gold candlesticks, cherubims, and pomegranates adorned the house, which had forty bathrooms."[6] The other is that of "a God who was greater than Solomon, but he

---

[1] Bruce S. Bennett is senior lecturer in history at the University of Botswana. His research interests include colonial administration in Bechuanaland as well as British and Southern African religious history.

[2] Though see June M. Campbell, "Beyond Duality: A Buddhist Reading of Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*", *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 29 no. 1 (1993) pp. 64–81.

[3] As this paper had developed somewhat since originally being set down for the symposium programme, the title was no longer quite apt by the time it was presented, and I considered changing it for the proceedings, but it seems best at this stage to let it stand as presented.

[4] I have actually met at least two people who thought Bessie Head was a Christian writer because they had only read *When Rain Clouds Gather*.

[5] C. S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces* (Glasgow: Collins, 1987) p. 58.

[6] Bessie Head, *When Rain Cloud Gather* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1995) p. 181. The passage seems to refer to I Kings 7, which actually describes both Solomon's palace and the Temple. The reference to "forty bathrooms" presumably comes from I Kings 7:38 which refers to bronze basins "each of forty baths" (NRSV), a "bath" being

walked about with no shoes, in rough cloth".[7] They stand for two futures for Africa, and Bessie Head writes with what now seems frightening foresight: "Who could bathe if all the water went into his [Solomon's] forty bathrooms? Who would have time to plough if everyone had to join the parade to watch Solomon pass by in his Chevrolet of molten gold?"[8] The God with no shoes "continued to live where he always had—in the small brown birds of the bush, in the dusty footpaths, and in the expressions of thin old men in tattered coats."[9] All this can be read in a variety of senses, but it is language that Christian readers find highly congenial. It is notable that readers who have only read *When Rain Clouds Gather* sometimes take Bessie Head as here making an explicitly Christian point, and may think of her as a Christian writer.[10] In fact, she undoubtedly did *not* intend this straightforward Christian message, and the specifically Christian reading is clearly untenable if her work is taken as a whole. If Bessie Head had died leaving only this one book, and no other evidence, we would probably conclude that she was a Christian writer, though some slightly odd comments would suggest to us that she had some unorthodox ideas. (This is, perhaps, a warning about our interpretation of isolated texts.) It suggests, though, the way in which her Christian background did contribute some elements to what went into her writing despite her overall rejection of that tradition.

In *A Question of Power* it is clear that Bessie Head's religious belief is of Hindu and/or Buddhist type,[11] but evidence of antagonism to Christianity does not appear until the end. Reincarnation and the wheel of existence are assumed, although the vision of existence seems somewhat more progressive and less cyclical than might have been expected.[12] Not only have individual souls developed over many lifetimes—Sello has become what he is because he has "specialized" in holiness—but the human world itself also seems to be developing through stages. Elizabeth is shown visions of some of these previous stages, and the conclusion of Darwin's *Origin of Species* is quoted to the effect that new life continues to evolve:

> There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.[13]

At the same time, an idea of "God" appears, with Elizabeth considering both Dan and Sello for the title at various points, but her thinking moves away from this concept. At the end, she muses that "there is no God like ordinary people [...]. You'll find Medusa and Dan in heaven and hell, but you won't find ordinary human kindness and decency there. God in heaven is too important to be decent...".[14] This is perhaps reminiscent of the Buddha's attitude to gods: not exactly

---

a Hebrew measure of volume. The Authorized Version, which was very probably what Bessie Head used, reads "Then made he ten lavers of brass: one laver contained forty baths [...]". Tom Holzinger recalls (personal communication) that Bessie Head had an excellent verbal memory and could quote from the Bible.

[7] Head, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, p. 181.

[8] Head, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, p. 182.

[9] Head, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, p. 182.

[10] This is accentuated by the fact that the wise character Mma-Millipede evidently holds some sort of Christian belief, though she is cautious in talking about it to the embittered Makaya (p. 127), and by references to "the Good God".

[11] Bessie Head wrote to Randolph Vigne in 1966 that "quite a lot of my previous incarnations were spent in India. When I found this out some time ago I thought deeply about the matter. Actually I'm not the kind of person that's just born for being born sake. It's very significant that I've been born in Southern Africa." Bessie Head to Randolph Vigne, 14 Mar. 1966, in *A Gesture of Belonging: Letters from Bessie Head 1961–1979* (ed.) Randolph Vigne (London: Heinemann, 1991) p. 31.

[12] In Indian thought the wheel of rebirth has classically been regarded as something from which to escape.

[13] Bessie Head, *A Question of Power* (Oxford: Heinemann, Oxford, 1974) p. 35. The quotation is from the final sentence of *On the Origin of Species*.

[14] Head, *A Question of Power*, p. 197.

disbelief, but that they are irrelevant. But in some ways it suggests more the view of the supernatural as noxious.[15]

Christianity in Bessie Head's other Stories

Christianity naturally features as an aspect of Botswana society appearing in short stories. The Rev. Dr. Obed Kealotswe, in his useful chapter "Life and Prophecy in the African Independent Churches: Some Background to Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasures*", points out that the issue of payment versus free treatment by faith-healers (as in "Jacob: The Story of a Faith-Healing Priest") has been a contentious one in reality, and that names in the story suggest allusions to actual people and events of the time.[16] Bessie Head's attitude to Christianity was critical, and yet there is a certain ambivalence, at two levels. The first presents little problem. Bessie Head recognized goodness in people across the divides of differing ideologies and beliefs, and had no difficulty writing about such figures as Jacob the faith-healing priest, or Galethebege the natural Christian[17]—even if they are contrasted with the money-grubbing false prophet and the intolerant missionary.[18] But the second level is one at which Bessie Head seems, sometimes perhaps despite herself, to see some positive aspects to Christianity. In "The Coming of the Christ-Child"[19] she wrote that the black South Africans "unconsciously chose Christianity to maintain their compactness, their wholeness and their humanity". Her hero, Khama III, was after all the paradigmatic Christian convert ruler of the region.[20] Although Bessie Head had turned away from formal Christianity, she noted it, perhaps grudgingly sometimes, among her formative influences. In 1966 she wrote "[I]n some part of my heart I bow down to the King of the Jews [...]".[21] In a 1982 essay she listed "a bit of Christianity" as an element in her personal mix, and cited especially the appeal of Jesus the story-teller.[22]

In *A Question of Power*, a strangely moving scene is the appearance of Mrs Jones, the old woman whom Elizabeth finds boring, and whom she had physically struck during the height of her troubles. She comes in answer to Elizabeth's apology. "You must not be afraid of evil. Jesus overcame evil a long time ago", she says—to which Sello loudly responds "Yes".[23] Elizabeth then muses on this in terms of her evolving human-centred philosophy, but in fact it is a remarkable piece of self-subversion in terms of any simple reading of the novel's religious ideas. This is an example of the sort of complexity which I suggest requires much greater analysis in religious terms.

---

[15] Cf. Confucius: "To apply oneself to the duties of man, and, while revering the spirits and gods, to keep away from them—this may be called wisdom." (*Analects*, 6.22). *The Analects of Confucius (Lun Yu): A Literal Translation with Introduction and Notes by Chichung Huang* (New York: OUP, 1997).

[16] Rev. Dr. Obed Kealotswe, "Life and Prophecy in the African Independent Churches: Some Background to Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasures*", in Mary S. Lederer & Seatholo M. Tumedi (eds) *Writing Bessie Head in Botswana An Anthology of Remembrance and Criticism* (Gaborone: Pentagon Publishers, 2007) pp. 80–6.

[17] In "Heaven is not Closed", *The Collector of Treasures*.

[18] As an indication of Bessie Head's attitudes, it is perhaps telling that even a South African prison guard seems more likely to escape his stereotype than the missionary. ("The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses", *Tales of Tenderness and Power*.)

[19] In *Tales of Tenderness and Power*.

[20] Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa 1450–1950* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996) p. 366: "For the late Victorian and Edwardian world Khama was the model African Christian king, the jewel in the crown of the London Missionary Society, the man who led his country to Christianity and influenced all the kings around him."

[21] Bessie Head, "God and the Underdog", *A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990) p. 44.

[22] Head, "Writing out of Southern Africa", *A Woman Alone*, p. 96.

[23] Head, *A Question of Power*, p. 196.

"God", and Sharing the Absolute Title

One of the most distinctive ideas in Bessie Head's most religious vision is the attribution of the name or title "God" to human beings—and not to humanity in general, but to specific or at least individual ordinary people. It is in *A Question of Power* that the concept is discussed most fully, and in fact forms a key theme of the novel. When Sello shows Elizabeth a "vast company" of people who have repeatedly died "for the liberation of mankind", she thinks, "Why, an absolute title has been shared. There are several hundred thousand people who are God."[24]

Note the *shock*. "God" is an "absolute title", yet has been shared. Bessie Head here insists on a paradox, and any interpretation of the idea that resolves it into an easily-comprehensible formulation is bound to be inadequate. One may say that any reader who does not find this passage deeply problematic has not taken it seriously. The point is that it is the "absolute title" of the God of monotheism which has been—paradoxically—shared. For the Hindu title of God to be shared would hardly be news. Again, Bessie Head had brought some Abrahamic concepts into her Hinduism. Hinduism is, of course, almost infinitely receptive; Gandhi brought rather more Christianity into his Hinduism.

It seems clear overall that Bessie Head did believe in a religious reality, but it is not easy to determine what "God" means within her religious system. It does not seem to have a constant meaning. Sometimes it is used as a metaphor of the sort a non-theistic person might use: "He had said, in so many ways: 'God is people. There's nothing up there. It's all down here.'"[25] Sometimes it is the "absolute title" that shocks Elizabeth. Sometimes the word might be understood as ancient polytheism—"Nearly every nation had that background of mythology—looming, monstrous personalities they called 'the Gods'"[26]—a sense that would more commonly be spelt "the gods". Sometimes, as in "She had no illusions left about God or mercy or pity",[27] it seems to refer to a theistic concept of God, introduced in order to dismiss it. But only a few paragraphs before this, we read "Nothing stood in the way of her prestige and self-esteem; she was God"[28]—here apparently referring to Elizabeth's successfully joining the company of Sello.

Thus, there is no simple answer to the question "what does 'God' mean" in *A Question of Power*. This is one of the many profound and difficult questions that arise from the novel. The reader, significantly, is not in my experience aware of such plurality as an inconsistency. It seems to belong naturally to the mythic quality of the story.

Man Holy to Man

The reason why the absolute title "God" must be shared is linked to her criticism of Christianity, which is summed up toward the end of *A Question of Power*: "[T]he basic error seemed to be the relegation of all things holy to some unseen Being in the sky. Since man was not holy to man, he could be tortured for his complexion, he could be misused, degraded and killed."[29]

The curious point is that an orthodox Christian would agree with Bessie Head's argument about the need for "man to be holy to man". Christianity asserts that human beings are and

---

[24] Head, *A Question of Power*, p. 31.
[25] Head, *A Question of Power*, p. 109. Admittedly this is Sello's use of the term, strictly speaking.
[26] Head, *A Question of Power*, p. 40.
[27] Head, *A Question of Power*, p. 200.
[28] Head, *A Question of Power*, p. 199.
[29] Head, *A Question of Power*, p. 205.

must be holy to each other, firstly because they are made in the image of God, and secondly because of the Incarnation. The Incarnation is defined in the Athanasian Creed (as Bessie Head, who went to an Anglican school, might have remembered) as "not by the conversion of the Godhead into flesh; but by the taking of the Manhood into God". The importance of the Incarnation for the social gospel has been repeatedly stressed. Frank Weston, the Anglican Bishop of Zanzibar who protested ferociously against colonial exploitation, famously proclaimed in 1923 that "You cannot claim to worship Jesus in the Tabernacle, if you do not pity Jesus in the slum [...]. It is folly—it is madness—to suppose that you can worship Jesus in the Sacraments and Jesus on the throne of glory, when you are sweating him in the bodies of his children [...]".[30] C. S. Lewis, probably the most widely-read Christian apologist of the English-speaking world in the twentieth century, wrote that "Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses."[31]

There is, however, a complication. Christianity tries to maintain a concept of God as *both* immanent and transcendent. It is the immanent view that finds all humanity made holy by the Incarnation. The transcendent view, however, is the sense of God as mysterious, wholly other, incomprehensible, and beyond all we can imagine. Keeping the two together, although it provides the most all-embracing concept of God, is psychologically difficult, and there has been throughout the history of Christianity a temptation to emphasise one over the other.

Interestingly, Bessie Head herself seems to have sensed that her criticism does not exactly fit Christianity. After setting out the case that man must be holy to man, she concludes that her revelation "was quite the reverse of Mohammed's dramatic statement [...]. She said: There is only one God, and his name is Man".[32] At this point Bessie Head significantly draws the contrast not with Christianity but with the uncompromisingly transcendent revelation of Islam, which rejects the concept of Incarnation.

"God" in the Novels and in Bessie Head's Essays

In some of Bessie Head's essays she discusses her concept of God and her use of the word in her writing. Some individual statements seem clear, and if quoted in isolation can appear to resolve the problem of "what does 'God' mean here?", but when taken together the picture becomes less clear, even without taking into account the complication of possible changes in her ideas over time.[33] In 1966, the same year that *When Rain Clouds Gather* was published, Bessie Head wrote that "I just accept it that my 'Nigra'[34] Goddess is real and alive because I have nowhere else to look for salvation."[35] This seems clear enough. However in a 1982 essay (*A Question of Power* appeared in 1973) she wrote "I have used the word God, in a practical way, in my books. I cannot find a substitute word for all that is most holy but I have tried to deflect people's attention into offering to each other what they offer to an Unseen Being in the sky. When people are holy to each other, war will end, human suffering will end."[36] This seems to imply a quite different sense: that "God" is being used symbolically, though the careful reader will note that this is not in fact exactly what she said. But she then went on: "I believe

[30] H. Maynard Smith, *Frank Weston, Bishop of Zanzibar: Life of Frank Weston, DD, 1871–1924* (London: SPCK, 1926) p. 302.
[31] C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory" [1941] in *Screwtape Proposes a Toast* (London: Fount, 1998) p. 102.
[32] Head, *A Question of Power*, p. 205–6.
[33] See e.g. Head to Vigne, 13 Aug. 1971, *A Gesture of Belonging*, p. 148.
[34] From a joke about two K.K.K. members at the Pearly Gates: one warns the other about God that "She's a Nigra".
[35] Head, "God and the underdog", *A Woman Alone*, p. 44. Interestingly, in this piece she wrote that she preferred a Goddess to a God, though this hardly appears in the novels.
[36] Head, "Writing out of Southern Africa", *A Woman Alone*, p. 99.

that the nations of the earth are drawing closer to each other [...]. I would propose that mankind will one day be ruled by men who are God and not by power-hungry politicians."[37] Now we have the concept of people who are God, introduced without explanation in this essay. Taking all these comments together, it is apparent that although they can help illuminate the meaning of "God" in the novels, none of them is sufficient by itself. This is hardly surprising; Bessie Head wrote in 1982 that despite her initial plan to write didactically, the novels seemed to write themselves, and the characters began to rebel against the destiny and definitions she had intended for them.[38]

There are two further complications in connecting the ideas of the essays and the novels, especially *A Question of Power*. The first is that *A Question of Power* is a work of fiction. This may be obvious but it bears repeating since the book contains so much autobiographical material and expresses so much a personal viewpoint. A work of fiction is not a disguised autobiography; similarly, it cannot be reduced to a tract for a set of easily defined ideas. It must be treated as having an internal system in its own right.

The second follows on: the book necessarily exists at two levels. At one level, there are gods and strange events. Anyone might write a story about gods and strange events, whatever their beliefs, as an allegory or myth or whatever, in which case there would be a clear remove between the system of ideas and realities *within* the story and that actually held by, or being expressed by, the author. In *A Question of Power*, the situation is slightly more complex. It is clear that at one level the book uses some of Bessie Head's own ideas and terminology about "God" and religion. *Some* of this terminology and system is described by Bessie Head in her essays as being designed for use in fiction—"I have used the word God, in a practical way, in my books."[39] But some of it seems to belong to Bessie Head the person, and some of it appears in her writing without any neat and tidy definition ever appearing. Thus in *A Question of Power* there is a remove between the two levels but it is unclear and ambiguous, one of the work's fascinating complications.

Liberal Theology of the 1960s

Another way of looking at what Bessie Head is trying to do with the "absolute title" of God is to consider the new theological writing that was flowering—or spreading like weeds, according to one's viewpoint—at that time. While Bessie Head does not seem to have read a great deal of it, and indeed may not have read any of it in the original sources, the religious ideas of books such as John Robinson's *Honest to God* (a bestseller, incredibly, in 1963[40]) were very much in the air and surely reached her in some form. The liberal theologians were re-interpreting Christianity to make it more "relevant", and usually emphasized the "this-worldly". Robinson emphasised the immanence of God as "Ground of our being" rather than a transcendent "God out there"—the latter concept, he believed, had lost meaning. Like Bessie Head, Robinson was trying to bring God down to earth. "[S]tatements about God are statements about the 'ultimacy' of personal relationships [...]" he wrote.[41] However Robinson was in fact more traditional than he sounded, and carefully noted that "God is love" did *not* mean "love is God",[42] although readers tended to understand his language of "demythologizing" in a strong

[37] Head, "Writing out of Southern Africa", *A Woman Alone*, p. 99.
[38] Head, "Notes from a quiet backwater II", *A Woman Alone*, pp. 77–8.
[39] Head, "Writing out of Southern Africa", *A Woman Alone*, p. 99.
[40] Adrian Hastings, *A History of English Christianity 1920–1985* (London: Collins, 1986) p. 537; "Religionless Christianity", Time, Friday, Apr. 12, 1963, archived online at http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,828100,00.html?promoid=googlep accessed 29 June 2007
[41] John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* [1963] (London: SCM Press, 1987) p. 50.
[42] Robinson, *Honest to God*, p. 52.

sense. Later, this theological writing moved on to a "radical" phase, in which some thinkers "demythologized" Christianity in a cruder and more unambiguous way: they tried to interpret statements about God as being merely symbolic, and abandoned the idea of an objectively-existing God.[43]

Can we see Bessie Head as demythologizing God? That is, did Bessie Head mean, by saying that God is Man, that statements about God would become simply a way of talking about humanity, human destiny, and so forth. This is a possible reading,[44] and some of Bessie Head's writings, which seem to indicate a preference for a rational, logical world-view, may support it. However I think that it is an inadequate way of understanding Bessie Head, as it implies a "means only" reductionism, and that Bessie Head was in reality a non-religious writer using religious symbols. This does not match the evidence of Bessie Head as a person with real (if not clearly defined) religious beliefs. In terms of the new theology mentioned before, Bessie Head seems to have more affinity with the earlier, liberal writers, such as John Robinson (who were in fact more her contemporaries) than with the later, "radical" writers such as Don Cupitt (the comparison being complicated by the fact that, as we have seen, her beliefs were not Christian). The liberal writers did not, initially, see what they were doing as actually writing an objectively-existing God out of the story, but as providing a new, more "relevant" way of understanding a God they continued to believe in. The development of the "radical" strain of the new theology was by no means welcomed or accepted by many of the earlier liberals, who did not agree that the reduction of God to a symbol was the inevitable result of their reinterpretation.

About Bessie Head's Hinduism, and other Possible Views

Bessie Head's work provides a religious vision of extraordinary fertility. There is, of course, no such thing as a standard Hinduism, but Bessie Head's beliefs do not seem to have fitted clearly into any of the main traditions (hardly a surprise). In a 1969 essay she seemed to identify herself with the "Untouchables" (now more often known as Dalits).[45] I have not been able to discover what influences were important in the development of her Hindu/Buddhist thinking. At the least, by investigating the religious and intellectual history of Durban in the relevant period some possibilities could be suggested. I suggest this as an area for future research. That is, rather than simply label her beliefs as "Hindu", I suggest that it would be fruitful to try to explore which *parts* of that enormously rich and diverse tradition she was reading and learning about when she was imbibing it. (She was in touch with a particular community, and it is possible that a particular library could be identified as the source of her reading.)

In some ways, the world-view (inasmuch as it can be deduced from the fiction) seems more like that of Mahayana Buddhism.[46] Apparently superhuman beings like Dan and Sello are ultimately within the same universe of rebirth as us. In *A Question of Power*, the people who have died repeatedly "for the liberation of mankind"[47] are reminiscent of *bodhisattva*s, those who turn back from nirvana to remain in the world of rebirth in order to help others.

The extraordinary, archetypical dreamscape of *A Question of Power* has I believe a universal resonance. Its original religious background was, of course, Hindu and perhaps Buddhist in terms of Bessie Head's own thought, and I have just been discussing some ways in which the Christian aspects of her environment may also be relevant. Also, however, I would

[43] In fairness, it should be said that this was often part of an attempt to apply a sort of extreme postmodern scepticism more universally, and disbelieve in *anything* "out there".
[44] Recall Sello's "'God is people. There's nothing up there. It's all down here.'" (*A Question of Power*, p. 109)
[45] Head, "African religions", *A Woman Alone*, pp. 50–1.
[46] See Campbell, "Beyond Duality".
[47] Head, *A Question of Power*, p. 31.

suggest that it would be interesting to hear the results of analyses from *other* religious and philosophical perspectives. For example, to illustrate what I believe is the wide potential of Bessie Head's work, let me take a tradition completely removed from Botswana, one which might at first glance seem rather unpromising, and suggest a Confucian reading of Bessie Head. The central Confucian value of *ren* (human-heartedness) would be an obvious first point of contact. Next, I think a Confucian would be interested in her ideas about the holy really relating to humanity. The Confucian tradition has tended to value an emphasis on the natural and this life.[48] (Note, however, that although Confucian thought has sometimes been described as secular, and a fully secular interpretation can be supported from some classical sources,[49] the Chinese Confucian tradition has in fact been somewhat more complex.) Also, it might be interesting to set Bessie Head's insistence on "ordinariness" against the Confucian belief in the normal: "The Master said 'The path is not far from man. When men try to pursue a course, which is far from the common indications of consciousness, this course cannot be considered THE PATH.'"[50] Confucianism does of course traditionally express human relationships in terms of a society of seniors and juniors rather than equals; but then so does Botswana, and Bessie Head was able to find great good in it nonetheless; furthermore, Bessie Head's engagement with good-hearted humble people—"she had fallen from the very beginning into the warm embrace of the brotherhood of man"[51]—could be compared with Mencius's belief in human equality based in the precepts that everyone has "sprouts" of good in them and is capable of being a sage.[52]

The basis of a possible Taoist critique is not as obvious, but then my knowledge of Taoism is limited. (Possibly one might note that religious Taoism[53] is one of those traditions which deals explicitly with those aspects of the supernatural which might be called demonological—what Taoist masters call "the Tao of the Left".) There is something about *A Question of Power*, with its unexplained strangeness followed by sudden enlightenment, which may connect with the related Zen Buddhist tradition. Perhaps both a Confucian and a Taoist would agree in finding, in the three main novels, a sense of the Way and its loss (most of all, perhaps, in *Maru*, despite its apparent resolution).[54] A Muslim response might seek to answer Bessie Head's critique of the idea of transcendence. These are only suggestions, and this list of traditions is not intended to be exhaustive or to indicate which ones I suppose to be more important, merely some cases where I have some illustrative ideas to offer.[55]

And then of course there is the view of the traditionalist. Fashions change as to whether we should talk about an "African Traditional Religion" or not, but it would nonetheless be interesting to hear the insider's voice. There is of course a problem in that there is a great

---

[48] Thus Confucius, in response to the question "What is death?": "The Master said: You do not understand life yet; how can you understand death?" (*Analects* 11.12).

[49] Xunzi [Hsün Tzu in Wade-Giles romanization] held that rituals for the dead are understood by the common people as being about spirits, but by the superior man (*junzi*) as being a form of social solidarity (ch. 13). This source should perhaps give us pause, firstly because of Xunzi's elitism, which not would have gone down well with Bessie Head, and secondly because of his role as the teacher of Li Si and Han Feizi, two Legalists who helped establish the ruthless and anti-traditional state of the First Emperor Qin Shi Huangdi.

[50] *The Doctrine of the Mean* [*Zhongyong*], XIII.1, in *The Chinese Classics* trans. James Legge (Hong Kong & London, 1861) vol. 1 p. 257 (Google scanned text accessed from http://books.google.com).

[51] Head, *A Question of Power*, p. 206.

[52] Mencius [Mengzi] 6.A.8, 6.B.2.

[53] Western scholars have generally followed Chinese tradition in distinguishing philosophical Taoism (*dao jia*) and religious Taoism (*dao jiao*). Taoist masters are, among other things, ritual specialists for the general population, though it should be noted that "Taoism" and "Chinese popular religion" are not the same thing.

[54] See *Analects*, e.g. 4.6, 3.24, 14.38; *Daodejing* [*Tao-te-ching*] ch. 38.

[55] In her essays Bessie Head expressed admiration for Jewish thought, but this does not seem to appear overtly in the novels.

reluctance to discuss some of the relevant topics openly (notably witchcraft)—partly for obvious reasons and for reasons of traditional secrecy, but also because of westerners' unsympathetic attitudes. A secular and sceptical west needs to treat the beliefs of Africa, both old and new, with more respect, if it wishes to learn anything about how Africans think.

Motswana ke mang? Tswana Culture and Values in Plaatje, Head, and McCall Smith

Grant Lilford[1]

Introduction

Who is a Motswana? What values and beliefs does he or she embody? Who defines those values and beliefs? Clifford Geertz tells us that the values of a society are an open secret. Every member of a given society has the inside story, which he or she understands as "common sense".[2] A Motswana does not have to proclaim his or her *botswana*, it is a lived, often unconscious condition, not unlike Wole Soyinka's tiger and his tigritude. We do not need to proclaim our values or our common sense unless they are under attack. Three writers draw attention to the state of being a Motswana, and the associated values. The first of these, Sol Plaatje, reflects on the importance and dignity of specifically Barolong culture, perhaps to define and preserve that culture in the face of invaders: British, Boer, and Nguni, each of whom asserted their own superiority. Plaatje's novel *Mhudi* mentions the latter invaders, but has little to say directly about the British. However, he writes in English, as in *Native Life in South Africa*, to make a particular case to the British Empire. As a refugee from South Africa, and an intimate insider, Bessie Head is initially almost an unwilling participant in Tswana society, particularly as evidenced in *A Question of Power*. She becomes a chronicler of rural Botswana history and life in *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*¸ although she never loses her critical eye. Alexander McCall Smith is essentially a visitor to Botswana, though he finds something to admire, and something that the world would do well to emulate. He also suggests that Tswana culture is under attack, and identifies hostile forces. Like Plaatje and Head, McCall Smith points towards some essential notion of *botswana*, which, he implies, must be cherished and defended, and which serves as a model for Africa and the world.

Motswana ke mang? Towards a Definition

To define is to limit, or circumscribe. Citizenship, or membership in a group of people, is a process of definition, of limiting who is inside and who is outside the circle of the group. One way to define citizenship, for example, is geographical. The fourteenth amendment to the United States constitution defines any child born on American soil as an American. Germany, on the other hand, recognises citizenship by descent, but not location. A person of German descent born in Russia or Namibia is German. A child born in Germany of Turkish parents is not German. In Africa, questions of citizenship are a great deal more complex, since they apply to membership both of a nation-state and of a tribe. In the case of the Batswana, a cluster like Bafokeng or Bamangwato falls within a tribe, like Bakwena, and then within a language group, Batswana, which fits into the Sotho language family (Schapera 10). Constitutionally, members of the group can be citizens of South Africa, Botswana, or both, or even of the United States or Germany. Throughout the novels under discussion, we see membership of the Sotho family opposed to membership of the Nguni family, which includes Zulu, Ndebele, Xhosa and Swati. Plaatje's chief Moroka, for example, takes credit for the wise governance of Moshoeshoe, king

---

[1] Grant Lilford was formerly with Uganda Christian University (which sponsored his attendance at the conference) and is currently with the University of Botswana. His research interests include African literature, African languages, language policy, and literary theory.

[2] See, for example. Clifford Geertz, "Common Sense as a Cultural System" in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983. 73–93).

of the Basotho, and distances himself from the conduct of the Matabele. Men sitting around a campfire in McCall Smith's *Morality for Beautiful Girls* discuss the essential difference between Tswana and Zulus. Makhaya, the Zulu-speaking protagonist of Head's *When Rain Cloud's Gather*, encounters tribal attitudes as he crosses the border between South Africa and Botswana.

In Bantu languages, *mo-* and *ba-* and their cognates are the human noun-class prefixes, which indicate membership in a group. *Motswana* is a member of the Tswana group. *Motho* is a member of the people group *batho*. *Omuganda* is a member of the Ganda group. The latter is a good illustration of the problems that arise when nation-states come into being, employing the boundaries created under colonialism. Uganda is the Swahili cognate of *obuganda*, the state of the *Abaganda*. The root *-ganda* means a sibling of the same gender, so the *Abaganda* are brothers of brothers or sisters of sisters. The *obu-* class (*u-* in Swahili, *bo-* in Setswana) refers not to a physical place, but to a state of being. In Luganda, *obuto* is the state of being a child. In Swahili, *ujamaa* is the state of belonging to a family. In Setswana, *bogale* is the state of being brave, for a person, or being sharp, for an axe. *Bo-* forms the abstract noun. The stem *-gale* can also form adjectives, which agree with the noun class, as in *motho yo o bogale* or *selepe se se bogale* The best way to translate the *bo-* class into English is to use an English suffix like -ry, -ness, or -hood: bravery, sharpness, or childhood. According to Cole, some nouns of the *bo-* class in Setswana have developed "locative significance," as in *Botswana* (the country), *bogogwadi* (a man's in-law's place), or *borwa* (south).[3] These combine the sense of place with the abstract qualities usually associated with *bo-* class nouns. In addition, the *bo-* class includes uncountable things, like *bogobe* (pap) or *bojalwa* (beer), so a country or a direction is indefinite. To refer to a specific place, we would have to use one of the locative classes: *fa-, go-, mo-* or the suffix *-eng*. GaLuka is Luke's place. Tlokweng is the location of the BaTlokwa, just as *Emaxhoseni* uses the Nguni cognate suffix *-eni* to indicate the heartland of the Xhosa people. The *kwa-* in Nguni languages, like *ga-* in Setswana, usually refers to a person, not a tribe. KwaZulu means Zulu's place, not the Zulu kingdom, which reaches far beyond the physical boundaries of KwaZulu and which does not apply to all of the people living within the province of KwaZulu-Natal. Likewise, not all people living within the physical boundaries of the modern nation-state of Uganda are *Abaganda*. Some *Abaganda* maintain their *buganda* even if they live outside the group's territory. In many parts of Africa, the conflict between having the essential, abstract nature of being a member of a group and living in a physical place has given rise to actual, violent conflict. The kingdom of Buganda still resides uneasily in the country of Uganda. The abstract state of being a Motswana is complicated by the existence of a geographical entity called Botswana. In fact, before independence, the capital lay outside the boundaries of the physical territory then called Bechuanaland, and even today, the majority of Batswana do not live within the borders of Botswana, or even hold Botswana citizenship.[4] Post-colonial boundaries do not coincide with pre-colonial African nations, so membership in a nation is always problematic. The use of an abstract noun in the *bo-* class intensifies the indeterminacy of citizenship, even as members of the group have a reasonably clear idea of who is, and is not, a Motswana.

To illustrate these complications, Bessie Head describes a conversation with Ramosamo Kebonang:

> "*Dumela* Mongwato," old Ramosamo said to me, absent-mindedly.
>
> As soon as I returned his greeting, he started slightly, blinked to clear the mist from his ancient eyes, and said in high astonishment: "Yo! She isn't even a proper Motswana!" Then he said to me loudly:

[3] Thank you to the participants in the symposium for their help in clarifying this argument.

[4] See Gordon, Raymond G., Jr., ed., *Ethnologue: Languages of the World, Fifteenth edition* (Dallas, Tex.: SIL International, 2005; online version <http://www.ethnologue.com/>).

> "*O tswa kae kae?*" ('Where's your original home?')[5]
>
> "South Africa," I said.
>
> "Well, that's all right," Ramosamo said kindly. "What we like is for all foreigners to accept themselves as Mongwato and stay peacefully with us. The custom started from the time of our King Khama. King Khama used to be the lover of foreigners, both black and white. In the case of black people we have very large village wards in Serowe now of foreign tribes. It came about that we cannot easily trace who is a foreigner these days. They have added to the Bamangwato tribe and all talk Setswana." (*Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* 68)

Ramosamo understands clear, delineated categories of Batswana, which include the Bamangwato, and "foreigners". He is surprised to learn that his interlocutor "isn't even a proper Motswana!" However, he corrects himself, establishing her origin, and then explaining the policy of who is a Mongwato. He proposes that the Bamangwato easily assimilate newcomers, following the example of Khama. The definition of a Motswana is closely tied to the Tswana language; the black foreigners are indistinguishable from the Bamangwato because they "all talk Setswana".

McCall Smith describes a conversation around a campfire in the Okavango. A group of Batswana are speculating whether "Rra Pula", the white man in their midst, is becoming a Motswana:

> He was a thin-faced man with the leathery, sun-speckled skin of the white person who has spent all his life under an African sun. The freckles and sun-spots had now become one, which had made him brown all over, like a pale biscuit put into the oven.
>
> "He is slowly becoming like one of us," one of his men said as they sat round the fire one night. "One day he will wake up and he will be a Motswana, same colour as us."
>
> "You cannot make a Motswana just by changing his skin," said another. "A Motswana is a Motswana inside. A Zulu is the same as us outside, but inside he is always a Zulu. You can't make a Zulu into a Motswana either. They are different."
>
> There was silence round the fire as they mulled over this issue. (*Morality for Beautiful Girls* 18–19)

Two of the men, a younger and an older man, begin to argue about what makes a Motswana. The older attributes identity to milk received in the "mother's womb." The younger feels that cannot be the case, but is unable to identify exactly where identity comes from. The older asserts his superior knowledge based on his status as father of five children, but is met with silence, as nobody has grounds to challenge, or to prove, that assertion. The elder man's example is important. He claims that Zulus and Batswana are essentially different, perhaps more so than Batswana and whites, in spite of external appearances.

Chief Moroka, in Plaatje's *Mhudi*, also explains the difference between Tswana and Zulu, in answer to a question from the Boers:

> "What kind of people are the Matabele?" asked Cilliers further.
>
> "They are nearly all much blacker than ourselves. Their men go about stark naked even in the presence of their children. The women are well-dressed just like ours. *But the men!* Even in winter, they scarcely ever cloak themselves against the cold winds. Winter cloaks are the luxury of a few of their nobility. But in the summer months no Matabele ever puts on anything. They only carry spears and shields; but for the rest they walk about just like children!"
>
> "Oh," said an elderly Boer, "they are the kaal-Kaffers."
>
> "No, no," said the chief, who didn't know Dutch, "I mean the Matabele, Mzilikazi's people." (86)

[5] Reshoketjoe Lilford suggests that this is a misprint and should be "*O tswa kae gae?*" literally, where do you come from at home.

For Moroka, the difference is cultural. The Matabele, who have broken off from the Zulu kingdom, violate a key taboo. They allow their children to see their nakedness. Tswana society traditionally shelters children from knowledge of their parents' sexuality; so that *Rakgadi*, the paternal aunt, and *Malome*, the maternal uncle, are responsible for the sex education of girls and boys, respectively. While the Matabele have similar prohibitions, Moroka is shocked that they do not extend to a child seeing his or her father's nakedness. Throughout *Mhudi*, Plaatje demonstrates the pre-Christian values of the Barolong as anticipating Christianity. In this case, the Matabele would be subject to the curse of Ham, because they look upon the nakedness of their fathers. The Barolong, who practice Christian modesty even before contact with the missionaries, are exempt from the same curse. The elderly Boer sees only the difference in clothing. *Kaal* is the Afrikaans word for naked. He then applies the derogatory racial epithet, *Kaffer*, which is derived from the Arabic word for a non-believer. To him, some black people wear clothes, others do not, but they are all heathens. The Dutch Reformed Church notoriously distorted the curse of Ham as a justification for apartheid and for the subservient status of black South Africans. Their failure to discriminate between different cultural practices, and between ally and enemy, becomes a liability. Plaatje emphasises this blindness when he portrays a Boer child shouting "The Kaffir, the Kaffir!" when he sees Ra-Thaga drinking from a Boer vessel (*Mhudi* 118). The parents have conditioned their children to believe that contact with African lips will contaminate their utensils so the boy exposes his conditioning. The Boers' drinking vessels would be worthless without the water that Africans have granted to them. They are insulting an ally and a friend, and confirming Mhudi's suspicions about them. Moroka finds the Boer's statement perplexing, emphasising that the Matabele are Mzilikazi's people. His limited contact with the whites means that the idea of classifying people purely by skin colour is bizarre. The Matabele are different because they always carry weapons and they do not wear shoes or other clothes. However, they remain people.

Rose, "that Sindebele woman", in Head's short story "Kgotla", encounters the prejudice against Nguni-speakers. Her mother-in-law and other relatives view her as a belligerent troublemaker and blame her ethnicity for her behaviour. She receives a fair hearing in the *kgotla*, the traditional court, and acquits herself well, establishing that she has respect for Tswana people and customs. At the end of her hearing, Kelapile, one of the hearers, says, "'I have seen a wonderful thing today, Thatayarona,' he observed at last. 'The Sindebele woman fills me with wonder. You know very well that we can never settle cases at kgotla and this case looked impossible from the start. The forefathers were right when they said that the finest things often come from far-off places…'" (68). Kelapile reveals his abiding prejudice persisting in referring to Rose as "the Sindebele woman" by expressing his amazement that her politeness and articulation, which he sees as completely uncharacteristic of the Matabele, have resolved an apparently impossible conflict. He implies that the Batswana are unable to live up to their ideals, because they "can never settle cases". While his expectations of Nguni-speaking people remain unchanged, he is happy that, in this specific case, his prejudice has proven unfounded. In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, prejudice against Nguni-speakers surfaces, not in any bias directed against Makhaya, but in his own self-loathing. He tells the Morolong man, "'Yes, we Zulus are like that. Since the days of Shaka we've assumed that the whole world belongs to us'". He also laughs "sarcastically at the thought of calling himself a Zulu" and rejects his name as inappropriate, since he is not "at home" as the name would imply. He would prefer an English name (*When Rain Clouds Gather* 9). Later, he tells the truck driver that he is Ndebele. Because of the prejudice against Nguni-speakers that he himself articulates, Makhaya's assimilation is more miraculous than Gilbert's.

Immigrants, Emigrants, and Refugees

Ramosamo identifies that Khama has established a tradition of welcoming "foreigners". He also notes that Barotse, who were once "just Barotse" are now boasting about being Zambian. He seems confused, perhaps demonstrating a confusion that anyone would opt to be Zambian rather than a Motswana. The truck driver in *When Rain Clouds Gather* echoes him, telling Makhaya, "Foreigners are always welcome in our country" (18). Sonny Pretorius, an Afrikaner, is proud of his assimilation and provides testimony that some Boers can overcome their failure to appreciate the distinctions between different African societies:

> Ah, I'm not a good Pretorius. Some people have said to me: "You're an Afrikaner. Go and live in South Africa. You'll get whatever you like with a name like Pretorius." It would kill me quickly there. I sometimes go down to Johannesburg for shopping. I get muddled by this people-can't-go-in-there. I sometimes leave before schedule. When I drive the car back over the border into Botswana, I stop, open the flask of tea and then just sit and see a dove fly by. Botswana is the only place that's normal, to my way of thinking.
>
> I was born in Serowe, 3 February 1929. I am a tribesman. I belong to Sebena Ward. My age regiment is Mahetsakgang, same as Tshekedi's son, Leapeetswe. I first had citizenship, but I wanted more, to have responsibility, so I became a member of the tribe.
>
> They call me Sani, a kind of Setswana pronunciation of my name. I was never away from Serowe for long, except for schooling. I went to Christian Brothers College Kimberley but it was far removed from myself. I hated it. My dad was born in Botswana and my grandfather came here as a young man. (*Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* 106)

Sonny has a certificate of status, in which he submits to the authority of the tribe, and the ward headman accepts his application. He has rejected the privileged status associated with being an Afrikaner in apartheid South Africa, preferring to live under the authority of an African tribal structure. Johannesburg, with its artificial distinctions between people, epitomised in its "*Slegs Blankes*" and "*Nie-Blankes*" signs, is an alien and distressing place for him. As a white man who has been completely assimilated into an African society, he is perturbed by the behaviour of his relatives in South Africa. Sonny can also recount his credentials. After expressing his distaste for apartheid, Sonny lists his place of birth, tribe, age regiment, name, time away from Serowe, and his genealogy. He locates himself in terms of space, time and ethnicity. His experience is by no means unique, as Isaac Schapera observes in his ethnography:

> The alien groups in a tribe were sometimes annexed by force, or else submitted voluntarily when their territory was invaded and occupied; others came as refugees from an invading enemy or from the oppression of a conqueror, or seceded from their own tribe because of internal dispute. It is still fairly common for malcontents or victims of injustice to change their allegiance, and for men disputing the authority of their chief to be banished. Once accepted by the chief to whom they apply, they become members of his tribe and are allotted a place in his territory. The tribe, therefore, is not a closed group, membership of which is permanently fixed by birth; it is, rather, an association into which people may be born, absorbed by conquest, or enter of their own accord, and from which, again, they may depart voluntarily. (34–35)

While Sonny's oath of allegiance may be scandalous from an Afrikaner Nationalist perspective, it is part of the normal Batswana business. People are constantly joining and seceding. Apartheid creates a wave of new refugees, perhaps too many to be easily absorbed. Schapera has nothing to say about exiles, who have left their own country to await the end of the "oppression of a conqueror." Perhaps the difficulties experienced by many South African exiles result from the lack of a traditional category for them. By Sonny's time, the traditional oath of allegiance requires a signed document, as an oral tradition becomes codified. Schapera also distinguishes between different social classes, with immigrants (*bafaladi* or *baagedi*) forming

a third class after nobles and commoners. Once the immigrants have served a period of probation, analogous to permanent residence in many nation states, they achieve full membership as commoners (36).

Elizabeth, in *A Question of Power*, remains an outsider: "Definitely, as far as Batswana society was concerned, she was an out-and-out outsider and would never be *in* on *their* things." (26, emphasis added). Eugene, the bearded Afrikaner who runs the secondary school, reveals after her breakdown that she is not alone: "'I suffer, too, because I haven't a country and know what it's like. A lot of refugees have nervous breakdowns'" (52). When she starts shouting abuse in the shop, he recognises her symptoms and comes to her aid. He appears to have assimilated more completely than she has, however. It is possible in writing *Serowe* that Bessie Head shows that, unlike Elizabeth, she has finally joined Botswana society. Her acceptance of Botswana citizenship may mark the end of her probation. Perhaps her writings, taken together, denote the stages of her own exile. *Rain Clouds* expresses the relief and hope that comes with the escape from South Africa. *Maru* expresses the disappointment that Botswana has its own barriers and prejudices. *A Question of Power* exposes the frustration of always being an outsider and never being at home. *Serowe* then becomes a homecoming.

Personal Responses

The anguish in *A Question of Power* gives way to peace in *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*. Exile, combined with the cruelty and injustice in South Africa, has broken Elizabeth and her author. Serowe brings her back together:

> It was by chance that I came to live in this village. I have lived most of my life in shattered little bits. Somehow, here, the shattered little bits began to grow together. There is a sense of wovenness, a wholeness in life here; a feeling of just how strange and beautiful people can be—just living. People do so much subsistence living here and so much mud living; for Serowe is, on the whole, a sprawling village of mud huts. Women's hands build and smooth mud huts and mud courtyards and decorate the walls of the mud courtyards with intricate patterns. Then the fierce November and December thunderstorms sweep away all the beautiful patterns. At the right season for this work, the mud patterns will be built up again. There seems to be little confusion on the surface of life. Women just go on having babies and families sit around the outdoor fires at night, chattering in quiet tones. The majority, who are the poor, survive on little. It has been like this for ages and ages—this flat continuity of life; this strength of holding on and living with the barest necessities. (*Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* x–xi)

Obed Ramotswe describes his return to Botswana after witnessing a murder in a mine in South Africa:

> So I left the mines, secretly, like a thief, and came back to Botswana in 1960. I cannot tell you how full my heart was when I crossed the border back into Botswana and left South Africa behind me forever. In that place I had felt every day that I might die. Danger and sorrow hung over Johannesburg like a cloud, and I could never be happy there. In Botswana it was different. There were no policemen with dogs; there were no *tsotsis* with knives, waiting to rob you; you did not wake up every morning to a wailing siren calling you down into the hot earth. There were not the same great crowds of men, all from some distant place, all sickening for home, all wanting to be somewhere else. I had left a prison—a great, groaning prison, under the sunlight.
>
> When I came home that time, and got off the bus at Mochudi, and saw the *kopje* and the chief's place and the goats, I just stood and cried. A man came up to me—a man I did not know—and asked me whether I was just back from the mines. I told him that I was, and he just nodded and left his hand there until I had stopped weeping. (*The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* 27)

Plaatje observes that Tswana hospitality and sympathy are not restricted to fellow Batswana, but he regrets that they are not reciprocated:

> About 1834 the first party of emigrant Boers under Sarel Cilliers made acquaintance with the Barolong and passed on with their voortrekking expedition. They soon came into contact with Mzilikazi's vanguards at Vechtkop [i.e., Battlehill], in the Heilbron District. Here they had to resist a vigorous attack by the Matabele who relieved them of every head of their livestock. This fight marked the beginning of the tragic friendship of Moroka and the Boers. Word reached Moroka that the Boers, having lost all their cattle, were now exposed to starvation and further attacks. The chief nobly rose to the occasion. He sent teams of oxen to bring the Boers back to Thaba Nchu. On their arrival he levied from among his people gifts of milch cows and goats and also hides to make sandals and shoes for the tattered and footsore trekkers and their families, whom he settled in a place called Morokashoek. If South Africans were as romantic and appreciative as white people in Europe and America, Morokashoek would be a hallowed spot among the voortrekker descendants, and efforts would surely be made to keep the memory of benefactors of their ancestors.[6]

Plaatje laments the abuse of this hospitality, both in his article and in Mzilikazi's curse, which predicts how the Boers will reciprocate Moroka's hospitality:

> "The Bechuana know not the story of Zungu of old. Remember him, my people; he caught a lion's whelp and thought that, if he fed it with the milk of his cows, he would in due course possess a useful mastiff to help him in hunting valuable specimens of wild beasts. The cub grew up, apparently tame and meek, just like an ordinary domestic puppy; but one day Zungu came home and found, what? It had eaten his children, chewed up two of his wives, and in destroying it, he himself narrowly escaped being mauled. So, if Tauana and his gang of brigands imagine that they shall have rain and plenty under the protection of these marauding wizards from the sea, they will gather some sense before long." (*Mhudi* 174–75)

Mzilikazi has a different attitude towards citizenship. He contends, using proverbial legend, that a lion will remain a lion, regardless of who brings it up and what he feeds it. Eventually, it will revert to type and behave as lions do. The Tswana acceptance of strangers is dangerous. History appears to have, at least until 1994, validated Mzilikazi's attitude. Mzilikazi uses a biological metaphor, suggesting that different types of people are as distinct as lions and mastiffs, and that biology is destiny. An animal, or a person, will revert to a biological type. In this, he is dangerously close to the logical positivism that informed apartheid. Certain types of people are actual people; the others can only be understood by comparison to animals. Plaatje alleges that this is a widespread belief among the Matabele. Bhoya, Mzilikazi's tax collector, makes a final speech before Tauana's men murder him:

> "You dogs of a Western breed, you are going to suffer for this. You will pay with your own blood and the blood of your children for laying your base hands on the courier of King Mzilikazi. A Matabele's blood never mingled with the earth without portending death and destruction. Kill me with your accursed hands, you menial descendents of mercenary hammersmiths, and you have sown the seeds of your own doom. Do you hear me?" (29–30)

The animal metaphor resurfaces in Bhoya's outrage that he is about to be murdered by "dogs", using the word "breed" rather than "tribe", to underscore their association, in his mind, with despicable animals. He asserts his superiority, warning of the consequences of mingling his noble blood with the earth. He also refers to caste. His killers are mere artisans; he is a soldier. After Mhudi witnesses the abuse of the "Hottentot maid", Ra-Thaga confirms that the Boers treat their servants with a great deal more ferocity than their children and that Boer children

[6] Sol Plaatje, article on Montsioa in *The Annual Yearly Register: The Black Folks' Who's Who,* edited and compiled by T. D. Mweli Skota (Johannesburg: R. L. Esson and Co, c. 1931), cited in Tim Couzens, introduction to *Mhudi* 11.

object to his drinking "their" water (117–18), which is, ironically on land ceded to the Boers by Moroka. Plaatje castigates the idea that certain human beings are superior, while others are on the level of animals.

Motho ke motho

Mzilikazi and Bhoya do not represent a universal Matabele sentiment, even if the sentiment is widespread among Matabele and Boers in *Mhudi*. The Matabele general Gubuza questions the attack on the Barolong, appealing to shared humanity:

> He said: "No my chiefs, I am not so hopeful as the previous speakers. Gubuza has sat at the feet of many a wise man; I have been to Zululand, to Swaziland, to Tongaland and to Basutoland. I know the northern forests, I know the western deserts and I know the eastern and southern seas. Wiseacres of different nationalities are agreed that cheap successes are always followed by grievous aftermaths. Old people are equally agreed that individuals, especially nations, should beware of the impetuosity of youth. Are we sure that Bhoya was guiltless?" he asked. "Was there provocation? Supposing there was, are we satisfied that the Barolong could have maintained order in any manner short of killing Bhoya and his companion? Did Bhoya simply deliver his message or did he violate Barolong rights in any way? Did he not perhaps terrorize the children or molest Barolong women? My Lords and my Chiefs, I am a King's servant and know what I am talking about. I ask these questions because men of my circle often forget that they are emissaries of the King. They sometimes think that they are their own ambassadors; they too often forget that without their ambassadorship they are menials of low station. Royal appointments have on some of them the same effect as strong drink on the heads of other men." (54)

Gubuza appeals to a wider human standard. He has travelled throughout Southern Africa, lived among different people and seen why individuals behave as they do. He believes that the Barolong may have been justified in their actions, and that Mzilikazi's soldiers have acted rashly, without considering Tauana's motivations. He is shouted down by the assembled crowd and answered by Dambuza, who asserts his superiority in the same language as Bhoya: "'It matters not whether it be a beast with four paws or only two, anyone or anything spilling Matabele blood should suffer a violent death'" (55).

The identification of people with animals is a recurring problem in Southern African culture, language and literature. In Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Makhaya is a Zulu refugee like Mzilikazi; only he is fleeing the system of apartheid whereas Mzilikazi fled Chaka. Makhaya climbs the border fence, escaping South Africa and entering Botswana. "His reasons for leaving were simple: he could not marry and have children in a country where black men were called 'boy' and 'dog' and 'kaffir'" (16). Botswana is not without its problems. A Morolong on the South African side of the border warns Makhaya, "'You are running away from tribalism. But just ahead of you is the worst tribal country in the world […]. Tribalism is meat and drink to them'" (*Rain Clouds* 10). The clearest example of such tribalism in both Head and McCall Smith is in the Batswana treatment of the Basarwa. *Maru* recounts the prejudice faced by Basarwa in Botswana, and links it to global racism:

> 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 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 have 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. (10–11)

Head defines racism as the classification of other people as non-people and shows that it is a universal human disease, with the abuse of the Basarwa as its particular manifestation in Botswana.

McCall Smith also identifies racism towards the Basarwa in *Tears of the Giraffe*. Those who epitomise the old Botswana values do not express this racism. Florence Peko, the housekeeper, reacts to Mr J. L. B. Matekoni's adoption of two Basarwa children, Motholeli and Puso, with prejudice: "Masarwa children being brought into an ordinary person's house and allowed to live there was something no self-respecting person would do. These people were thieves—she never doubted that—and they should not be expected to come and live in respectable Batswana houses" (102). Unusually among McCall Smith's characters, Florence uses the derogatory "Masarwa". In the Sotho languages, nouns of the *le-*, *ma-* class are objects, such as *lengwele*, *mangwele* (knee) or animals, such as *lengau*, *mangau* (cheetah). When applied to people, this class is derogatory, suggesting that they are alien and not quite human: *Letebele*, *Matebele* or *Lekgowa*, *Makgowa* (white person). Mma Ramotswe, by contrast, is scrupulously politically correct. She uses "Basarwa" to identify the tribe of the jeweller (57),[7] assigning him to the *mo-*, *ba-* class reserved for human beings. Even though she does not trust him, she is not prepared to deny his humanity. For Florence, the category of thief is a racial category that is independent of actual stealing. Florence Peko is herself a thief, who plunders J. L. B. Matekoni's kitchen and entertains her male friends in his bed. She perjures herself in trying to help her brother escape a prison sentence for handling stolen vehicles, and is almost charged with contempt of court when she shouts at the magistrate (158–59). Florence can never acknowledge her own thievery and that of her brother, but she sees the children as inherent thieves.

In *Maru*, Bessie Head explores the dehumanising effects of racism, particularly upon the racists. Those who stereotype others first try to conform to a stereotype:

> The principal of the school belonged to that section of mankind which believed that a position demanded a number of exaggerated mannerisms. He kept his coat unbuttoned. He walked as if in a desperate hurry, which made his coat-tails fly out behind him. There might have been a time in his life when he had smiled naturally—say, when he was two years old. But he had a degree and a diploma and with it went an electric light smile. He switched it on and off. It was painful when he was with important people, when it remained switched on. He also behaved as though life were a permanent intrigue. Nothing could be done in a straightforward way. He was a little like Uriah Heep, and a belly-crawler to anyone he considered more important than himself. (38–39)

Pete the principal is not a character but a persona. He is playing the part of principal. His whole identity is tied up in a position, and his stereotypical behaviour marks his commitment to both expressing that position and maintaining it. He is not alone. His friend, Seth, is also a self-made caricature: "an exact replica of a colonial officer, down to the Bermuda shorts" (40–41). Rather than using shallow characters as adversaries for her protagonists, Head explores the process by which a human being robs himself of his humanity, in order to act a part and to deny the

[7] Mma Potokwane describes the children's family as a "band of Masarwa", but then she describes the mother as a "Mosarwa woman" and the daughter as a "Mosarwa child" (85–86). Perhaps she is implying that Basarwa seem less than human at a distance, but become human once one gets to know individuals.

humanity of others. Both men have robbed themselves of their humanity, because they are acting a part. Their friend Morafi, with whom they constitute a "social élite of their own" (42), is a complete caricature, and is grotesque and hideous as a result:

> Morafi was revolting because his inborn stupidity was coupled with total insensitivity. First, he assumed that everything was all right with him because he was the son of a paramount chief. He had big, bulbous protruding eyes which were completely vacant of thought or feeling. His neck was covered in layers of fat. His stomach hung to his knees because he ate too much and drank too much. He was about seven foot tall and like Pete, the principal, he had an acquired laugh. It was staccato, squeaky—eh, eh, eh. His eyes never smiled. They were always on the alert for something to steal. (43)

While his friends have made themselves into a character from Dickens and a cartoon of a colonial civil servant, Morafi has made himself into the sort of ogre one finds in African traditional narratives. Such ogres are characterised by greed and stupidity, just like Morafi. He is brother to Dikeledi and Maru, both sensitive people. His presence and behaviour so revolts them that they have left their father's house to him.

By contrast, both Maru and Dikeledi carry themselves with dignity and authority. Both strive towards some kind of authentic humanity. "There was something Dikeledi called sham. It made people believe that they were more important than the normal image of human kind. She had grown up surrounded by sham" (25). Actually, Morafi resembles their father, who abused his position as chief in order to steal cattle. Maru and Dikeledi mark a break with their father's tradition. Dikeledi initially recoils when her new friend announces that she is a "Masarwa". Later, she announces "'There is no such thing as Masarwa,' she said, a sudden shrill edge in her voice. 'There are only people'" (65). Maru initially confounds Dikeledi in his reaction to Margaret Cadmore, demanding that Margaret return the bed. His explanation clarifies his belief that Margaret is his true equal: "'I don't want anyone to be wiser than thou about my actions,' he said in a quietly threatening voice. 'I don't care if she sleeps on a hard floor for the rest of her life but I am not going to marry a pampered doll'" (66). His revelation shocks Dikeledi utterly. She has to restrain herself from saying "'But you can't marry a Masarwa. Not in your position'" (66). She realises her own prejudice as the thought crosses her mind. Maru leaves his chiefdom, his friends, and his life to marry Elizabeth. He is described as a true chief, yet he abdicates his chieftainship to realise a radical vision of equality. We do not know where Maru and Margaret go after they leave Dilepe. However, Margaret has purified the community, since Pete, Seth, and Morafi have already fled. They leave Dikeledi and Moleka, both of whom have taken steps to emancipate the Basarwa slaves, to bring about a more gradual change in social attitudes. Maru and Margaret leave the village and Maru rejects his status, and to an unknown extent, Tswana society as a whole. Their story parallels, in some ways, the story of Seretse and Ruth Khama. They were forced into exile due to prejudice, although it was largely the prejudice of the British and South Africans that precluded their return to Botswana. Maru and Margaret cannot live out their married life within the traditionalist confines of Dilepe, just as the budding friendship between Ra-Thaga and De Villiers is impossible in nineteenth-century South Africa. Plaatje presents the two men as a model for a South Africa that could have been, had white supremacy not polluted the country. Head presents Margaret and Maru's exile as a challenge to Botswana. She understands the Batswana's ideal of assimilating outsiders, and thus chastises them for failing to realise that ideal. Head herself receives increasing acceptance into Serowe. She questions why another person of the same complexion, but a different ethnicity, would be rejected from the outset.

In *Morality for Beautiful Girls*, the argument about the differences between Zulus, Batswana, and whites is interrupted by the arrival of a human child who smells like a lion and who lacks any understanding of human language or behaviour. At that point, the argument becomes meaningless; the boy is manifestly a person and probably a Motswana, even though he lacks both language and culture. At the same time, his lack of language and culture means

that he is radically separated from other people. Mma Potokwane receives the boy at the Orphan Farm and names him Mataila. Rra Pula and Mma Potokwane accept his essential humanity. Later in the novel, he assists with J. L. B. Matekoni's recovery from depression just as Mr J. L. B. helps with his assimilation into society. Mma Potokwane and Mma Ramotswe speculate about his origins. Both have had an idea, but disbelieve it: "Mma Ramotswe shook her head. 'That is what I have said to myself. People talk about these things, but they have never proved it, have they? They say that there are these wild children and that every so often somebody finds one. But do they ever actually prove that they have been brought up by animals? Is there any proof?'" (*Morality* 225). Like Mma Potokwane and Motopi, Mma Ramotswe suspects that animals have raised this child. However, she believes that various experts and journalists would want to "take the boy somewhere where they could look at him" (225). He would become the object of scientific scrutiny and curiosity. Both women view that possibility as a violation of his dignity because he is a person, not a specimen. Mma Ramotswe concludes by saying, "'We don't want to know the answer to everything'" (225). She rejects the notion that some people are to be studied like animals. She echoes Bessie Head's concern:

> 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 turn around 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. (*Maru* 11-12)

Head attacks science as that which objectifies people, treating them as specimens, or worse, animals. The dehumanisation of the Bushmen begins with scientific enquiry, which condones all the dehumanisations that follow. Other people, insecure in their status within the racial hierarchy, take the attitude of the scientists as an excuse to demean those who apparently dwell below them. Oppression entails the reduction of a human being to teeth, organs, and other body parts. Mma Ramotswe and Mma Potokwane resist such a reduction of Mataila. He will remain a human being, rather than a specimen for analysis.

Human beings deserve both dignity and privacy, and scientific probing violates both. The novels portray privacy as compatible with membership in a community. Those who know one are entitled to ask probing questions, but reaching that state of intimacy takes time, as Elizabeth tells Eugene in *A Question of Power*:

> "You don't seem to get along with the local people," he observed.
>
> "It's not that," Elizabeth said, anxiously. "People don't care here whether foreigners get along with them or not. They are deeply absorbed in each other." She paused and laughed. "They have a saying that Batswana witchcraft only works on a Motswana, not an outsider. I like the general atmosphere because I don't care whether people like me or not. I am used to isolation." (56)

Freedom is also the freedom to be left alone, to have one's own life. Elizabeth needs both distance and companionship.

Conclusion

We cannot generalise about a society and its values from the works of three writers, especially since two of the writers are outsiders. All three writers find something to admire and to extol in Tswana culture and values. However, it remains for contemporary Tswana writers and philosophers to show us how to adapt these values to a changing world. All three writers could, to varying degrees, be charged with escapism. McCall Smith presents Mma Ramotswe

and her values as an antidote to modern fads and fancies and as an answer to all those who would portray Africa as the suffering continent. While she draws on Botswana, Mma Ramotswe has a great deal in common with McCall Smith's other heroine, Isobel Dalhousie. Both exemplify a common-sense approach to the problems of the world. Both women are the antithesis of the hilariously stupid, though highly-educated, German philology professors in the *Portuguese Irregular Verbs* trilogy. Perhaps McCall Smith is implying that sense is in short supply and we should take it where we find it, whether it is in Edinburgh or Gaborone. Plaatje was a representative for an emerging national consciousness. As Afrikaner Nationalism sought to obliterate the record of Africans building South Africa, and even preserving Afrikanerdom, Plaatje strove to remind them of the truth. The friendship between Ra-Thaga and De Villiers is about a South Africa that could have been. It is significant that they part ways at the end of the novel and that Ra-Thaga learns to trust Mhudi's cynicism about the Boers. Like McCall Smith, Plaatje tries to tell the story of another, better Africa, which draws on its past to adapt to the present and future. Perhaps the reception accorded to McCall Smith should tell us that it is time for a critical reappraisal of Sol Plaatje. In her more positive moments, especially in *Serowe*, Bessie Head would seem as nostalgic and sentimental as Plaatje and McCall Smith. However, we have the harrowing breakdown in *A Question of Power* and the unresolved racism in *Maru* as evidence that she saw the warts in Tswana society, and was uncompromising in exposing faults, in society, her friends, and herself. Nonetheless, she can, like both other writers, answer my question *Motswana ke mang?* with the same answer: *Motswana ke motho feela*. A Motswana is just a person. *Motho ke mang? Motho ke motho; ga se phologolo* and *Motho ke motho ka batho ba bangwe*.[8] This is not to reduce Bessie Head to slogans, proverbs, formulae, or easily exploitable philosophical constructs like Ubuntu or Ujamaa. She is uncompromising in showing us the anguish of the human condition. She shows us the evil that dwells within even the most innocuous village neighbour. She also shows us that redemption is possible and that she finds her redemption in a village in Botswana.

Works Cited

Cole, Desmond T. *An Introduction to Tswana Grammar*. 1955. Pinelands: Longman Botswana, 2001.

Head, Bessie. "Kgotla." *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales*. London: Heinemann, 1977. 61–68.

———. *Maru*. 1971. London: Heinemann, 1986.

———. *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*. London: Heinemann, 1981.

———. *When Rain Clouds Gather*. 1968. London: Heinemann, 1987.

McCall Smith, Alexander. *Morality for Beautiful Girls*. 2001. New York: Anchor Books, 2002.

———. *The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency*. 1998. New York: Anchor Books, 2002.

———. *Tears of the Giraffe*. 2000. New York: Anchor Books, 2002.

Plaatje, Solomon T. *Mhudi*. 1930. London: Heinemann, 1978.

———. *Sechuana Proverbs with Literal Translations and the European Equivalents/ Diane Tsa Secoana Le Maele a Sekgooa A a Dumalanang Naco*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1916.

Schapera, Isaac. *The Tswana*. 1953. London: International African Institute, 1976.

[8] "A person is a person, not an animal" and "A person is a person through other people". Cf "*Ke motho ka ba bangoe*" (235) "Through others I am somebody" in Plaatje, *Sechuana Proverbs*.

Continuity and Roots: Bessie Head and the Issue of Narrative Identity in Fiction and Autobiography

Ann Langwadt[1]

> A sense of history was totally absent in me and it was as if, far back in history, thieves had stolen the land and were so anxious to cover up all traces of the theft that correspondingly, all traces of the true history have been obliterated. ("Social and Political Pressures" 66)
>
> Not now, not ever shall I be complete. […] me as the thing of nothing from nowhere? Nothing I am, of no tribe or race. (*The Cardinals* 141)
>
> Although one may personally lack roots in a society, writing rests on a sense of deep roots being present in a culture. ("What Does the Botswana Novel Say?" 40)
>
> I tell an impossible story.[2]

This paper will give a brief presentation of how Bessie Head can be read as a writer grappling with a strongly felt need for "continuity and roots" in constructing a narrative identity for herself. Much of her writing can be seen as a serial take on self-representation, but this essay will be restricted to a selection of (auto)biographical details and their narrativization in non-fictional writing as well as in the novel *The Cardinals*.

Many of Head's fictional and non-fictional writings contain clearly autobiographical elements, not least as concerns the question of "origins" or "roots". The circumstances of Head's birth have been thoroughly researched by Gillian Stead Eilersen, whose biography *Bessie Head. Thunder Behind Her Ears: Her Life and Writing*, presents a picture of Head's mentally disturbed mother (who was severely traumatized by the violent death of her four-year-old son Stanley in 1919 [*Thunder* 4]), the harsh and poor circumstances of Head's childhood, and the traumatizing revelation when she was thirteen years old that her foster-mother Nellie Heathcote was not Head's biological mother and that her "real" mother was a dead madwoman and her father "a native" (*Thunder* 24)

My concern here is not with locating traumatic events ("what really happened"), but with how events that were *experienced as traumatizing* by Head leave their irruptive marks all over her writing and how they influenced Head's fashioning of personal, historical, and universal truths. At the end of her life, Head spoke about writing an autobiography, but I doubt whether she could have satisfied the restrictions of a conventional autobiographical genre due to the readers' or society's demands for veracity (factual or forensic truth). Her strategy seems instead to have been to apply an autobiographical mode to all her writing, and I shall here suggest that her autobiography in fact requires fiction, because it tells "an impossible story".

> If it is ridiculous to claim that a people "has no history," one can argue that, in certain contemporary situations, while one of the results of global expansion is the presence (and the weight) of an increasingly global historical consciousness, a people can have to confront the problem posed by this consciousness that it feels is "vital," but that it is unable to "bring to light": because the lived circumstances of this daily reality do not form part of a continuum, which means that its relation with its surroundings (what we

---

[1] Ann Langwadt is external lecturer in postcolonial literatures in the Department of English, Germanic, and Romance Studies at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark.

[2] Letter to Giles Gordon, 1 April 1972 (KMM 24 BHP 34, Bessie Head Papers at the Khama III Memorial Museum, Serowe, Botswana).

> would call its nature) is in a discontinuous relation to its accumulation of experiences (what we would call its culture). In such a context, history as far as it is a discipline and claims to clarify the reality lived by this people, will suffer from a serious epistemological deficiency: it will not know how to make the link. The problem faced by collective consciousness makes a creative approach necessary, in that the rigid demands made by the historical approach can constitute, if they are not restrained, a paralyzing handicap. (Glissant 61)

A creative approach to personal history was required in Head's case, and conventional autobiography (like conventional Western historiography of the kind that Glissant criticizes in the above-quoted essay) would not be able to recover "the true history" which had been "obliterated". The psychic and cultural traumas rupturing her biography and history meant that Bessie Head, a person with little factual knowledge about her ancestral and cultural origins, was unsure of her place in history. This genealogical uncertainty lead her to construct a personal myth based on memory and hearsay: "I was born on the 6th July, 1937 in the Pietermaritzburg Mental Hospital" ("Dear Tim, Will You Please Come to My Birthday Party…" 13; see also *A Question of Power* 15–19). This sentence was Head's standard opening line when telling the story of her life, and it was followed by her explanation that her white mother from a wealthy race-horse owning family became pregnant by a black stable hand, was committed to a mental hospital where she gave birth to Bessie Head, and later committed suicide. This story, repeated by Head in both private correspondence and published work, was her "working truth". Eilersen's biography has since its publication in 1995 given Head researchers much-needed information for assessing the self-representation strategies of Head's writing. We now know that Head's mother did not commit suicide, that her white family did not own race horses, and that her father therefore was not an employee in the family stables (see Eilersen's biography, 7–26). Although it now seems that the identity of Head's father is entirely unknown, most critics still assume that it was a black man, rather than Head being a case of a genetic "throw-back" so feared in white South African families.[3] One way or another, a non-white child in a white family was shameful in the pigmentocracy of South Africa in the 1930s. In consequence, seeking to discover a usable past for constructing a personal subject identity would yield only evidence of "obliterated traces of history" both in personal and collective terms—traces obliterated by Head's white family and by colonial history:

> There must be many people like me in South Africa whose birth or beginnings are filled with calamity and disaster, the sort of person who is the skeleton in the cupboard or the dark and fearful secret swept under the carpet.
>
> The circumstances of my birth seemed to make it necessary to obliterate all traces of a family history. ("Notes from a Quiet Backwater I" 3)

Head's comments on her childhood and social environment demonstrate that Head herself saw them as traumatic—both individually and collectively, in that her personal experiences were in accordance with her overall view or diagnosis of South African society and history. Head describes her childhood with the Heathcotes as being generally violent and abusive, with unfair and frequent beatings by her foster-mother, extreme poverty, and alcoholism in a racist and

[3] The famous "throw-back" story of Sandra Laing provides an example of the consequences for the people involved (see, e.g., <http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,3604,915475,00.html>). The assumption has generally been that Head's father was black, although the genes that made Head "not quite white" could have come from other sources and other times, on the mother's or father's side. In a racially segregated country like South Africa, it might for some be convenient to refer to the throw-back phenomenon to cover up a sexual affair across the colour line, but that does not seem to be the case with Head's mother. Although this is purely speculative, I consider it more likely that the reason for Head's mother keeping the identity of the father a secret was precisely that he—who might be a "pass-white" or who might be unaware of his mixed racial ancestry—was not a stranger to the family at all. If both Head's biological parents were "to all appearances" white in South African race classification terminology, one wonders what this would mean in terms of seeing Head as one of Africa's few black/coloured women writers, and what it would have meant for her own sense of being an African.

sexist milieu. When Head was thirteen years old, the local welfare organisation's Coloured Case Committee judged that Head's home environment was so bad that it recommended and organised her immediate removal from the Heathcote home (*Thunder* 15).

All this time, Head believed that the Heathcotes were her biological parents. When Head was thirteen years old she was told in an apparently extremely insensitive way that Nellie Heathcote was not her biological mother and some of the other details that became part of Head's standard narrative of her family origins.[4] She thus lost two mothers at once: Nellie Heathcote and Bessie Amelia Emery, who had died when Head was six years old. She also in a sense lost two fathers at once: George Heathcote, who like Head's biological mother had died when Head was six years old, and the "unknown native" biological father. Neither Eilersen's biography nor Head research generally pays much attention to Head's foster-father George Heathcote, and Head herself also focused on the question of mothers in her non-fictional writing.[5] Head wrote that George Heathcote died suddenly of a heart attack and that his death made everything worse at home because it brought Nellie Heathcote much emotional and financial suffering—it turned out that her husband "had had a private girlfriend who had swiped all his money by the time he died" ("Dear Tim" 14). Head writes nothing about grieving the death of the man she must have thought her biological father, and Eilersen's biography provides no clue to this strange reaction. The lack of information about Head's two fathers does not mean however that they were insignificant to her strategies of self-representation as a writer, and their absences are felt in her writing, not least in *The Cardinals*, which I shall return to below.

With three of Head's four foster/biological parents dead or unknown, only Nellie Heathcote remained. In spite of Head's terror of being utterly alone in the world, she broke off this emotional tie herself. Head's autobiographical piece "Dear Tim, Will You Please Come to my Birthday Party…" (written in 1973) consistently refers to Bessie Emery as "my mother" and Nellie Heathcote as "the foster-mother", which perhaps shows Head's view of the importance of biology or which was simply part of her strategy to detach herself emotionally from a woman who "did bad things to me" (*Thunder* 13). "I next had to sort out an almost fanatic attachment to the foster-mother […]. I re-churned the events of the past thirteen years. There had been something grievously wrong with our relationship". These early experiences and what might be described as the birth of the writer find clear parallels in Head's first attempt at novel-writing in *The Cardinals*. "There were a thousand decisions going on in my head. One of them was to snap the affection I had for the foster-mother" and another was to choose a life of books—"it was a blind choice for survival" which Head made when she was sixteen years old ("Dear Tim" 14–15).[6] Henceforth, Head's exploration of selfhood and origins, or continuity and roots, would be conducted in her writing.[7]

The Cardinals was Head's first long piece of fiction, and it is the only novel set in South Africa. It was written in the early 1960s when Head was living Cape Town's District Six and

---

[4] In Eilersen's words, a "shocking example of adult insensitivity, this event shaped and coloured the rest of Bessie Emery's life. Its emotional impact can only be imagined, never assessed". Head made the following comment in 1982: "The lady seemed completely unaware of the appalling cruelty of her words. But for years and years after that I harboured a terrible and blind hatred for missionaries and the Christianity which they represented, and once I left the mission I never set foot in a Christian church again" (qtd. in *Thunder* 24–25).

[5] Eilersen gives a little bit of information about George Heathcote, who was a cobbler and a member of the same Child Welfare Committee that had brought Head to the Heathcote home and later organised to have her removed again (*Thunder* 11).

[6] See also Head *A Question of Power*, p. 15–16.

[7] One can only speculate as to why Head did not try to discover the identity of her biological parents; at any rate there is no indication that she ever did. In the early 1960s her friend Dennis Brutus negotiated with Ira Emery (Head's biological mother's husband until their divorce in 1929) about racial discrimination in sports—the name Bessie Amelia Emery was a clue, but Head did not pick up on it (see *Thunder* 59).

working for the tabloid *Golden City Post*. The story traces the first two decades in the life of the character who is known as Mouse throughout most of the novel. Her foster-mother gave her the name Miriam; she is later renamed by social welfare authorities as Charlotte Smith, and finally the domineering mentor/lover Johnny gives her the nickname Mouse, which she passively accepts.[8] Mouse's characterization is dominated by on the one hand her repetitive response of passiveness and silence acquired from years of victimisation and on the other an intense desire to learn to read and write that is seen as key to survival. In this we are reminded of Head's own quietness as a child and her choice of a life of books, and, as Eilersen states, in the character Mouse "Bessie is clearly presenting a view of herself" (*Thunder* 47).

Mouse was born in 1937 and was immediately placed into foster-care as a so-called "illegitimate child"; there are close parallels to Head's own life. Her mother Ruby places Mouse with her washer-woman Sarah.[9] Mouse is to some extent protected from the harshness of life by her foster-mother, and her own "quiet and solemn reserve protected her further. She was the type of child who preferred to be alone" (4). In Head's descriptions of her own childhood, solitude and individualism were clearly censured by her community, but in *The Cardinals* she creates a character, significantly a writer, whose individualism is accepted by the community and who therefore becomes a kind of role model for "the silent and solemn-eyed child" (4). The township community in the novel would usually repress violently any sign of individuality, according to the narrator, but the old letter-writer softens "their blind, brutal hearts" because of the service he offers the community in writing their letters copied from examples in a book (4). Mouse tells the letter-writer that she sees lots of printed paper at the refuse dump; thus, one could say that her first acquaintance with writing is basically that it is garbage and/or that it is copied from a book. On the other hand, standing "knee-deep in the dirt of the refuse dump" Mouse finds a copy of *The Adventures of Fuzzy Wuzzy Bear* (7) and the bear becomes an imaginary friend for the lonely child, her only friend apart from the old letter-writer.

The letter-writer teaches Mouse to write her own name, and she produces "an almost perfect reproduction of her name the way he had printed it" (6). What she learns from the letter-writer is to copy someone else's words, just like the letter-writer himself is doing. The letter-writer's death is grieved by Mouse, the "silent, stubborn little figure possessed of an insatiable desire to learn to read and write" (8). But what he could teach her was in any case limited, and only her escape from the township sets her on the course for further learning: "Strangely, it was her foster-father who thrust her out into a new way of life" (8).

Mouse is assaulted by her foster-father, but the foster mother prevents rape and gets a beating in what is clearly a traumatizing experience for Mouse.[10] Mouse hides under the table for the rest of the night of the assault "trembling with the wild fright that possessed her"; she then escapes from the family and walks to a Cape Town suburb—"only a silent, stubborn willpower kept her feet moving" (8)—where she is taken to hospital and handed over to the social authorities. At the hospital, the ten-year-old Mouse does not and perhaps cannot answer the essential questions "who are you" and "where do you come from" (10). Mouse's narrative identity, the story of her self, has been silenced by the traumas and ruptures of her early life.

---

[8] Despite an uneasy sense of complicity in accepting this nickname, I shall also be using the name Mouse, as do Head and all Head researchers. Mouse's biological mother simply calls her "the baby" (2). There is a photo of Head with a school friend called Miriam, but I am not aware of any references to this friendship by Head (photo seen at Tom Holzinger's photo exhibition of Head's life, "Bessie Head: People and Places", shown at the Centre for African Literary Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, July 2007).

[9] It is intriguing—if purely speculative—to consider that Mouse's mother's name Ruby echoes Head's mother's name Toby. It is unlikely that Head would have heard the name Toby, which is what her mother was called in the family.

[10] It is not known if something like this happened to Head.

She is clearly in a state of shock and perhaps has never made the Miriam identity her own, hence her passive response to re-naming by the authorities (and later by Johnny). Mouse is given the name Charlotte Smith—a name that is hardly ever used in the novel—and the birth date 6 January 1939 by the social authorities in what may be read as another "obliteration of the traces of her history".[11] She goes through a series of rejections by ten foster-care homes, and she retreats more and more into silence.[12] She "had become more and more silent and her inner retreat was almost to a point where no living being could reach her" (11). On these pages one starts noticing the frequent repetition of the words "silent" and "stubborn" used to describe Mouse, words that are repeated throughout the novel. The silence of her traumatized self and the stubborn will to survive makes her determined not only to write but also to become a writer.

The sixteen-year-old Mouse finally finds a more permanent home when she rents a room with an old couple "who never bothered her" and for "the next four years of her life she sat up educating herself", demonstrating again her determination to learn to read and write (12). Twenty years old, she is surprisingly hired by the paper *African Beat*, which also employs Johnny who, unknown to both of them, is her biological father. The opening paragraphs of the novel's second chapter clearly present the abusive social dynamic of her working environment:

> There was a restlessness and intensity about Johnny that was hard to accommodate. None but the most indifferent or insensitive could tolerate being near him for long. He always seemed to be living at a perpetually intense level of concentration that was nerve-racking and destructive. He was a voluble talker too, and the slightest remark could set him off.
>
> From a long habit of reserve and retreat she appeared to be indifferent to the battering effect of his personality, but this cold reserve seemed to drive him to extremes to taunt and provoke her. She fared no better with the other two men. James taunted her with sly, crude remarks and PK treated her with a patronising and paternal indulgence that was humiliating. To all their taunts she responded with a silent, impassive stare. Only to herself would she admit how they disturbed her. (15)[13]

The constant verbal battery in the work place makes clear the relation between wounds and words which is part of both the failure of representing trauma and the strategy of healing. Mouse cannot find the words to respond to hurtful words, in fact, she is so psychologically damaged that she can hardly speak at all, but she clearly senses that words must be fought with words, that her silence must be broken, and that she needs help to break through the shell she has enveloped herself in: her protective shell has become a prison. For Mouse, it is a question of breaking out of this shell or committing suicide.

As in Head's other novels, the importance of having a creative outlet is made clear, and her characters' creative practices can be read as a parallel to Head's creative outlet in novel writing. Ruby's father and Margaret in *Maru* are painters while Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* is a writer and farmer. Mouse writes, which is a silent and transformational, subjectivity-exploring activity closely linked to the verbal form of abuse that Mouse has been and continues to be subjected to. The novel presents Mouse's training and development as a writer struggling with different styles and forms of writing.

From the beginning it is made clear that Mouse responds strongly to all kinds of writing: learning to write her own name, reading *The Adventures of Fuzzy Wuzzy Bear*, studying Darwin's prose, and writing for the newspaper *African Beat* and Johnny. During Mouse's early

---

[11] The change of date would make it even more difficult for Johnny to discover that Mouse is his daughter.

[12] This, again, is parallel to Head's own experience of being unwanted and returned by several foster-care parents due to suspicions about her race (she was first placed with white people).

[13] *African Beat* is a clear reference to *Drum*. As Dorothy Driver suggests, *Drum* was enabling for black male writers but quite the opposite for women: "Head survived as a writer in spite of *Drum*" ("*Drum* Magazine (1951–9) and the Spatial Configurations of Gender" in *Text, Theory, Space, Land, Literature and History in South Africa and Australia*. Eds. Kate Darian-Smith, Liz Gunner, and Sarah Nuttall. London and New York: Routledge, 1996. 231–42. 231).

years, reading and writing were vehicles of escape from the harsh realities of her life. Particularly *Fuzzy Wuzzy Bear* seems to have provided her with an escape—an idea of an alternative world with a bear that seemed very real to her. It is this idea of an alternative world, an "elsewhere" beyond the slum, that provides her as a child with the "stubborn willpower" to walk out of it. Reading and writing also become a possible way out for the adult Mouse, a way out of her shell and into the world around her. When Johnny and Mouse visit the slum in which Mouse had grown up, Johnny expresses surprise that she had escaped from it, to which she replies: "Escape? I don't think I was trying to escape. I wanted to learn to read and write and it did not seem possible if I stayed here" (23). This important statement—and it is rare for Mouse to say anything at all, let alone express an independent opinion about her own life—is central to the novel as a whole. The departure from the slum enables writing, and writing becomes the way of dealing with the slum and its traumas.[14] In spite of the adult Mouse's opinion, it does not seem likely that the ten-year-old Mouse had reading and writing foremost on her mind when she left the slum and her foster-parents behind; more likely, and in accordance with the description of events around her leaving, she was in a numbed state of shock after the traumatizing experience of being sexually assaulted and witnessing her foster-mother being violently beaten for having saved her from the foster-father (8–9).[15] But trauma, escape, and writing have clearly been (subconsciously) connected by the child early on. The story presents Mouse's mental escape (the protective shell) from the traumatizing conditions of childhood in the slum followed by her struggle to escape the trauma symptoms of dissociation (the imprisoning shell), and both escapes are linked to writing. "Have you ever questioned the appeal that writing has for you?" Johnny asks Mouse; "It can only have this appeal if it is life that excites, fascinates and moves you. Writing is the interpretation of life through words" (108). But Mouse is writing to survive life as she has experienced it; it is more a blind, stubborn choice of survival (like Head's own choice to cut ties with Nelly Heathcote and choose a life of books, as quoted above) than a sign of her fascination and excitement with life as she sees it around her.

By the end of the novel, Mouse has hardly progressed beyond the point of writing for mere survival, but that is of course a significant achievement for a person on the verge of committing suicide. She writes others' stories in which she has no obvious place (although the reader is shown that these versions of others' stories are linked to her own). Just as the child copied the old letter-writer's writing of her name, so the adult Mouse is continuously copying other people's styles and stories. At the newspaper, her writing style does not fit the paper's, which in her view is "vulgar". PK therefore tells her to copy his style (18), which is not only far more informal than the "quiet and conservative tone of the daily newspapers" (12) but also supportive of the political status quo. At the office, during the discussion of Mouse's allegedly sentimental writing style, Johnny suggests to Mouse that she "clear out of here and go and sit on the mountain and write your short stories" (19), indicating that her sensitivity has no place at the newspaper, just like women writers had no place in the sexist environment of journalism at the time.[16] If Mouse was hoping to use writing as a vehicle for reconnecting with the social world, to be told to take herself and her writing off to the mountain could be understood by her as being told that she had no place in this world, and maybe no place in any existing story or history, which is why she so desperately needs to tell or create her own story. A later instance is Mouse's coverage of an Immorality Act court case: she struggles to find the required newspaper tone for writing her report so Johnny steps in and dictates the story to her and

[14] Similarly, Head would later say that her departure from South Africa to Botswana enabled her as a writer.

[15] Mouse's statement may also be taken to suggest her realization as an adult that there was no escape from the abusive environment—that there was no "elsewhere" to escape to, no place outside or beyond social and political oppression.

[16] This also recalls the descriptions of Mouse as a child always going behind a tree to read and write (7).

"waited impatiently as she typed out the story" (71).[17] At the newspaper, Mouse has to copy and learn the other reporters' writing styles: it is not a form of writing that would seem to help her create an alternative kind of story since it repeats the oppressive discourses that have dominated her life.

Finally, however, Mouse begins to practice a different kind of writing. This is a different kind of "copying" which allows more for Mouse's own creative imagination because it is not aimed at news publication but is written for Johnny as reader and mentor or "muse". Johnny gives her a draft or notes for a short story which he wants her to rewrite: "Read it and then re-write it the way you think it should be. Make the people real" (31).[18] Unknown to Mouse herself, her rewrite of Johnny's story is a version of her own parents' story. The story about "Sammy" is based on Johnny's experiences of slum poverty, gangsterism, and his love affair with Mouse's mother Ruby twenty years earlier (38–42). Mouse's version is based on Johnny's draft and shows no struggle for words of the kind we witness in Mouse's social interaction: in fact, although Mouse is described as writing out the story "stiffly and uncertainly, like a child learning to walk", Mouse here appears to have no trouble finding the style and tone of the newspaper and its journalists (37). The reader is later given "the true history" of Johnny's relationship with Ruby, which is more detailed but very similar to Mouse's version; the reader is also given the story of Ruby's pregnancy and suicide, which is unknown to both Johnny and Mouse. Head is here able to play the omniscient narrator, whereas in her own case, of course, she hardly knew more about her own parenthood than Mouse knows about hers.

In the novel, Johnny instructed Mouse to "make the people real" in her writing, but Head herself felt that she had failed at this in *The Cardinals*:

> It was a hotch-potch of under-done ideas, and monotonous in the extreme. There was always a Coloured man here, an African man there and a white somewhere around the corner. Always the same old pattern. I tried to be poetic but even that didn't help […]. If I had to write one day I would just like to say *people is people* and not damn white, damn black. Perhaps if I was a good enough writer I could still write damn white, damn black and still make people *live*. Make them real. ("Let Me Tell a Story Now…" 6)
>
> When I think of writing any single thing I panic and go dead inside. Perhaps it's because I have my ear too keenly attuned to the political lumberjacks who are busy making capital on human lives. Perhaps I'm just having nightmares. Whatever my manifold disorders, I hope to get them sorted out pretty soon, because *I've just got to tell a story*. ("Let Me Tell a Story Now…" 7–8)[19]

I think one senses all of this when reading *The Cardinals*. The novel *is* monotonous and repetitive at times; many words and phrases are repeated over and over again, and the characters and their speech sometimes fail to convince. Repetitiveness in some cases may be read as a sign of the author's limited vocabulary or imaginativeness, but the repetitive and monotonous characterization of Mouse as silent and passive carries a deeper significance which is related to the "stuck" aspect of her personality and life story as discussed in this paper.

---

[17] Mouse continues to work on this story (not for the newspaper) and discusses the underlying issues with Johnny, who in this instance encourages her to think independently and write her own ideas.

[18] Head would later say that a main problem with writing in South Africa was with making her characters real, in presenting people as people rather than merely as representatives of a racial category (see quotation below).

[19] A discussion of the issue of race in relation to *The Cardinals* is beyond the scope of this paper. The racist treatment of Coloureds in South Africa meant that Mouse, like Head, was born into trauma: "a trauma of begetting which speaks a whole history of racial division" (Jacqueline Rose, "On the 'Universality' of Madness: Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*" in *Critical Inquiry* 20.3 [1994]: 401–18. 409). In South Africa, the situation for Coloureds, or for people with multiple lines of ancestry in terms of cultural and historical background, speaks directly to Glissant's discussion of history and the link between nature and culture, or between the land and the experiences and history of the people who live on/in it.

Johnny's proposed cure for Mouse's "condition" consists mainly of threats and violence and the outlet of writing (which is also largely controlled by Johnny). The novel presents a strong picture of a society completely dominated by sexism (practically all the men and women Mouse meets express sexist views). Mouse has escaped the oppressive slum only to find that the world outside is no different. It is difficult to see Mouse achieving any level of personal freedom in the set-up with Johnny, which may explain why Head, three novels on, has given up on this kind of relationship and leaves Elizabeth of *A Question of Power* belonging to the land rather than to a man.

Head has stated that her own development as a writer also depended on escaping from an oppressive environment. She repeatedly referred to *When Rain Clouds Gather* (from 1969) as being her first novel and said that she could not write while she lived in South Africa: "Twenty-seven years of my life was lived in South Africa but I have been unable to record this experience in any direct way, as a writer. […] The environment completely defeated me, as a writer" ("Some Notes on Novel Writing" 61–62). Head's move to Botswana did not in itself bring an end to her mental anguish. In Botswana she found a "new world", but from that new world "peaceful rural scenes would be hastily snatched to form the backdrop to tortuous novels" ("Living on an Horizon" 53). In Botswana her writing became a therapeutic space, and over the course of her first three novels there (*When Rain Clouds Gather*, *Maru* and *A Question of Power*) she moved deeper and deeper into an exploration of her mental unsettledness:

> The earlier work was written over a period of such high inner distress with repetitive cycles of nervous breakdowns that on looking back I feel that the learning recorded in them defined my relationship to Africa, not only in one life but in other lives to come.
>
> Having defined the personal, my work became more social and outward-looking.
>
> ("Notes from a Quiet Backwater II" 78)

The story of *The Cardinals*, on the other hand, opens on a bleak winter's day in an unnamed desolate slum area outside Cape Town, and Mouse later comes to live in another township that is probably based on District Six where the "pattern of life was the same with the weekends of drunkenness and violence and the crude, animal, purposeless, crushing world of poverty" (10). This early work contains none of the passages describing beautiful, harmonious nature or other gestures of belonging such as one finds in the later work set in Botswana. Correspondingly, there is no sense of the protagonist trying to create or discover a sense of belonging to place in *The Cardinals* such as one finds in *A Question of Power*. There is no perception of a meaningful, historical link between landscape and person, or "nature and culture" in Glissant's formulation quoted at the beginning of this essay: the story is dominated by Mouse's sense of being "out of place", of not belonging, of needing to escape in order to survive. When she tries to enter society in the form of her group of colleagues at the newspaper, she and her writing are judged to be out of place, as discussed earlier. She will have no place in history, in any story, until she writes one for herself. The need to tell a story is therefore a question of survival and seems to become more important than the need to know "the true history"; the perception is that her story has to be created rather than discovered.[20] Johnny's instruction to Mouse that she take the people of the story and make them real could be seen as a way of making the absent parents "real" in a fictional autobiography: they are written into existence, and by bringing the parents into the story (or history), Mouse also finds a place in that story—she becomes part of a genealogical continuity. She unwittingly makes use of the traces of her own history supplied by Johnny when she writes the story about Sammy and his girlfriend, but she does this without knowledge of "the true (his)story" and her place in it. In other words, Mouse's "autobiography", like Head's at this stage, required the creative approach of fiction.

[20] This perhaps explains why Head did not try to discover who her biological parents and family were.

Works Cited

Eilersen, Gillian Stead. *Bessie Head. Thunder Behind Her Ears: Her Life and Writing*. Claremont: David Philip, 1995.

Glissant, Edouard. *Caribbean Discourses. Selected Essays*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1989.

Head, Bessie. "Dear Tim, Will You Please Come to my Birthday Party…." *English in Africa* 28.1 (2001): 11–17.

———. *The Cardinals. With Meditations and Short Stories*. Ed. Margaret Daymond. Claremont: David Philip, 1993.

———. "Living on an Horizon." *English in Africa* 28.1 (2001): 40–42.

———. *Maru*. 1971. Oxford: Heinemann, 1972.

———. "Notes from a Quiet Backwater I." *A Woman Alone* 3–5.

———. "Notes from a Quiet Backwater II." *A Woman Alone* 77–79.

———. *A Question of Power*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1974.

———. "Social and Political Pressures that Shape Writing in Southern Africa." *A Woman Alone* 65–72.

———. "Some Notes on Novel Writing." *A Woman Alone* 61–64

———. "What Does the Botswana Novel Say?" *English in Africa* 28.1 (2001): 51–54.

———. *A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings*. Ed. Craig MacKenzie. Oxford: Heinemann, 1990.

The Black Antecedents of Bessie Amelia Emery Head

Tom Holzinger[1]

I wish to whack a wasps' nest about Bessie Head's parentage. I begin with Mr Kenneth Stanley Birch of Rosebank, Johannesburg. He is Bessie Head's mother's youngest brother, still razor-sharp mentally despite his ninety-one years. Ten years ago he published an extraordinary apology for his family's behaviour toward their non-white niece: *The Birch Family: An Introduction to the White Antecedents of the Late Bessie Amelia Head*.[2] This booklet of twenty pages gives us a striking look at how the Birch family operated—firmly dominated by matriarch Alice Birch (Bessie's grandmother) following the early death of her husband Walter. There is especially valuable information about the headstrong but unstable and ill-fated Bessie Amelia Birch ("Toby"), Bessie Head's mother.

Toby's adult life was marked by an unhappy marriage of fourteen years to Ira Emery, later to become well known as the organizer of the South African Olympic Committee. She gave birth to two sons, one of whom was killed at age four. The other, Ronald Emery, died in February 2005 in his eighties, leaving no children. Late in life he was bitter that his Grandmother Alice prevented him from ever knowing his much younger half-sister.

Toby was in and out of mental hospitals following her divorce. Eight years later she unexpectedly gave birth to a girl. This daughter received her own name, Bessie Amelia Emery, later to become Head. A few weeks after her birth, it became apparent that infant Bessie's father was non-white. The rest of this story is relatively well known.

The Birch Family tells us more of Toby's life history. Apart from her husband, she came again and again under the influence of just two persons. One was her mother, Alice Birch, and the other was the lawyer W. A. Morison Abel.

Morison Abel gave her her first job, represented her in divorce proceedings, drew up her will, and helped execute her estate after her death. *The Birch Family* provides ample circumstantial evidence that Alice Birch and Morison Abel conspired together to cover up all evidence related to the liaison that led to Bessie's birth. Mr Abel in particular made some surprisingly unprofessional moves. He ceased to represent his client Toby's interests and pursued his own and Alice Birch's.

After he learned of the scandalous birth of the baby girl, Abel moved Toby's will out of his law office and placed it with a practice that had no connection to the Birch family. After Toby's death, he did not produce the will, but allowed Alice Birch to proceed as heir rather than Ronald Emery. After winding up Toby's estate together with Alice, he henceforth claimed that he had "lost contact" with these former clients. (This egregious misrepresentation had the effect of denying Bessie Head's guardians access to the Birch family at a time when she needed money for further schooling.)

What were Morison Abel's motives? One possibility is that he was *protecting the illegitimate father of the girl*. Toby, who had worked in his office as a young woman, returned to it in 1936 to make a will. As was learned nine months later, this visit occurred around the time of Bessie Head's conception. I would not be surprised to learn that Abel had a Coloured associate with an adventuresome son. Abel would then have acted as he did to protect his own.

Mr Abel's law office is not the only place to look for Bessie Head's father. The thread of probability also leads to the Birch home and the Coloured men who had ready access to it either as friends or employees or tradesmen. Next likely would be an African man in Alice Birch's

---

[1] Tom Holzinger is writer, editor, and friend of Bessie Head. He now lives and works in Serowe.

[2] First published by *English in Africa* (22.1 [1995]: 1–18), and reprinted by the University of the Witwatersrand Library in its Africana Series, number 4, 1997. The reprint is quoted in this essay.

employ, with the least likely possible father being a non-white man who was a stranger. It is this last possibility that many people have put first. Curiously, the astute and man-of-the-world Kenneth Birch, with access to many of the facts, also champions this possibility in *The Birch Family*. Here is his key paragraph: "Who the father was is completely unknown, and speculation is a waste of time. The event must have taken place in Johannesburg when Toby was out on parole from the family home; a brief encounter; a misuse of her mental state? Was she waylaid? Was she enticed somewhere? We do not know" (11). This passage is written with a different style and tone from the rest of the pamphlet. It throws out the least likely possibilities instead of the obvious ones.

Kenneth Birch's uncomfortable writing—and vehement personal unwillingness to discuss the issue—suggest that Alice Birch initiated him into a cover-up before she died. I read his key statement as a dissemblement; I believe its purpose is to make readers look the wrong way.

Why do I believe that Alice Birch learned the secret of Bessie Head's paternity before Toby died? Her actions, like those of Morison Abel, would seem far-fetched if they were not part of a cover-up plan. She took severe measures that of all the Birch family, only she would have any contact with the little Bessie. No discussion of the child was permitted in her home. I think there was the fear that Toby would tell someone else. Upon Toby's death, Alice gathered up her daughter's things and had the body cremated. She had legal control, and she used it to keep even her grandson Ronald "out of the loop" (and largely out of the small inheritance as well). Toby's letters and papers remained with the Birch family and did not go to Ronald. Following Toby's death Alice paid her last visit to the child Bessie; thereafter this girl was totally severed from the Birch family.

Kenneth Birch adds a revealing note to his account of Toby's legacy: "my mother [...] allowed Abel to play a legal part in the winding up of my sister's small estate which included provision for Bessie, *and other matters not mentioned in official estate or other public documents*" (15, emphasis added).

In summary, I believe that Alice Birch learned the identity of Bessie's father. For some reason, quite possibly because this man worked for Abel, or perhaps because Abel was Toby's legal counsel, she told Morison Abel and no one else. Later, it would seem, she told her son and family caretaker Kenneth Birch.

Thus there is the chance that the identity of Bessie Head's biological father will one day become known. The name may be included in what remains of the records of W. A. Morison Abel's law practice. The name is even more likely to be among the Birch family papers, though Kenneth Birch has told me in private correspondence that he has burned many of them. And until his death there is of course Mr Kenneth Stanley Birch himself, who may well know what his mother's cover-up has for so long successfully concealed.

Well, the nest has been whacked. I await the wasps.

"Raising Hell": The Body as Text in Selected Letters of Bessie Head

Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis[1]

> Don't be upset if I quarrel with everyone. I enjoy raising hell. If there is no hell to raise I get out of style. Most times it is I who take the most blows and learn the deepest lessons. (*A Gesture of Belonging* 69)

As a woman alone in every sense of the phrase, Bessie Head writes her life from fluctuating positions of strength and vulnerability. She *is* the eternal "other" trapped in an in-between space that restrains her agency and obstructs her choices. Being *female* and *bi-racial* in southern Africa during apartheid marks Bessie in distinct ways, bestows upon her a disfavored identity with little, if any, cultural currency. How does Head *read* this marking of her corporeal *self,* and what does her response reveal about the person behind the pen? In answer to these questions, I examine representations of the black female body in letters of Bessie Head written to Randolph Vigne and the Cullinans, in the years 1963–79. In particular, I focus on Vigne's letters because, as Ibrahim has remarked, *A Gesture of Belonging* "gives us an authorial text without fictive mediation" (14). I argue that within the epistolary framework, Head constructs her body as a text that writes, is written upon and erased by contending forces entrenched in the social and political fabric of the worlds in which she lives.

Writing the Self: Personal Letters as Autobiography

Autobiographical aspects of personal letters generally are taken for granted based on the assumption that a signature unequivocally identifies the author. According to Zaczek, a letter is "rooted in a tangible reality, since it normally contains a date, an address, and a signature. All of these elements locate it in time and space" (Zaczek 12). Thus, the specificity of this written form anchors the letter to language and culture in uniquely revealing ways. The process of letter writing produces texts that are simultaneously personal and cultural. Head's penchant for saving letters, both sent and received, preserves historical links to the time in which she lived as well as aspects of dominant culture in Botswana.

In spite of loopholes underlying the assumption that a signature names the authority of the letter writer (e.g., a forged signature), the writer of a personal letter indeed creates an autobiographical text, especially if letters have been written to the same person/audience over a prolonged period of time. A wider range of the writer's life is revealed bit by bit, letter by letter, and eventually intimate details of her experiences and inner thoughts connect to form a larger whole. The parts and pieces may not necessarily add up to a smooth or seamless narrative, but to a great extent will reflect a life-story from the first-person point of view. I am by no means suggesting that autobiography is a simple genre without complications, but that its intricacies are embedded in its construction. All the more reason, then to value letters as an under-utilized source of information.

Jolly argues that scholars must "re-evaluate letters, more specifically, letter-collections, as a form that has been unduly neglected in the study of autobiographical writings" (Jolly 10). To that end, the examination of Head's letters adds another layer of knowledge that supplements and further explicates her published autobiographical writings.

---

[1] Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis is professor of linguistics, Women's Studies and Black World Studies at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Her research interests include women's narratives (oral and written), African women writers, women's higher education, and gender differences in language use.

At first glance Head's letters reflect an autobiographical "I" that embraces many contradictions. Her *voice* is both strident and gentle, strong and fragile. Often she seems to express a compromised authority that gains strength from conflict. According to Desiree Lewis,

> In the case of her correspondence with Vigne, Gordon and Cullinan, she often situates herself in relationship of dependency, subordination and supplication. But her letter-writing to these men also becomes an intensely personal and impulsive way of confronting tensions between a "self" dictated by social circumstances and the possibilities for other, more defiant, modes of being. (52)

Clearly, Head's personal challenges (i.e., exile, poverty, estrangement, mental illness, single parenthood, etc.) are formidable, and by definition make her a difficult correspondent. So the persona she projects in her letters wavers between emotional extremes as she attempts to anchor herself in her personal writing to mostly privileged interlocutors. In spite of this asymmetrical positionality, Head admits on more than one occasion that letter-writing fulfills multiple purposes. In one of her letters to Vigne, she states, "Writing to you puts me in a good mood. You are my best friend" (*A Gesture of Belonging* 69). Bessie's declaration of friendship does not endure the tempests of mental and socio-political tests, but while this intimate connection existed, it functioned as a source of comfort for her. She makes a similar, but more forthright comment to Cullinan: "I am writing to you for a number of reasons—the most important being writer's vanity—I have to direct my ideas somewhere and have an audience. It's a tonic exercise too" (*Imaginative Trespasser* 23). By creating such bonds, no matter how fragile, Head is cultivating a specialized audience that is granted access to her most personal thoughts and experiences. Her language of intimacy implies that these selected interlocutors are a part of candid and truthful exchanges that transcend their respective social positions. Head's failure to maintain these close ties and her fluctuation between friend and foe is not necessarily a sign of weakness, but rather a sensitive balancing act that can be disrupted by the slightest hint of impropriety. According to Campbell, "Epistolary writing is subjective and emotional; it reaches out as it looks inward, opening up and presenting a consciousness to a specific sympathetic listener" (Campbell 336). In many ways, it is the form itself that provides Bessie Head with a forum for (re)constructing her most intimate *self*.

Sites of Engagement: The Black Female Body

> In Western art the representation of the black female body has been largely determined by prevailing attitudes toward race, gender, and sexuality and can be grouped into three categories: the naked black female (alternatively the "National Geographic" or "Jezebel" aesthetic); the neutered black female, or "mammy" aesthetic; and the noble black female, a descendant of the "noble savage." (Willis and Williams ix)

The preceding quote highlights issues of the body that are particularly critical for black women who must constantly (re)create themselves against the legacy of a tarnished reputation. As Willis and Williams indicate, the black woman's body image has been defined by a complexity of factors, all connected to external perceptions of black women as limited in their humanity and tethered to a colonial past. This definition *writes* on the black female body prescribed notions of subordination and sexuality, effectively concealing any other, less physical, qualities. Campbell remarks that the African woman in particular "was sometimes thought to lack interiority […]"(81). Taken to its ultimate conclusion, this notion suggests that the black woman's body, her outer shell—is the sum of her existence. So her identity has already been established, even before she writes or is written about. Against this kind of *erasure*, black women write them*selves* into multiple texts, and by so doing resist perceptions that limit their possibilities. As for Bessie Head, resistance is essential because she is an embedded minority (e.g., bi-racial, exile, writer, activist, etc.) who does not fit conveniently into any

singular identity. As a result, she is hypervisible, a stand-out amongst others. And to make the situation more intriguing, she *marks* her self with her voice. As a case in point, she writes of her encounter with an artist: "An artist once tried to sketch me and she said she couldn't come to terms with my mouth. It had not a set pattern—but she sketched my eyes over and over again. In the end she asked me to put my hand over my mouth to get it out of the way" (*Imaginative Trespasser* 167)**.** The artist's unusual reaction is revealing as well as symbolic. On a basic level, one can argue that the mouth is a symbol of Head's voice: outspoken, uncontrollable, confrontational. The artist, not being able to cope or perhaps accept the *mouth*, mirrors a kind of conventional reaction to a woman who does not know her "place"—she must be silenced. Yet Head does not submit to this condition. She is anything but quiet. In fact, she reports in her letters that she relishes inciting fierce emotion, especially when interacting with men: "I like to do things to men and say all kinds of horrible things and be very provocative" (*A Gesture of Belonging* 65). Clearly, Bessie uses oral and written language to impress upon others the force of her personality.

In spite of her best efforts to assuage people's misconceptions, reactions to Head were influenced by her physical appearance. Her physical being is the *map* that outsiders read first. This practice of reading the corporeal body as text or map, especially the black female body, establishes gender stereotypes that become entrenched in the fabric of a community. Collins maintains that standards of female beauty are closely correlated with age and race and that "women are pretty or they are not" (194), they conform to prevailing standards or they do not. There is no middle ground. If not, then unattractive women have fewer options than those who are pretty. Head applies this notion to outsider's reactions. She remarks in a letter to Vigne, "My God, Randolph, I'm a hell of an ugly woman—I don't know why I'm in so much trouble. It's never happened to me before. Not the kind of woman men take a second look at but HERE I've created chaos and confusion—even to the point of having my sanity threatened" (*A Gesture of Belonging* 15). Her remarks can be interpreted as "tongue-in-cheek," a bit of self-mockery. On the other hand, she may be quite serious. That she plays the "*femininity card*" (so to speak) is pivotal. Bessie covertly acknowledges that certain standards must be maintained in order for a woman to get into "trouble", or to be popular with men and the corollary—to be hated by other women. Casting herself in such a self-effacing, negative light and taking on the role of an "ugly" woman indicates that Head perceives her self outside of mainstream sexual politics even though people around her treat her as a key participant in the "sleeping around" game. In her own words, she simply does not measure up to the prevailing standards. On a deeper level, the term "ugly" may be a personal metaphor for outsider or nonconformist. Bessie is a unique individual in so many ways; this may have been an unconscious acknowledgment her distinctive hybridity. Ultimately, Bessie concedes that sexual politics, more than anything else, shape women's and men's interactions: "It's pretty terrible I tell you for a woman to be alone in Africa. Men treat women as the cheapest commodity" (*A Gesture of Belonging* 11).

For all practical purposes Bessie Head is in a no-win situation. By virtue of her gender and social circumstances, she is isolated—removed, erased, alone. She also manifests qualities that the community finds unacceptable in a woman. Bessie is a mother, but not a wife; she is a woman, but not invested in sexual escapades; she is a female, but does a man's work. From a public point of view, she *is* a material being, nothing more.

The Body as Object

> Above all else, her image, and particularly her body, was understood to represent that which could be dominated and that which could be possessed, especially sexually. (Willis and Williams 3)

As the preceding quote suggests, black women's bodies are sites of engagement where rival forces (i.e., patriarchy, sexism, imperialism, racism, commercialism, capitalism, etc.) vie for dominance. This fixes the black woman in an unending loop of imagined hypersexuality as well as a permanent inferior social status relative to all others. So given the circumstances of Head's life and her sharp intellect, it is not surprising that she is troubled about the treatment of women. She frequently expresses this concern in her letters. To Cullinan, she writes, "You know—this man and all these other men they don't value women. They don't even see you as a real woman" (*Imaginative Trespasser* 87). Head does not explain what she means by the phrase "real woman", but certainly there is an element of invisibility here. The categorical lack of *presence* further marginalizes her, and at the same time creates a social paradox. According to her perceptions she is simultaneously hypervisible and invisible. On the one hand, she is a "nonentity, a nobody" (*A Gesture of Belonging* 58), and on the other hand she is routinely discussed and scrutinized: "And I have fantastic sex parts which have been thoroughly and widely discussed with no one really knowing what they are like. Or for that matter, no one ever stopping to question what I might be like, […]" (*A Gesture of Belonging* 121). She constantly struggles with the misguided perceptions of others and the larger implications of the treatment of women. According to Collins, "Sexuality also can be seen as a site of intersectionality, a specific constellation of social practices that demonstrate how oppressions converge" (11). So in a way, it does not matter whether or not the accusations are true because the sexual labels assigned to her are part of the process of maintaining the dominant masculinity of the community. Kapstein has argued that when women fail to reproduce and maintain prescribed female and male identities, "they threaten to become boundary transgressors instead of boundary creators. Society, made anxious by this possibility, moves to contain and classify them" (81). Examples of this process of *containment* from Bessie Head's personal life are instructive. She writes to Vigne, "The women kind of treat men like property. Same with the men. Then there's all this feverish hopping about looking for "SOMETHING." It's a fever and hell—everybody's sex organs. Apart from I-can-stick-around-alone-attitude; I also like to keep my sex organs to myself" (*A Gesture of Belonging* 10). It seems that from Bessie's point of view, the practice of commodifying gender confines both women and men to sexualized social roles that are neither progressive nor liberating. Apparently nothing much changes because years later, she makes a similar comment to Cullinan: "It is not that I don't have sex parts and other impulses but that I have self knowledge as well. I cannot find a man suited to me and he would be just like I described in my work" (*Imaginative Trespasser* 170). In both instances Head admits that she is human with all the desires that this encompasses, but hints that joining the sexual Olympics that surround her is not what she chooses. The key element here may be what Bessie refers to as "self knowledge". This knowledge of self as an intellectual, and not just physical being, may be the force that drives her to opt out of the sexual conquests she observes in her community. In this way, she *writes* on her body the capacity to think and know. Her letter provides a means for her to "write back" and to utilize this form as more than just a means of communication. Campell observes that women in particular "use the letter as a subversive and freeing agent and also as a mirror in which they not only seek themselves and/or another but attempt to change their lives to reflect the mirror image" (332).

As an intellectual and a writer, Bessie Head is outside of the ordinary experiences of her community. Lacking any tangible measure to compare or evaluate her, people invent her life,

write on her body an imaginative text that has no external confirmation. Bessie is very much aware of this state of affairs and writes with humor about the implausibility of some of the rumors: "There is something I am curious about, though. They are a funny crowd here. Something is wrong with the outlook of people who keep their eyes glued in transfixed fascination at a woman's stomach. I've had the longest pregnancy in history, with no man in sight" (*A Gesture of Belonging* 121). Not being bound to an adult male (i.e., husband or father), and being tarnished by the sin of fair skin, is another strike against Bessie's full membership in the community. Because of her *unboundedness*, she is categorically excluded from the honor of being a respectable woman: "To people who are literate I am a fascinating animal, something like a zoo. To intelligent women, I'm a potential husband stealer and to intelligent men—well they look at you that way—speculatively—and you know what they think—'how would this zoo animal behave in bed'— […]" (*Imaginative Trespasser* 23). The animal-like image dehumanizes Head as well as those who (mis)interpret her. She remarks on several occasions that she is not given the opportunity to prove herself and thus stays mired in the realm of speculation and rumor. Furthermore, this framing of others' perception of her as an exotic animal may be a covert warning to her white male interlocutors. In other words, she may have been reporting real life experiences and at the same time putting her white male friends on notice that she is aware of the possibility that misconceptions may indeed violate or at least shape in some way the lopsided the bonds of their friendship. If this is in fact a covert warning, it represents what Lewis refers to as a "mask" or kind of rhetorical stance that momentarily slips out of place.

Finally, although Head argues that matters of the body are gender specific, she also suggests that the gendered nature of evil is not fixed. She identifies the components of evil—"malice" and "viciousness" that cross over in the service of murder, literal and symbolic:

> There were two or three other things I learnt for myself—what love is really like and what evil is really like and that evil is so powerful because it does not answer to logic or reason, that *there are men who are women in disguise because malice and viciousness are feminine qualities and that such men can kill a woman like me,* because although I look feminine and am blabber mouth enough to be feminine, I am really masculine in feeling because I make straight deals and don't understand the eternal trick of—you eat me and I eat you, that's how we play this game. (*A Gesture of Belonging* 116, emphasis in original)

Bessie describes her embodiment through a gendered lens—"I look feminine", "I am really masculine in feeling"—to make the point that appearance is superficial and, at the very least, misleading. To illustrate this understated idea, she goes on to suggest that a person can be feminine and masculine simultaneously because of incongruities on the surface of the body and within. She does not elaborate on the novelty of this concept, but uses this situation to acknowledge the flexibility of gender as a social construct.

The Surface of the Body and the Question of Race

> The body is an overdetermined concept, burdened with religious and philosophical as well as psychoanalytic, sexual and racial meanings […]. (Lionnet 30)

As to the question of race, Head's very existence represented a violation of rigid apartheid law, a kind of *taboo writing* on the body. Racial meanings manifested in Bessie's corporeal *self* serve as a public reminder to both blacks and whites of the inherent treachery of miscegenation. The progeny of such ungodly and illegal unions are neither "fish nor fowl" so to speak. Neither black nor white, but both, they inhabit an in-between, "third space" not easily

defined and certainly not accepted. Thus marked, Head responded to others who reacted negatively to her physical and ideological blackness. To Cullinan, she writes,

> There's a certain type of African intellectual who dominates the scene at the moment. To him blackness of skin colour is terribly important—which is quite reasonable. Half castes like I look are a miserable crowd generally. Anyway, it's just not possible to assert my kind of Africanness which is a wide, all-encompassing feeling of great intensity. (*Imaginative Trespasser* 23)

Once again, Head recognizes that appearance is a detriment to her participation in the liberation movement, at least in other's eyes. She seems to understand the "reasonableness" of this stance as well as its absurdity. Bessie subtly contrasts the limitations of the former view with her "all-encompassing" (i.e., inclusive) "Africaness". Three years later she writes to Vigne, "You did not like me then because I was such a hot rod black nationalist. I very soon got over that phase because many people pointed out to me that I was not black enough" (*A Gesture of Belonging* 64). Here is a repeat of the previous situation at a different time and place. The notion of ideological blackness is again measured by what is *written* on the body—skin color. To other blacks in the movement and even to some whites, Bessie Head could never really measure up because her bi-racial ancestry canceled out, made null and void any efforts she could expend for liberation of the people. Furthermore, one could argue that the option of passing, whether or not she chose to do so, afforded her a privilege that others did not have. So the possibility that she could opt out of the struggle at any time made her particularly suspicious. Sample points out that "Ironically, the racialized hatred she fled from returns in Botswana, but the skin colors have changed. Now she is hated by blacks for her lightness. Now blacks are the holders of power" (13).

In terms of her own assessment of the significance of race, Head by virtue of others *writing* on her body, ruminated about the issue of skin color. Even though she remarks that she does not think about it, clearly she does: "To tell the truth I don't sit around thinking about the colour of my skin" (*A Gesture of Belonging* 68). She makes an effort to discount or mitigate the importance others have placed on racial differences. Several months later Head embraces a racial identity that is stigmatized within the African community. It is as if she is trying to claim the most extreme marginalization in order to (re)claim her self. Being a part of a "despised tribe" distinguishes her as an *African* "other" rather than an unknown other who has no predetermined place of belonging.

> I can't change myself … from being bushman, half-breed or what have you into anything to please anybody. I look like a Bushman, who is a despised tribe here. … I am short in height. There is no one who is going to un-bushman me. […] But few people know my heart and my mind. […] I really live with my heart and my mind, not my looks. Even if I had someone to love me, it would surely be infantile of him to love my looks. He might love my heart or my mind. (*A Gesture of Belonging* 71)

By appropriating the identity of a "Bushman", whether in jest or in all seriousness, Head connects her self to an outlaw group and implies that the surface of her body is not what counts. Playing the *race card* in this way allows her to once again point out the superficiality of identity politics.

From a different perspective Bessie writes about the reality of the color barrier, even in her dreams. One can theorize about race as a social construct, but the sad truth of the matter is that this notion takes on unwarranted significance in daily life. Head feels constant tension between her self and the community because her body has been *written* upon by forces outside of her control. Nonetheless she is held accountable for her own *being* and the resulting anxiety is manifested in her dreams:

> I got a fixed nightmare behind me. There was a woman in my dreams torturing me. She was a black woman, as though I had no right to live on this earth in my own complexion. There was a mocking smile on her face as though nothing I could do

> would ever make up for the crime of my complexion and such a horror overcame me that I put myself to sleep with tablets. (*A Gesture of Belonging* 108–09)

It is tempting to look outward for a villain that matches the woman in her nightmare. But could it be an inner representation of the kind of self-hate that is often a by-product of racial oppression? Could the woman in her dream be Head herself? In that same letter, Head sums up the question that plagues her on a regular basis: " Why do you suffer so much only to come to a simple conclusion that a world based on complexion is an empty and unimaginative world. It can't see anything beyond that, just one track: 'If you are not my complexion, you ought to die'" (*A Gesture of Belonging* 109). Trapped in her own skin, Bessie Head seems to lament her predicament. Ideologically she is black, but physically she is not. Her body is inscribed with characteristics that the movement associates with the enemy (i.e., skin privilege). So given the narrow parameters of this situation, there is no place for her to *be* in the prescribed binary—black/not black. Undoubtedly the trauma of the body weighs heavily on Bessie. Lionnet and Heath explain such a condition in terms of larger cultural ramifications: "As a privileged symbolic space, the 'body in pain' translates cultural conflicts into a visible representational frame […]" (150). Thus, the collision of opposing values, especially with regard to matters of the racialized body, are significant beyond Head's individual dilemma, although this may not have been any comfort to her. Eventually, Head tires of being defined almost exclusively by the *writing* on her body. She insists that she is much more than that which the color of skin implies to others: "Maybe I'm also sick of the label of black or non-white and crap like that. I have a string of lives behind me. This isn't the only life I've lived and the only place on earth I've been identified with" (*Imaginative Trespasser* 66).

Conclusion: The Names She Calls her *Self*

I have argued that Bessie Head constructs her body as text that writes, is written upon and erased. The sexual innuendos and racial insults that plague her are based on ill-conceived (mis)readings of her body. The end result is Bessie Head's constant struggle to define her self in her own terms. As a means of resistance, her body becomes a text that writes back when she claims the very qualities that others disdain. Her comment that: "There is no one who is going to un-bushman me" is a prime example of how she uses the facts of her body to repel the irrational pressure to be someone or something other than her *self*. Moreover, Head fortifies her own agency by applying to her self those negative labels that others probably have used to describe her: "ugly woman", "half-caste", "Bushman", "zoo animal", "not black enough", "blabber mouth". All of these derogatory words and phrases obscure the positive attributes of her personal identity. However, the act of claiming a negative label not only removes some of the sting, but also is a means of empowerment. Bessie Head sums the matter quite effectively: "All sorts of stories go around about me. I think the most well worn one being that I'm a walking lunatic asylum. It's sort of given me the courage to dress up my outer self with my inner soul. I can reach the ultimate in human freedom" (*Imaginative Trespasser* 66).

Works Cited

Campbell, Elizabeth. "Re-Visions, Re-Flections, Re-Creations: Epistolarity in Novels by Comtemporary Women." *Twentieth Century Literature* 41.3 (1995): 332–48.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

Head, Bessie. *A Gesture of Belonging: Letters from Bessie Head, 1965–1979*. Ed. Randolph Vigne. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1991.

———. *Imaginative Trespasser: Letters Between Bessie Head and Patrick and Wendy Cullinan*, *1963–1977*. Ed. Patrick Cullinan. Johannesburg: Wits UP, 2001.
Ibrahim, Huma. *Bessie Head: Subversive Identities in Exile*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1996.
Jolly, Margaretta. "'Life Has Done Almost as Well as Art': Deconstructing *The Maimie Papers*." *Women's Lives/Women's Times: New Essays on Auto/Biography*. Eds. Trev Lynn Broughton and Linda Anderson. Albany: SUNY Press, 1997. 9–30.
Kapstein, Helen. "'A Peculiar Shuttling Movement': Madness, Passing, and Trespassing in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*." *Critical Essays on Bessie Head* 71–99.
Lewis, Desiree. *Living on a Horizon: Bessie Head and the Politics of Imagining.* Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007.
Lionnet, François and Joseph Heath. "Inscriptions of Exile: The Body's Knowledge and the Myth of Authenticity." *Callaloo* 15.1 (1992): 30–40.
Sample, Maxine. "Artist in Exile: The Life of Bessie Head." *Critical Essays on Bessie Head* 1–25.
———, ed. *Critical Essays on Bessie Head*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003.
Willis, Deborah and Carla Williams. *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2002.
Zaczek, Barbara. *Censored Sentiments: Letters and Censorship in Epistolary Novels and Conduct Material*. Newark: U of Delaware P, 1997.

"Wom*e*n at Point Zero": A Comparison of Prison Narratives by Nawal El Saadawi and Bessie Head

Bobana Badisang[1]

Introduction

This essay discusses two works based on stories of women prisoners, common-law wives, imprisoned for murder, set in different African countries, Egypt and Botswana. The narratives depict women in incarceration, Firdaus and Dikeledi Mokopi, who have been captives of social structures. Firdaus, in *Woman at Point Zero*, murders her pimp in self-defense when she can no longer cope with his demands for unlimited rights to share her prostitution earnings. Dikeledi, in "The Collector of Treasures", a short story, murders her estranged husband to escape his demands for unlimited conjugal rights and the humiliation at his hands. There are a number of similarities between the two inmates, Firdaus (on death row) and Dikeledi Mokopi (imprisoned for life), in terms of both their social class and their cultural backgrounds. After trial and conviction, both women appear indifferent and far from remorseful regarding their crimes—because of their backgrounds. Both surrender to the police without any struggle and, for the first time, hold their heads high as if to celebrate some kind of emancipation, although they have been convicted of murder and manslaughter.

At the opening of both works, the reader is ushered into women's prison gates with a woman warder as caretaker of each prisoner: Firdaus in Qanatir Prison in Cairo and Dikeledi Mokopi in the Gaborone State Prison. A question on the space for women in society (domestic versus public space) arises: Where is a woman's space? When domestic space fails her, is she ironically safer—freer—in prison, where at least someone listens to her? When she decides to commit her crime, in Dikeledi's case, where does that then leave her children? Firdaus tells her story after a lot of coaxing and cajoling from the frame narrator; "The Collector of Treasures" is told from a third person's view point. Neither woman expresses any remorse for her crime. "Not really" Dikeledi responds when a fellow inmate asks if she is sorry, and then when asked how she killed him, replies, "I cut off all his special parts with a knife" (89). Firdaus says to the prison doctor, who tells her she has a good chance of appeal, "'But I don't want to be released,' I said, 'and I want no pardon for my crime. For what you call my crime was no crime. […] Now I'm waiting for them. After a little while they will come to take me away" (101).

Solidarity and support among incarcerated women within prison is important and reliable for both women. In Head's work, the understanding of each other's plight, the sharing, and the egalitarian spirit that one seems to miss in the outside free world reigns. In Saadawi's work, Firdaus marches unremorsefully yet majestically to death row. She not only refuses to sign clemency papers, but she also refuses to talk to anyone about the homicide case. Her prison warder does not believe that Firdaus deserves to die. Tarabishi observes that Firdaus is charismatic and inspiring and that both the male doctor and female warder are seduced by Firdaus's magic and worry about her, since she "will neither speak, eat, sleep nor contest her case" (20). According to the male prison doctor, "she was not like the other female murderers held in prison. 'You will never meet anyone like her in or out of prison. […] To be quite honest, I do not really feel she is a murderer. If you look into her face, her eyes, you will never believe that so gentle a woman can commit murder'" (*Woman at Point Zero* 1–2).

---

[1] Bobana Badisang is a librarian at the University of Botswana. She has published fiction, poetry, and annotated bibliographies and discographies. She is currently completing a Master's in Education in the University of Botswana.

Immediately after killing her husband, Dikeledi Mokopi sends her son Banabothe to call the police. Her friend Kenalepe's husband, Paul Thebolo, her neighbour and strong supporter, who has been alerted by cries, shocked to near numbness by the unfolding events, only has this to say: "'You do not have to worry about the children, Mma-Banabothe. I will take care of them as my own and give them all a secondary school education'" (103). Firdaus's warder is overprotective of her, while Dikeledi's prison warder responds to her crime cynically: "'So you have killed your husband, have you?' the wardress remarked, with a flicker of humour. 'You'll be in good company. We have four other women here for the same crime. It's becoming fashion these days'" (88). The warder's cynicism is contrasted with the support that Paul has promised her from outside the prison.

Class Background

Orphaned at a tender age, poor, and downtrodden, both Dikeledi and Firdaus are brought up by their uncles and married off primarily to rid their families of liabilities and for economic gain. While Firdaus, a secondary school graduate, is married off to her aunt's retired and disabled pensioner uncle, Sheik Mahmoud, Dikeledi, a semi-literate young woman, is married off to her uncle's civil servant friend, Garesego Mokopi. Firdaus overhears her aunt expressing the following sentiments: "The house is small and life is expensive. She eats twice as much as our children" (35). And Dikeledi is told, "You'd better marry Garesego because you are hanging around here like a chain on my neck" (95). Their abusive marriages force them to be resourceful in their struggle to survive. In her short-lived "escape", Firdaus faces life's choppy journey. She seeks honour through paid employment, languishes in poverty, experiences a failed love, and goes through a struggle complicated by having to fight oppressive structures. She comes to realize that as a prostitute, she becomes more significant. She is capable of saying "no". Dikeledi, the "collector of treasures", possesses a combination of rare skills. As a seamstress and the village roof-thatching expert, she has earned a modest, decent, but gratifying and fulfilled living as a single parent, until a crisis triggered by her estranged husband Garesego's demand for conjugal rights hits the family:

> Her life had become holy to her during all those years she had struggled to maintain herself and the children. She had filled her life with treasures of kindness and love she had gathered from others and it was all this she wanted to protect from defilement by an evil man. Her first panic-stricken thought was to gather up the children and flee the village. But where to go? Garesego did not want a divorce, she had left him to approach her about the matter, she had desisted from taking any other man. She turned her thoughts this way and that and could find no way out except to face him. […] Black women did not have that kind of power. […] At last at peace with herself, […] she […] wrote a reply: "Sir, I shall prepare everything as you have said. Dikeledi." (101)

The peace that Dikeledi finds in her decision to "prepare everything" is what also makes her fellow inmates look up to her as indeed "the collector of treasures". As a "lifer", she comfortably settles in prison and uses her many talents—treasures—by her inspirational skill at knitting and dress-making. "'It's not so bad here,' Kebonye said. 'We get a little money saved for us out of the sale of our work, and if you work like that, you can still produce money for your children'" (90–91).

Dikeledi's and Firdaus's experiences do not haunt them, but for other women, having killed a partner is an experience that haunts them for life and one that they have to live with till death. Iranian women prisoners who had been convicted of murdering their husbands have this to say:

> "Our husbands are lying in enclosed graves and we are in open graves. We too ceased to live the very day that we killed our husbands." These are the words of a woman who spends her nights on the three story bed across from me. Her nights are filled with

> nightmares about the death of her husband—a husband she stabbed to death. (Hossein Zadeh)

Who is the Criminal?

Firdaus's warder's analysis emerges as political. She responds to the frame narrator in anger: "'Murderer or not, she is an innocent woman and does not deserve to be hanged. They are the ones who ought to hang'" (2). Firdaus has dared at one point to refuse sexual favours from a head of state; thus she has become somewhat a loose canon that needs to be silenced. Perhaps that is why the warder strongly feels she is a victim. In *Woman on the Edge*, Phoolan Devi's background as an abused child is understood to have contributed to her life as a famous and celebrated killer, who killed to avenge her lover's murder and her own rape. The stories of Firdaus and Dikeledi clearly have "real life" precedents.

Mahboubeh Hossein Zadeh, ex-prisoner and analysist of incarcerated Iranian women in similar circumstances, posits that

> These women, they all seem kind and patient to me. They are women forced into marriages they did not choose, women who were forcibly married off at the age of 13 and 14, women whose husbands were chosen by their fathers…one of these women was forced into marriage through physical violence bestowed upon her by her father, who slapped her repeatedly until she accepted her fate. Until she accepted to marry a man who was 45 years her senior. Another woman continues to have nightmares about that doomed day four years ago, when she took matters into her own hands and murdered her husband. She worries about her daughters whom she turned over the state welfare organization for care. Others too, have similar stories.

Firdaus's and Dikeledi's miserable life stories also are rooted in sad childhoods. As orphans they are both "dropped off the deep end" into arranged marriages, married off to older men while at a very tender age. Both women endure humiliation in their matrimonial homes, dictated by unequal circumstances: "driven by greed for money and his desire to get rid of another useless mouth to feed" and under pressure from his wife, Firdaus' uncle, an El-Azhar University graduate, marries her off at age eighteen to sixty-year-old Sheik Mahmoud, her uncle's wife's uncle, "who also suffers from a sickening facial deformity: […]" (Tarabishi 20). Firdaus describes the way her life decays:

> The day came when I departed from my uncle's house and went to live with Sheik Mahmoud. Now I slept on a comfortable bed instead of the wooden couch. But no sooner did I stretch out my body on it to rest from the fatigue of cooking and washing and cleaning the large house with its rooms full of furniture, than Sheik Mahmoud would appear by my side. He was already over sixty while I had not yet turned nineteen. On his chin below the lip, was a large swelling, with a hole in the middle. Some days the hole would be dry, but in others it turned into a rusty old tap exuding drops red in colour like blood or whitish yellow, like pus. (43)

Sheik Mahmoud watches her like a hawk while she goes about her domestic chores. He chastises her for any mistake that may arise during her cooking and washing. He inspects the way she measures even cooking oil, so that she does not waste it. He even checks every detail about the rubbish bin so nothing goes to waste.

The ordeal and challenges of prostitution begin when she eventually runs away from the matrimonial home. She becomes a captive to Bayoumi, a restaurant owner. At the first expression of her desire to be independent, to fend for herself using her only legitimate possession in life, her secondary-school certificate, Bayoumi becomes nasty. In pimp fashion, Bayoumi invites friends to take turns to have sex with her. From Bayoumi, who has been locking her indoors as a sex slave, her escape is short-lived as she ends in the open "den" of the madam Sharifa, whose house specializes in an upper class agency, booking girls for the up-market clientele whom Firdaus describes as well-manicured and refined, as opposed to

Bayoumi's clients with despicable body odor and unkempt, dirty nails. Firdaus has respect for Sharifa because she has taught her to be assertive as a woman; she is worth more than she thinks, and she is a human being who deserves respect, but she is still trapped in a "gilded cage". The pressure that women feel when they are supposedly free turns out in fact to be a cage: an economic one for Firdaus or an emotional one for Dikeledi. Prison brings complete freedom.

Cultural Background

Both Firdaus and Dikeledi Mokopi are intelligent women who have had the desire to acquire good education. Dikeledi remembers that "'Uncle paid for my education for six years, then, he said I must leave school. I longed for more because, as you know education opens up the world for one'" (95). Firdaus as a young girl is sexually molested by her uncle, the same one who takes over as her guardian after her parents have died. She admits that her father has not treated her any better. She has observed the double standards in the way her father practices Islam religion; he despises his female children: "When one of his female children died, my father would eat up his supper, my mother would wash his legs, and then he would go to sleep. just as he did every night. When the child that died was a boy, he would beat my mother, then have his supper and lie down to sleep" (18). In his self-centered nature, he has thrown her mother out and remarried without consulting her. Women seem to be interchangeable, even: suddenly, another woman has replaced her mother. In her mother she has seen the eyes that held her up; the new woman's eyes do not hold her when she is on the verge of falling, so she refuses to believe that the new woman is her mother. The loss of her mother brings with it the loss of a sense of herself. Philosophically as a young girl, she asks herself some questions: "Who am I? Who was my father? Was I going to spend the rest of my life sweeping the dung out from under the animals, carrying manure on my head, kneading dough, and baking bread?" (16); "I had many brothers and sisters. They were like chicks that multiply in spring, shiver in winter and lose feathers, and then in summer they are stricken with diarrhea, waste away quickly and one by one creep into a corner and die" (18). The behaviour of her father towards the "mother" and his children shows Firdaus how little they matter.

Dikeledi Mokopi's first name refers literally to "tears" or rather "grief" in the Setswana language. Her father passed away just about the time she was born, and the grief she is named for is that felt by her mother. Her mother died when Dikeledi was only six years old, so she was brought up by her uncle. While Firdaus has been aloof and reluctant at first to share her ordeal with anyone, she opens up to the psychiatrist; Dikeledi shares her story with fellow prison inmates. On why she got married to a man who did not respect her, Dikeledi has this to say:

> "I think I mostly wanted to get out of my uncle's yard. […] I never liked my uncle. Rich as he was, a hard man and very selfish. I as only a servant there and pushed about. I went there when I was only six years old when my mother died and it was not a happy life. All his children despised me because I was their servant. […] Garesego was a friend of my uncle and he was the only man who proposed for me. […] 'You'd better marry Garesego because you are just a hanging around here like a chain on my neck.' I agreed, just to get away from that terrible man. Garesego said he'd rather be married to my sort than the educated kind because those women were stubborn and wanted to lay down the rules […]". (95)

Both women have lived with well-off uncles, but due to their circumstances as orphans, the uncles took advantage of them. In Firdaus's case, her uncle takes advantage of her vulnerable self. At the same time he becomes her role model—a parent who reads to her, who keeps her warm in the winter, who gives her an education up to secondary school level. Then

> He became a different man. He no longer read before his sleep or wore his *jebbah* or kaftan. Instead he bought a suit and a tie, found a post in the Ministry of *Wakfs* and married the daughter of his teacher at El Azhar. […] She never washed my uncle's feet and he never beat her, […]. He was extremely polite, […]. I sensed that his feeling was more of fear than love, and that she came from a higher social class than his. (23)

Firdaus further describes how her uncle behaves whenever his in-laws come to visit. He buys all the goodies and puts on his best smile. Yet he sulks when his poor aunt with weather-beaten hands comes to visit, carrying food presents. This is the same aunt who laments that she has had to sell her gold necklace, her only possession, in order to pay for his education. In her uncle's marriage, Firdaus recognizes her own status, and she begins to understand the power of money.

Firdaus participates in a labour movement in solidarity with other workers and with a seemingly sensitive man, whom she meets when she decides to find paid work—as opposed to prostitution where she has felt she has been degraded and remained a slave. Firdaus holds him in high esteem, thinking his radical sympathies are legitimate. But Ibrahim ascends the bureaucratic ladder by marrying his chairman's daughter. Simola writes, "Firdaus's love affair changes into her realization that the man has turned the woman's love into services" (172). Even revolutionaries desire the prestige that money makes possible, and Firdaus reacts: "Now I knew what I wanted. Now there was no room for illusions. A successful prostitute was better than a misled saint. All women are victims of deception" (89).

Dangerous Women

According to *Women's Space*, the struggle for emancipation of women from social injustices is a long one:

> This is a battle that as women, we wage throughout the world, this battle to be free of the abuse of men, particularly the men with whom we live, whom we marry, with whom we bear children, or who are our fathers. It is a battle which too often goes un-remarked, ignored, trivialized or dismissed, which is couched in terms which obscure its reality—"domestic violence," "spousal abuse"—a battle for which, too often, women give their lives in one way or another. ("Iranian Women in Prison")

Both Firdaus and Dikeledi Mokopi have to be silenced as they become independent and dangerously successful within their cultural contexts. Events leading to the murder of the pimp and the husband respectively catalogue years of abuse, disrespect, and violation of human rights. Firdaus dares to say "no" to the pimp:

> A prostitute always says yes, and then names the price. If she says no, then she ceases to be a prostitute. I was not a prostitute in the full sense of the word so from time to time I said no. As a result my price kept going up. A man cannot stand being rejected by a woman, because deep down he feels rejection of himself. […] No matter how high I raised the price he could not stand being refused by a woman. (89)

Since Firdaus knows all the weaknesses of the leaders, she becomes a threat to security: " I became a very successful prostitute. I was paid the highest price, and even men of great importance competed for my favours" (89). There comes a time when Firdaus refuses the favours of a very high-powered, highly placed, and high-profile personality, a head of state:

> I knew successful politicians cannot bear to accept defeat in front of others, probably because they always carry defeat within themselves. A human being cannot stand up to double defeat. That is the secret of their continuous attempt to rise to power. They draw a feeling of supremacy from their power over others. […] It hides how essentially hollow they are inside, […]. (89–90)

Every day the politician sends someone from the police; the politician offers money, threatens her with prison, but Firdaus stubbornly refuses. In her trade, Firdaus has to contend with lust from notable personalities who use their power to manipulate her: "On still a third, he explained

that refusing a Head of State could be looked on as an insult. If I really loved my country, if I was a patriot, I would go to him at once. So I told the man from the police that I knew nothing about patriotism, that my country had not only given me nothing, but had also taken away anything I might have had, […]" (90). She learns the role of money in corruptly purchasing "freedom" and honour:

> On one occasion they put me in prison because I had turned down one of these important men. So I hired a very big lawyer, for a very big sum of money. Shortly after, I was released from gaol without charges. The court decided I was an honourable woman. […] honour required large sums of money to protect it, but […] large sums of money could not be obtained without losing one's honour. (90–91)

Firdaus gives the reader a different outlook on her profession. "I knew that my profession had been invented by men, and that men were in control of both our worlds, one on earth and the one in heaven. That men force women to sell their bodies at a price and that the lowest paid body is that of the wife"; in Firdaus's analysis, "all women are prostitutes, of one kind or another" (91).

Firdaus as an independent woman poses a threat to the status quo. She has to be silenced, as she is getting out of hand. As she asserts, she can buy her way out of prison any time, pay a doctor for an abortion, pay handsomely to defend her honour, pay a journalist to publish her picture and her story in a newspaper. Everybody has a price, and every profession is paid a salary: "One day I donated some money to a charitable association, the newspapers published pictures of me and sang my praises as the model citizen with a sense of civic responsibility. And so from then on, whenever I needed a dose of honour or fame, I had only to draw some money from the bank" (91).

Firdaus's loss and disillusionment after Ibrahim's scheming against her in matters of the heart has taught her to be wary of allowing herself to fall in love again: "But male noses have an uncanny way of sniffing money. And so one day a man came along and asked me to marry him. I refused. The imprint of my husband's shoe was still there on my body. Then came another looking for love, but I reused him too. Deep down inside of me, there were still vestiges of pain" (91–92). One day, just when Firdaus thinks she has escaped from men, there comes a well practiced expert in the male profession, a pimp. Marzouk is a dangerous pimp well placed in the judiciary, the police, and with high-powered politicians; he not only wants to control and enslave Firdaus, but also to share a large chunk of her earnings: "'You cannot do without protection, otherwise the profession exercised by husbands and pimps would die out'" (92). Protection ends in control, manipulation, and violence. Marzouk catches Firdaus planning to leave, again armed with her school certificate, and draws a knife to threaten her. In self-defense after a scuffle, Firdaus manages to use the same knife to stab Marzouk to death.

Although her circumstances are different—poorer—Dikeledi in "The Collector of Treasures" also understands the value of money, but for her the question is not one of self-preservation. She is a mother, and her priority is the survival of her children. Dikeledi is overcome by joy after Banabothe, her eldest son, has obtained an A grade in his primary school leaving examinations, and she turns up at Garesego's office to request assistance. She has been struggling single-handedly for eight years. Her husband portrays images of Botswana's newly independent nation. He has had a pay rise as a result of newly independent Botswana. It has come with some pomp, and it is also accompanied by a paunch that suggests eating and drinking beyond his needs. When he sees Dikeledi, he regards her as a lower form of human life:

> Then this unpleasant something turned up at his office one day, just as he was about to leave for lunch. She had heard from the village gossip that he had eventually settled down with a married woman who had a brood of children of her own. He had ousted her husband, in a typical village sensation of brawls, curses and abuse. Most probably the husband didn't care because there were always arms outstretched towards a man,

> as long as he looked like a man. […] "You must hurry with whatever you want to say […] The lunch-hour is very short and I have to be back at the office by two." (99)

Dikeledi is humiliated by her husband, whom she tries to approach for assistance after she has saved some money for secondary school fees; she is still short by twenty Rand. The problem is that Dikeledi Mokopi, as a legally married woman and cannot qualify for a government grant or bursary for her son, especially since Garesego Mokopi is a civil servant, quite capable of supporting the family he has deserted. In order to divert the attention from the main topic, Garesego Mokopi takes the opportunity to insult Dikeledi. He suggests to Dikeledi arrogantly that she should approach Paul Thebolo, who according to Garesego has been sleeping with her. Dikeledi is lost, but still puts her children first, and devises her plan: "Garesego's obscene thought processes were his own undoing. He really believed that another man had a stake in his hen-pen and like any cock, his hair was up about it" (101). He writes a note to Dikeledi expressing his intention to come home so they may settle their differences. As far as Dikeledi remembers, they have never had any differences: "He was coming home for some sex"(101). Garesego waltzes back into Dikeledi's home on the fateful evening: "He came at sunset and found everything ready for him […]" (102). He eats, drinks the beer he has brought, and takes a bath, making ready to reclaim his conjugal rights. Not even once does he show interest in the children: "Any tenderness he offered the children might have broken her and swerved her mind away from the deed she had carefully planned that afternoon" (102). Dikeledi gives him a way out, the only way that would mean anything for her, but he does not take it, and after waiting on him, feeding him, bathing him, and disposing of his dirty bath water, Dikeledi comes back to her hut to find Garesego sprawled stark naked across her bed, on his back: "With the precision and skill of her hard-working hands, she grasped hold of his genitals and cut them off with one stroke. A massive spurt of blood arched its way across the bed. And Garesego bellowed" (103).

Conclusion

The culture of male dominance means that prison is the only place where Firdaus and Dikeledi can be free; in Firdaus's case, freedom only really comes with death. Nahid Keshavarz sums it all up by observing that

> We have seen women who are in prison on charges of murder, but who prior to taking matters in their own hands had tirelessly struggled to resolve their problems and to escape the cycle of violence to which they were condemned. Prior to resorting to the murder of their husbands, most of these women had never committed even the smallest of crimes. They were kind mothers and wives, who for years quietly endured the violent nature of their relationships, their husband's unfaithfulness or his years of addiction. Forced to try all avenues to flee their cruel fate and after having met repeatedly with failures in their efforts to improve their situation, these women chose a path of escape, that in essence was never truly a choice at all.

Saadawi's novel shows how court systems fail to look beyond the surface facts of why women murder. Head, too, in her short story "Life", demonstrates that a man's life is worth more than a woman's life.[2] Based on Iranian women's prison stories, Keshavarz corroborates their stories:

> Perhaps our court system can exhaust women's rights activists through the infliction of threats and fear. Perhaps they can tire us through continuous summons to court, by inflicting in our hearts uncertainty, by forcing us into prison, but truly what will the

[2] In this story, a man who falls in love with a prostitute and marries her kills her after she gets bored in the marriage and returns to her old ways. He is given a very light sentence because the male judge "understands" how he was provoked. (Head, Bessie. "Life." *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales*. Ed. Craig MacKenzie. London: Heinemann, 1977. 37–46.)

> court system do about the increasing awareness among its own prison guards? The social workers and guards at Evin prison know better than anyone, about the immense tragedy that results from unjust laws, oppressive cultural traditions and the male interpretations of religion. These are the realities that make up the lives of women, condemning them to "dead ends," spent in prison.

Both Firdaus and Dikeledi have experienced abuses that lead them to commit homicide—if not unintentionally, then with provocation. Some analysts have wondered if university moot courts were to engage in a review of these two cases of Firdaus and Dikeledi Mokopi, would they not come with different conclusions and maybe acquittal as opposed to harsh sentences? For further reading and analysis, Ken Saro Wiwa's *Lemona's Tale*[3] is another such work that has been reviewed together with *Woman at Point Zero* (Simola 162). Other analysts make reference to the battered woman syndrome, where continued abuse can lead a woman to eventually kill her male partner. There have been extenuating circumstances in legal terms in the two works that lead the women to end up behind bars. Their social status would obviously prejudice their cases and deny them justice. In both works, little value seems to be placed on women. Both protagonists are controlled, insulted, humiliated, and dehumanized openly by their oppressors, to the point of tragic resistance in their struggle for liberation. Both works, one could say, attack the patriarchal way of thinking where women represent passivity while men show activity. Other commentators have shown that such cases of domestic violence and social injustices against women appear to be common globally. To sum up, Harlow, in her analyses of some works from women's prisons in developing countries, has this to say: "The authoritarian traditions and social structures which lead women to kill their husbands, brothers to seek blood vengeance from their sisters, must be revised" (522).

Works Cited

Harlow, Barbara. "From the Women's Prison: Third World Women's Narratives of Prison. *Feminist Studies* 12.3 (1986): 501–24.

Head, Bessie. "The Collector of Treasures." *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1977. 87–103.

Hossein Zadeh, Mahboubeh. "All Women are Victims, not Just those in Prison." Trans. Sussan Tahmasebi. *Change for Equality, Iran*. 14 April 2007. 22 Aug. 2007 <http://payvand.com/news/07/apr/1183.html>.

"Iranian Women in Prison: We Too Ceased to Live the Very Day That We Killed Our Husbands." *Women's Space*. 18 April 2007. 21 April 2007 <http://womensspace.wordpress.com/2007/04/21/iranian-women-in-prison-we-too-ceased-to-live-the-very-day-that-we-killed-our-husbands/>.

Keshavarz, Nahid. "What Will They Do about the Growing Awareness among Female Prisoners and their Guards?" *Change for Equality, Iran*. Trans. Sussan Tahmasebi. 13 April 2007. 22 Aug. 2007 <http://payvand.com/news/07/apr/1193.html>.

Phoolan Devi. *I, Phoolan Devi: The Autobiography of India's Bandit Queen*. With Marie Theresa Cuny and Paul Rambali. London: Little Brown, 1996.

Saadawi, Nawal El. *Woman at Point Zero*. 1975. Trans. Sherif Hetata. London: Zed Books, 1983.

Simola, Raisa. "A Journey to Prison of Two Young Women, Lemona and Firdaus." *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 14.2 (2005): 162–74.

Tarabishi, Georges. *Woman against her Sex: A Critique of Nawal El Saadawi. With a Reply by Nawal El Saadawi*. London: Saqi Books, 1988.

[3] West Drayton: Penguin, 1996.

Boundaries and Beyond: Issues of Resistance and Control in the Work of Bessie Head

Sarah Mandow[1]

There is no comfortable place from which to begin to write about Bessie Head and her work. For me the reason is partly, to borrow from the opening sentence of *A Question of Power*, that although "it may seem almost incidental that I am not African", my position as a white western feminist studying an African woman's text is one of crucial significance. The full import of that borrowed line resides in the "almost": a near-erasure of a crucial distinction that, were I to ignore it, would lead to a repetition of the abuses of power that the novel lays bare. My resistance is also partly in response to the ambiguous nature of the writing itself; to the way in which the author identifies herself with her protagonist, Elizabeth, which in turn reflects the contradictions of Bessie Head's life and identity—experiences that structure her writing and so doing, undermine and lay bare the dualisms of oppression.

The reader's relationship to *A Question of Power* embodies these concerns, so that a lack of reflexive awareness tends to compel critics to repeat the abusive power relations the text exposes. For example, Gillian Eilersen tells us the publisher James Currey originally rejected the manuscript on the grounds that it was "not really African"—a cruel irony in that the book chronicles in semi-fictional form her experiences of mental breakdown in her place of exile, Botswana, where she continued to suffer the torments of exclusion and oppression because she was "coloured".

The oppression inherent in demarcations of race and identity is the stuff of Elizabeth's nightmare, in which we are all—author, protagonist, reader—implicated. By focussing on Bessie Head, *A Question of Power*, and the way critics respond to both, this paper explores some of the ways the dynamics of oppression manifest themselves in the reader-text relationship. It concludes that through the systematic exposure of false distinctions that perpetuate systems of domination, the novel has challenging implications for what and how others know, while through it runs a thread of small, quiet hope for humankind.

Texts of Resistance and Transformation

African women writers face a double bind. They must negotiate both colonial and anti-colonial discourses, in order to resist patriarchy without appearing to pander to the west (McLuskie and Innes). The danger of presenting her own race to a race of readers that sees itself as "universal" or "race-free" (Morrison) is that the writer's text will be assimilated into the Eurocentric thought-pattern of the literary establishment at the expense of her own subjectivity (Rooney). When this happens, literary criticism becomes a form of knowledge that robs literature of its ideas and creativity (Morrison).

Critical discourse thus often operates as a colonising or imperialist discourse that annexes the textual object in order to perpetuate itself (Rooney). Feminist criticism, guilty in the past of homogenising women's concerns by ignoring the cultural and historical context of African texts, has moved the debate towards a culturally informed approach that avoids such simplistic cultural relativity. However, taken to its extreme, this view would leave white feminists culture-bound with nothing worthwhile to say about the work of black women writers. So what

[1] Sarah Mandow is a psychoanalytic psychotherapist at the Cassel NHS Hospital in the UK. She has a Masters in Women's Studies from the University of Kent in Canterbury. Her research interests include exploring the tensions between psychoanalysis and issues of identity and race.

is important, then, is to investigate the politics and poetics of resistance, from the point of view of both writer and reader.

For black women writers, the aim of resistance is not to replace dominant Eurocentric literary discourse with dominant Afrocentric scholarship. Of more value is to question what makes intellectual domination possible and to discover how the nature of literary knowledge can be transformed from invasion and conquest to revelation and choice (Morrison).

Resistance literature rejects rather than adapts western literary theory. For black women in a racialised society, writing is not about imagining oneself into another person's shoes; it is a process of "becoming" (Morrison). The texts themselves form sophisticated critiques and so serve to interrogate that which would interrogate them (Rooney).

In this process of becoming, Bessie Head writes out the obscenity and degradation of centuries of domination and exploitation. She shares with other African women writers an ability to "Africanise" the text by resisting a colonising western discourse. Such a strategy would be the rejection of a linear search for origins in favour of a cyclical journey that celebrates beginnings. Similarities occur, too, in the form of the novels, which eschew traditional narrative conventions for a more poetic style and a non-linear timescale. But whereas in many of these texts, white women readers can experience the effects of being marginalized, in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* there is no escape. Inclusion is a dubious honour, however, as the reader is drawn into a nightmare world where there is no omniscient narrator and no overarching explanation.

When strategies of resistance occur in the work of writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo in Ghana and Flora Nwapa in Nigeria, they can be understood as creating a space for a black perspective, as being in and of themselves the process of acquiring a subjective voice. For Bessie Head, it is only half a process. For her, it offers no simple access to African identity. Instead, a terrible journey has to be endured, one that tests the capacity for transformation (of writer, text, and reader) to the limit.

Working the Edge: The Dynamics of Merged Identities

A Question of Power is no easy novel to read. And, in the light of the previous discussion, it must be said that it is not easy to write about. One of the ways of responding to the text comes about through the disruption of boundaries between Bessie Head and her fiction—her "working the edge", whereby she repeatedly blurs the distinction between her own life and that of her protagonist Elizabeth.

In a note to the publisher accompanying the manuscript, Bessie Head calls the work "almost autobiographical", a phrase with similar resonance to the opening line of the novel. The persistent undermining of boundaries between herself and her protagonist has many repercussions, not just in the ambiguities and tensions of the text itself but also in the reciprocal dynamic created by readers' responses to both text and author.

Bessie Head is remarkable for her capacity to engage over and over again with the issues her writing raises, and usually in a way that deepens rather than clarifies the debate. In the following extract, a question of difference surfaces at one level as an argument that distinguishes between male and female identity, yet at another level, rather than upholding distinctions, Head makes her point through constantly criss-crossing the boundaries of author and protagonist:

> I cannot stop thinking outside female bounds, in broad horizon terms, like a man. *I did it to Elizabeth, showed myself more or less* and that is one of the most attacked characters by reviewers—there is nothing wrong with the woman, but *she is not thinking like a woman*; her generosity and thought processes are male…*I know my head is male* and I simply accept that. (qtd. in Eilersen 192, emphases added)

The elision that takes place between author and protagonist emphasises the merging of female and male identities rather than distinguishing between them, so that Elizabeth is/is not Bessie Head, who is/is not female. The start of this passage is significant, too, for it implies that the author's thinking is "out of bounds": it is characteristic of the transgressive nature of her writing, that in psychological terms she shuttles from one place to the other and constantly flouts the rules of assumed distinctions. The questions of indeterminate sexual identity recur in the text, when Elizabeth is apparently told she does not have a vagina: "It was not maddening to be told she hadn't a vagina. She might have had but it was not such a pleasant area of the body to concentrate on, possibly only now and then if necessary" (*A Question of Power* 44). In the binary logic of identity, it could be inferred that she had a penis, but uncertainty implies ambiguity, which implicitly questions the assumptions of either/or.

Conversely, when critics' interpretive responses assume a merging of boundaries, then Bessie Head robustly defends them: "[Bessie Head] pointed out most emphatically that it was not written in South Africa but Botswana. It was a record of what happened to her there" (Eilersen 221); Head herself wrote, "'no white South African had the power to invade my mind, nor to arrange a wide range of hisses and obscenities for me, day after day, day after day, for fourteen years'" (qtd. in Eilersen 222).

Events and characters in *A Question of Power* bear close resemblance to actual events and people in Bessie Head's life. What is interesting for the purposes of examining the dynamics of resistance and control of the text, is the way in which she deploys these similarities both to incite her audience to merge reality and fiction and to castigate them for doing so. For example, in a letter to Randolph Vigne, she enquires: "Did you recognise Pat van Rensburg in *Power* as 'the Eugene man'?" (Vigne 179). Another real-life companion, "the young man Tom, of my *Power* book" (Vigne 181), does not even have his name changed. When Naomi Mitchison, a writer well acquainted with the people and circumstances in Bessie Head's life, is aroused by the way Bessie Head parallels certain events in her life with incidents in the novel, her response is met with authorial scorn and derision:

> Gollancz produced a terrific performance from Naomi Mitchison. They usually hand her my typescripts to vet for libel. I'm black, you see and likely to say dirty things about people. You can't trust black. Well, this time she gave them the Botswana lowdown, indeed. She wrote me quite a hysterical letter, titillated beyond words and demanding to know why I had not made Seretse real. That frustrated her. She wanted the book rewritten with Seretse real.
>
> There is no titillating gossip in the book. It is stark, bleak tragedy from beginning to end. (Vigne 165)

The internal structure of this statement closely resembles the previously quoted view where the presenting argument of gender classification was undermined by a merging of fictional and authorial identities. Here the fictional/biographical merging of Sello/Seretse is rejected on the basis of a presenting argument over "racial" distinctions, so that the whole sequence becomes an issue of racial discrimination.

Head expresses on the one hand her own profound resistance to critical interpretation, while on the other, she observes how the book *A Question of Power* evokes strong reactions from people, "each one putting up his own particular performance" (Vigne 165). This rather astute, hostile observation brings up the question of African women's texts and the "poetics of resistance": textual strategies that resist assimilation or appropriation by the mainstream, among whose effects is the exclusion or marginalisation of the first-world reader. Bessie Head's strategies of resistance, however, far from excluding the first world, paradoxically appear all-encompassing. She describes her narrative as "small, sketchy and uncertain" drawn on a "BIG" canvas, so that readers "take fierce possession" of it. She sees her writing's "very attitude of uncertainty is an open invitation to the reader to move in and rewrite and reinterpret the novel in his/her own way" (Eilersen 252). But by writing herself inextricably into her plot

and protagonist, she ruptures the distinctions necessary for readers to objectify, place, or diagnose her writing. The merging of autobiography and fiction, the way inner and outer realities merge within the novel, seems compelled to be repeated in critics' responses.

Gillian Eilersen talks about "Elizabeth, whom we can almost totally identify with the author" ("Social and Political Commitment" 43), thus illustrating the strong attraction to doing so while admitting its impossibility ("almost totally" operates a similar dynamic for marking difference as the previously mentioned "almost incidental").

An example of a determined attempt to restore/impose the boundaries Bessie Head so powerfully destabilises is Patrick Colm Hogan's article on *A Question of Power*. He states, "What Head is really presenting is a case of psychosis" (97). Again that use of the word "really" can alert us to an area of destabilised boundaries, for the work of the word is to establish the exteriority of the condition of psychosis—exterior, that is, to the critic (who is sane and can "know" what the text—which is insane—cannot). His argument for treating the novel as a psychotic casebook centres on the debate between autobiography and fiction. He argues his distinctions on "ethical grounds" as a work of literature separate from its author:

> *A Question of Power* is not an autobiography. Head was not only a colored woman or a refugee from South Africa. She was also an artist, and in *A Question of Power* she created a work of literature which should be treated as a work of literature. In this context the isolation of biographical prototypes may be of some human interest, but it is irrelevant to an understanding of the literary work Head has fashioned. (97)

There is nothing new about this method of approaching literature, but in the light of Bessie Head's own views, is this a feasible distinction? This is the distinction she has made a near-erasure that manifests acute discomfort in the reader/critic. By asserting that *A Question of Power* is *not* autobiography, Hogan falsifies a distinction so that the subject matter may be talked about in a discrete way as psychosis of the individual without the uncomfortable recognition of imputing this patriarchal intrusion of a Lacanian analysis onto Bessie Head herself. Bessie Head allows no simple distinction to be made between her novel and her own experience: not that they are the same thing, simply that it is not possible to make clear distinctions. What is said about one implies the other. Hogan therefore achieves the opposite of his distinction and is doing what Bessie Head herself draws attention to when she condemns another of her critics as portraying her as "a mentally ill writer who wrote mentally ill books" (qtd. in Eilersen, *Thunder* 256).

While the need to hang on to a shred of sanity when entering the world of *A Question of Power* is entirely understandable, to overlook the feelings evoked, to remain unreflexive about one's own attitude to "madness", its connotations as a western imperialist weapon of oppression in relation to African writing, leads to other effects that could be considered at the very least unwarranted and certainly undesirable. By blurring distinctions, Bessie Head draws us into a tempting avoidance of the issues that distinctions are made of—the issues of power, privilege, and freedom—in fact the very issues that we seek to explore through her work. When these issues are excluded from the premise of the critic, the result highlights this reflexive avoidance of ambiguity and confusion.

It is significant to note, then, what befalls a critic who asserts that there is no confusion in connection with this novel. Joyce Johnson refutes the idea of confusion by exploring the theme of individual breakdown as symptomatic of the breakdown of society. In her synopsis of the plot she makes the following statement about Elizabeth's second incarceration in the mental hospital: "Elizabeth's anger at Dan is expressed in a hatred of everything African. She is helped by a doctor who pretends to share her feelings about Africans" (208). But in the novel the racist disclosures by the psychiatrist set off a "wild alarm bell" in Elizabeth: "He was stark raving mad too. He really hated black people" (184). Far from pacified, Elizabeth realises that "there was no way she could even begin to discuss her nightmare with him" (184). One could say it

is *almost incidental* to the doctor that Elizabeth's expressed rage and hatred of black people is directed at and by Dan in her head. The elision of inside and outside worlds elicits the racist views of the doctor, not the patient. The effect on Elizabeth is to bring the difference between them into sharp focus: "The shock of being thought of as a comrade racialist had abruptly restored a portion of her sanity" (184). The further irony is that the doctor apparently understands Elizabeth's outbursts because they accord with a socially acceptable racist ideology, thus lessening the bizarre and "inexplicable" features of her distress: "He assured her she was not really ill. She only had a slight nervous breakdown" (184). She colludes with him in order to gain release from the hospital, but the whole experience leaves her "silently flaming with humiliation and guilt" (184).

It is as though the critic colludes with the psychiatric establishment—not on the basis of racism, for sure, but in the name of sanity. To accept Elizabeth's view of the doctor at face value would be to identify with her paranoia, blurring boundaries between "sane" and "insane" critical readings. There is an understandable reassurance in wishing Elizabeth better, but I contend it is not possible without the donning of a metaphorical "white" coat so that clean, white sanity is maintained at the expense of confusing, messy, coloured insanity.

Madness without, Madness within

Confronting the racial implications of the text's madness without being situated as white in relation to it obscures differences. Any sense of recognition or insight may be a projection or appropriation on the reader's part. The ambiguity of the text as a whole, and not just the text but also the insistently recurring matrix of blurred boundaries between author/protagonist, virtually ensures a rebounding of penetrative analysis onto the critic. Seen in this light, themes and metaphors of Elizabeth's insanity become the themes and metaphors of reading and being read. As Jacqueline Rose observes, the diagnostic use of the term paranoia, or voices in the head, is a perfect metaphor for colonisation, for being taken over body and mind.

The questions of how we should listen to who is speaking in the text and to whom—the issues at the heart of the feminist debate on difference—are raised in Bessie Head's writing through a kind of kinesis: to read at the borderline of fiction and chronicle, with no conventional boundaries, is like entering Elizabeth's mind; the seemingly formal third-person narrative serves to heighten the depersonalisation of her mental invasion and offers no refuge for the reader. Far from it, indeed, as there is also an implied collusion or at least identification between the critic with her "pet theory" and the tormentors Sello and Dan: "People's souls walked right into her. […] They were all keepers of tender things that they loved […]" (104–5); "Obviously she was in an easily invaded world" (104). The "kinetic" effect is given another dimension when the reader interacts with the prose. Because the reader is implicated in the experiences the text conveys, the process of interpreting the text (and all the dangers that implies, as the examples have shown) creates a feeling in the reader of having her own mind invaded. And because the writer herself explicitly chooses to share the identification process (the book "was not planned in her mind"; it was "'a lived book'" [Eilersen, *Thunder* 221]), one is inescapably confronted with the reality of colonial abuse and the compulsion to repeat it.

Jacqueline Rose makes the link explicit:

> I am not sure that it is possible to read this book without feeling oneself go a little bit mad. It is, I think, part of the wager of the book. […] From the beginning, Head, or her character Elizabeth, turns the tables on her reader, issues an invitation of a very specific kind: Enter my (inner) world. […] I am sure I am not the only reader to have experienced *A Question of Power* as writing by battery assault. (404)

The compulsion to repeat is looked at quite differently by Caroline Rooney. She draws an analogy with the analysand's being compelled to construct her/himself in terms of the Freudian

analyst's theory. The analysand sacrifices the capacity to "originate" selfhood in order to authenticate the narrative of psychoanalysis. In this sense, she says, the text (analysand) of *A Question of Power* "originally repeats" what the critic (analyst) wants it to.

The text does show a compulsion to repeat the "truths" of the dominant order, but by also revealing the underside of that discourse of power; both destructive, as in the "expression of people who had been killed and killed and killed again in one cause after another for the liberation of mankind" (*A Question of Power* 31), and obscene: "Some dark, evil thing set down roots deep into his soul […]. Depravity and perversion of the most base degree were its natural habitat" (43).

But there is nothing so straightforward as a critique of colonial impulse here, as the power is all-pervading: "The African grin said so much. It was hatred. It was control of the situation" (108). Elizabeth's psyche is certainly presented as having been invaded by a "controlling" madness, but to see her as dominated by the competing "power maniacs" at the expense of her active inclusion in the process, as "the subjectless or effaced host of a parasitic deconstruction" as Rooney suggests (111) and Rose (415) rejects, is to interpret at a distance one aspect of a whole range of dynamic relationships that I have sought to demonstrate.

Both Rose and Rooney, it seems to me, attempt to articulate the complex state of mind that results from responding to the ambiguity of *A Question of Power*. Rose says: "It is not clear whether we are dealing with an outside in or inside out situation; the writing doesn't let you decide" (415). I would say it is the capacity of the text to sustain indecision, or ambiguity over all distinctions, that actually creates the inside/outside confusion, not just at the level of determining what Sello and Dan are—projections or ghosts—but also for the reader in deciding whence her responses emanate: from the text or from her projections onto the text.

Likewise, to consider whether or not Elizabeth is the victim or perpetrator of the ruthless power struggle in her mind creates similar difficulties. Rooney asserts the former, arguing against a Freudian view that crediting Sello and Dan with ontological reality would be animistic and therefore regressive: "[T]here is something askew or unhinged about this analysis for, in short, Elizabeth is not the agent but the receiver of an omnipotence of thought" (109). Freud's view was that animistic belief, which pertains to "primitive" societies comprising relational identities, is transformed into individual insanity in "civilised" societies, where ego structures are more developed. Rooney makes a persuasive case for regarding *A Question of Power* as reversing Freud's theory by showing that "insanity" is a construction of civilisation, as is the concept of animism. What distinguishes them ultimately is the self-reflexivity of the latter (animism's belief in its own reality) and the self-negation of the former—rationality as the only true way of knowing and the rational mind the only one capable of knowing: "The tyranny of thought that is at the expense of its own creative powers and, more than this, at the expense of other self-determining capacities and creative modes of thought" (Rooney 110).

The tyranny of thought, the despotism of dualistic absolutes (mad/sane; good/evil) is what madness rails at: are we in danger of circularity if madness is what results from the upturning of dominant discourse? If the question is one of tyranny, then it is to be experienced at any level, inside or outside, text or reader, author or protagonist. More than this, all feelings, from the most depraved to the most exultant, have to be acknowledged and felt: a severe test of any reader who actively resists recourse to denial. Jacqueline Rose comments, "In the case of Elizabeth, it seems that to get rid of the presences which persecute and haunt her, she must first entertain them in all senses of the term" (409). As a poetics of resistance, offering an open invitation to critics to enter her text is a challenge to acknowledge the madness of the unknowable and participate in the disruption of binary logic.

Tyranny is the nature of the critical response and that nature is unflinchingly exposed by the intensity of uncertainty in *A Question of Power*. Our human capacity to sustain uncertainty—to not know and to experience a continuous state of not knowing—is probably

extremely limited. Bessie Head's gargantuan achievement is to show us the essential paradoxes of truth and knowledge and power with a quiet, sustained steadiness of vision.

Towards Uncertainty

My main concern has been to grapple with the difficulty of conveying the full weight of uncertainty and ambiguity in Bessie Head's writing without resorting to distinctions and certainties of my own making. This is the underlying reason for the rather oblique approach of critiquing critics critiquing Bessie Head—but while this has proved a useful device for revealing the subtle mechanisms of appropriation, assimilation, and projection that her sustained position of ambiguity elicits, it also tends to obscure, or frame in a somewhat oblique way, my own responses which, if only in fairness to those whose critical writings have proved so valuable to my enterprise, should also be available for scrutiny.

So in order to convey more directly my feelings about Bessie Head's extraordinary achievement, I intend to use her portrayal of time and events as a metaphor for her ability to convey simultaneously the minute speck of human knowledge against a vast backdrop of universal, timeless possibility. In doing this, she creates a world where boundaries do not operate in the conventional way and therefore certainties cannot exist. This almost intolerable state of mind engulfs the reader and the extent to which one concludes, rewrites, or adds to what is there is an index of the individual's capacity to tolerate not-knowing. I have attempted to show the importance of examining the resistance, in both text and reader, rather than "conquering" it by recourse to definitive explanation.

One way in which *A Question of Power* conveys this state of uncertainty is through images that blur time and space, thereby disrupting chronological sequencing and inferring an unutterable, unconceptualised other. The unaccountable is presented as fact, and the usual paradigms of meaning-making that rely on linear time—basically, cause and effect—are presented as surreal parody, as in "Sello's question-and-answer approach to life" (47), or rendered inadequate and inappropriate.

The themes of time are many and various; they interconnect and undercut one another throughout the novel, thwarting the imposition of meaning. There is not room here to look in depth at the phenomenon of the uses of time in the novel, but I want to draw attention to one aspect of the conventional timeframe in the passages relating to Motabeng village life. It is the remarkable character of Kenosi, who remains firmly in that timeframe and resists the invitation to cross the boundary/threshold:

> Elizabeth was still in her nightdress.
>
> "I haven't cleaned up my house yet," she said. "But come inside."
>
> Kenosi shook her head: "I'll sit here till you are ready," she said. And she turned and seated herself on the ground near the door. (94)

Kenosi, unlike the reader of my argument, does not allow herself to become part of the mess and confusion of Elizabeth's life. Margaret Tucker describes the writing as shattering the notion of "the abject as object" (172): "We share in Elizabeth's victimisation and this is the beginning of the destruction of the central duality, that of text and reader" (172). Kenosi, by contrast, remains aloof and firm, a unique marker of the novel's underlying hope for the future. Elizabeth relies on both her support and her separateness: when Kenosi goes away, the depression crashes down on Elizabeth (91); when they work together, the text recognises that their mutual support in the practical world of the garden contrasts with their parallel and quite separate mental worlds: "All day long they worked at setting the poles in the garden" and "All day long Elizabeth had brooded" (95).

And yet Kenosi depends on Elizabeth, and it is the strength of her separateness that makes it possible for her to reflect this dependency back as recognition of Elizabeth as the driving

force and source of authority in the "real" world that Kenosi inhabits and Elizabeth is reaching towards:

> "I've come back to work," Elizabeth said. "Let me see the garden."
> […]
> Suddenly Kenosi raised her voice and said plaintively:
> "You left the garden. I don't know how to do. We became poor." (203)

Kenosi resists assimilation into Elizabeth's nightmare world, and refuses her invitation to cross boundaries. She does not appropriate or exploit Elizabeth's talents but her simple and humble acknowledgement of them is both a source of reparative strength to Elizabeth and recognition of her own limitations: "'You must never leave the garden,' she said. 'I cannot work without you. People are teasing me these days. They say: "Kenosi, where's your teacher? You are not in school." People have never seen a garden like our garden. It came there in one day'" (142).

There is one image of time that, quietly and discreetly, like Kenosi, offers a simple hope—it is the metaphor of time as underground water: "It was a village remotely inland, perched on the edge of the Kalahari Desert. Seemingly, the only reason for people's settlement there was a good supply of underground water" (19). It is an image closely linked to time as encapsulated in memory—where it may lie untapped until it is ready to bubble up. The catalyst is Elizabeth's co-worker Tom, who like Kenosi, remains mostly outside the inner nightmare world but sometimes crosses the threshold to "stare deeply into the mystery of life" (112). He offers his time to Elizabeth, which immediately taps an image of the hidden wellspring of memory:

> He looked around at the completely erected poles of the garden and said:
> "I have time to start some work here."
> The dry stream-bed beside the garden kept a hidden memory of when the water had flowed through it all year round, […]. The area seemed to whisper softly: "Take me". (112)

The pattern of struggle between powerful forces emerges not through history but through invisible planes that set off one time and place from another. The pattern of this landscape does not lead to a new vision of history; its images of time become the cusps of existence where existential decisions are made (Harrow), where boundaries become meaningful through personal choice, not historical movement.

The struggle to remain with Elizabeth and survive her experiences, renewed and enlightened, seems like a challenge laid down to readers by Bessie Head herself. So perhaps one must ask, finally, who is Bessie Head? The ability of her text to reveal the humble limitations in the reader's knowledge while offering such profound belief that hope lies in the worst of our uncertainties must be attributed to the extraordinary accomplishment of the author. But she does enter one's head, too, and becomes a version of oneself, making it seem possible to transcend the merged boundaries of identity in the desire for renewal and hope. That hope for the future is her gift to Africa. The following words, written soon after Bessie Head's death in 1986, capture, for me, this moment of transcendence when the writer's persona can finally exist as separate and whole and timeless:

> As I turn and regard her, from the current crossroads of South African history, her death liberates her writer's image, and the wholeness of her oeuvre, from the broken and stressed realities of her actual life. Her writer's image becomes healed, freed from accident and change, supra-real. By making this move, I see that she, too, is a subjective construct, a "Bessie Head of my own making", an image of wholeness and benevolence urgently needed at the current moment. A double historicity, of object and beholder, stands revealed. (Clayton 65)

Works Cited

Clayton, Cherry. "'A World Elsewhere': Bessie Head as Historian." *English in Africa* 15.1 (1988): 55–69.

Eilersen, Gillian Stead. *Bessie Head. Thunder Behind Her Ears: Her Life and Writing*. London: James Currey, 1995.

———. "Social and Political Commitment in Bessie Head's *A Bewitched Crossroad*." *Critique* 33.1 (1991): 43–52.

Harrow, Kenneth W. "Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasures*: Change on the Margins." *Callaloo: A Journal of African American and African Arts and Letters* 16.1 (1993): 169–79.

Head, Bessie. *A Gesture of Belonging: Letters from Bessie Head, 1965–1979*. Ed. Randolph Vigne. Oxford: Heinemann, 1991.

———. *A Question of Power*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1974.

Hogan, Patrick Holm. "Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*: A Lacanian Psychosis." *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 27.2 (1994): 95–112.

Johnson, Joyce. "Metaphor, Myth and Meaning in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*." *World Literature Written in English* 25.2 (1985): 198–211.

McLuskie, Kathleen and Lynn Innes. "Women and African Literature." *Wasafiri* 8 (1988): 3–7.

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Basingstoke: Picador, 1992.

Rooney, Caroline. "'Dangerous Knowledge' and the Poetics of Survival: A Reading of *Our Sister Killjoy* and *A Question of Power*." *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*. Ed. Susheila Nasta. London: The Women's Press, 1991. 99–126.

Rose, Jacqueline. "On the 'Universality' of Madness: Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*." *Critical Inquiry* 20 (1994): 401–18.

Tucker, Margaret E. "A 'Nice-time Girl' Strikes Back: An Essay on Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*." *Research in African Literatures* 19.2 (1988): 170–81.

Discarding the Encumbrance of Tradition: Libertarian Impulses in Bessie Head's Botswana Tales.

Tiro Sebina[1]

In the short story collection, *The Collector of Treasures* Bessie Head portrays the experiences of rural dwellers. The stories foreground the consciousness and agency of ordinary village characters in the historical context of the transition from pre-colonial tradition and custom-bound communities to postcolonial modernity and the political mutation from colonial rule to independence. The stories sensitively engage with the texture of village life by evocatively depicting the configuration of belief systems, the contours of emotional and moral economy, the processes of individuation, formation of desire, distribution of status, power relations, patterns of perceptions, and the institutionalisation of pride and prejudice among individuals and groups in Botswana rural communities.

In her aesthetic representation of Botswana's unevenly distributed state of independence, Head recuperates subaltern experiences and voices that colonial narratives and elitist nationalist historiographies often fail to take into consideration. The stories, in my view, constitute a consequential fictional archive of Botswana's village life that accentuates the experience of individuals, especially women and children, who live through the history of grinding poverty, neglect, humiliation, abandonment, and shame yet tenaciously manage to muster the strength to cope with minimal resources in acutely uncongenial circumstances. The stories call attention to cruelties of a patriarchal, ageist, and xenophobic order that victimises women, children, elderly people, and outsiders. The repression and victimisation of women, children, elderly, and infirm people is a gnawing feature in Head's stories. The psychological distress resulting from the conflict between Christian and Setswana beliefs, customs, and practices is also given prominence in Head's village tales. In terms of ideological disposition, Head eschews both the orientation of a cultural preservationist and the advocacy of modern elite-driven nationalism and shows inclination towards a broad-based humanism that incorporates and accommodates all humane peculiarities.

"Heaven is not Closed"

"Heaven is not Closed" pivots on the spiritual agony afflicting Galethebege, an elderly woman in her nineties. Galethebege is racked with distress due to a community-wide discord between Tswana ancestral beliefs and customs and a bigoted brand of Christianity that sanctions colonial governance while displaying wanton contempt for the values and practices of the Tswana way of life. In her youth, Galethebege responds to the seductions of the Christian religion with great zeal. Her heart is thrilled by "the austere rituals of the Church, the mass, the sermons, the intimate communication in prayers with God" (11). Throughout her life she remains a convinced and devoted Christian. She leads a quiet and worshipful life. She is always on her way to church and at home she spends hours on end diligently reading the Bible.

Galethebege's fidelity to Christian religion is put to a severe test when she falls in love with Ralokae and consents to be his spouse. Her marriage to Ralokae results in her being ex-communicated from the Church. Ralokae is a zestful and cheerful village gent. He is a devout traditionalist and a stickler when it comes to adhering to and upholding Setswana custom. He firmly believes that his community would experience untold adversity and degenerate into moral turpitude should it jettison Setswana customs and laws. He is also deeply distrustful of

[1] Tiro Sebina is lecturer in English at the University of Botswana. His interests include classical and modern literary theory and creative writing.

the missionaries and is inclined to "reject all things foreign" (10). There is palpable mutual hostility between Ralokae and the resident missionary. The vertically challenged and bespectacled resident missionary is contemptuous of ordinary village people who are not part of village elite. In the resident missionary's jaundiced view, the village people, inclusive of members of his congregation, are a "vague blur" of "terrible beggars and rather stupid" (10). Ralokae has little time for the cultural intolerance and racial prejudice exhibited by the missionary and his ilk. He speaks out against the exploitative and despotic tendencies of "the people who brought the word of the Gospel to the land. Their love was enslaving people and he could not stand it" (9). His reasoning blows to smithereens the hypocritical colonial claim of embarking on a God-inspired civilising mission of rescuing the souls of primitive heathens from the raging fires of hell: "They were full of tricks. They were a people who, at the sight of a black man, pointed a finger in the air, looked away into the distance and said impatiently; 'Boy! Will you carry this! Will you fetch this!' They had brought a new order of things into the land and they made people cry for love" (10).

Galethebege's decision to marry Ralokae in accordance with Setswana custom is not an act of premeditated defiance. Though Christianity is her chosen religion, she remains sensitive to "the ancient stream of holiness that people had lived with before any white man had set foot in the land, […]" (11). She is a Christian convert who also remains firmly rooted in the Setswana life and custom. Her ardent wish in the acrimonious situation of conflicting belief systems is for "a compromise of tenderness". She is not a self-conscious protester like Ralokae. Her life is described as worshipful, orderly, and quiet. She is a well-respected member of her community whose integrity has never been called into question. As a person with "natural goodness of heart", she genuinely falls in love with Ralokae, whom she knows and accepts as an unbeliever (8). In good faith, she approaches the bigoted resident missionary for advice only to be crudely dismissed and rejected. Galethebege without any sign of indignation goes through a ritualistic Setswana wedding ceremony. To wish the couple luck and prosperity in their marriage, bags made from portions of a cow's intestines are placed around the necks of Galethebege and Ralokae in accordance with Setswana custom. In the merriment punctuated by ululation, the wedding guests enjoy porridge and meat dished up in *mogopo* bowls. Ralokae and Galethebege are showered with adulation for observing Setswana marriage procedures. Throughout her married life, Galethebege dutifully performs her duties as a woman married in line with Setswana tradition. Significantly and true to her calling, Galethebege finds a corner in which to pray to her Christian God. After the death of Ralokae, Galethebege devotes the remaining five years of her life to her Christian worship. During Galethebege's funeral, in their funeral eulogies, her grandchildren solemnly recount anecdotes to the gathered mourners of how "all her pent-up and suppressed love for God burst forth and she talked only of Him, day and night—[…]" (7). She openly, frequently, and fervently declares her wholehearted devotion to God until her dying day.

Though she is not outwardly defiant, Galethebege's actions are cast in a heroic mode. In contrast to Ralokae's more open rebellion, Galethebege pursues the dictates of her conscience with quiet but firm resolution. The lofty dignity with which she conducts herself throughout her life is legendary. Her uncanny death posture in which "she lay on her side with her right arm thrust out above her head" (7) may be taken as a disturbing unconscious reflex action to keep the doors of heaven open even for unbelievers like Ralokae. This gesture symbolically resists the resident missionary's cruel pronouncement that the heaven is closed to the unbeliever. Galethebege's death posture as well as her remarkable life story capture the imagination of the villagers who "talked about it for days afterwards" (7). The seemingly uneventful life as well as Galethebege's seemingly innocuous death posture complicates, expands, and challenges the horizons of her community, imaginatively and conceptually. Galethebege's experience is remarkable and significant enough to become a consequential part

of the community's oral archives. Four or five decades down the line Ralokae's brother, the elderly Modise, tells Galethebege's story to his children and grandchildren as they sit around the fire for an evening meal. The riveting story of Galethebege sets people asking themselves pointed questions that open up space for debate on religious and cultural syncretism based on the values of mutual respect and tolerance: "had Christian custom been so intolerant of Setswana custom that it could not hear the holiness of Setswana custom? Wasn't there a place in heaven too for Setswana custom?" (12). Galethebege's story foregrounds the autonomous and independent consciousness and agency of ordinary villagers, their endeavour to overcome the problems posed by their specific historical conjuncture. The story registers the dignified resilience and ingenuity of ordinary villagers in the struggle to forge a sense of identity and cultural validity in the face of forces bent of erasing their humanity.

"The Village Saint"

"The Village Saint" is a moral tale set in a Bamangwato village. The tale, "written into the very stones and earth of village life" (13), depicts a rural community that sneers upon ethical venality and phony mannerisms. The story traces how the protagonist Mma-Mompati's almost foolproof facade of saintliness is exposed after almost twenty-six years. Mma-Mompati and her spouse Rra-Mompati are village notables. They have wealth and status. Rra-Mompati holds a position of eminence in community affairs. The family's white-washed, colonial-styled mansion is a regular meeting place where top-secret community issues are discussed and where political intrigues are hatched. In contrast to the cloak-and-dagger political meetings of her home, Mma-Mompati cultivates an image of a "great lady of the town" and a "patron saint". She earns her reputation of saintliness by attending the funerals in the village regardless of the social station of the deceased. She also makes regular rounds at the village hospital to pray for sick people.

A critical situation that leads to the eventual shattering of Mma-Mompati's elaborate social image emerges when Rra-Mompati turns his back on his family and leaves his job to live with another woman. This scandal sets the village rumour machine in top gear. The majority of the village people condemn and curse Rra-Mompati for forsaking his noble spouse who was "matchless in perfection". Mma-Mompati makes a divorce court oration that impresses many villagers and sways their sympathy towards her. She speaks about "God, the Church, the Bible, the Sick, the Poor, the Suffering, the Honour of an Honourable Woman, The Blessings of Holy Matrimony […]" (15). Mma-Mompati's speech casts her as a noble woman who has been wronged by a callous spouse. The villagers do not hide their disdain for Rra-Mompati and his lover. In utter indignation Rra-Mompati retires to his cattle-post. Mompati, the couple's only child, suffers a nervous breakdown when his attempt to follow his father to the cattle post flounders. He later recovers, and together with his mother, he manages to restore their life to normalcy.

Mma-Mompati's angelic image is shattered when a month after Mompati's marriage, his mother insists on being the first one to open her son's pay packet and fishing out as much money as she wants, leaving the married couple with barely enough to afford a week's groceries. She does so mainly to spite Mary, her daughter-in-law, whom she despises for being weak and plaintive. She feels an urge to dominate her daughter-in-law. She devises a number of devious plans to humiliate and emotionally abuse Mary. When Mompati summons enough courage to hand over his pay-packet to his wife instead of his mother, Mma-Mompati's pose of graciousness is blown to pieces. She shows her evil streak. She even denies her daughter-in-law permission to draw water from the tap in her yard. Mary has to walk a mile from her home in order to draw water from the village taps. Mma-Mompati's malicious and demeaning treatment of her daughter-in-law reveals the villainy and viciousness that has been shielded by

her pretensions of saintliness and piety. Village people stop believing in Mma-Mompati's "God or her Jesus Christ" (18). In the eyes of the community, her tragically decrepit character has been revealed and the phony halo of righteousness and rectitude has evaporated. They see her for what she is, a control freak and phony saint. Not only does the tale highlight the complex moral economy of village life, it also foregrounds the moral vigilance of ordinary rural people who "were never fooled by facades" (13). Mma-Mompati's redeeming qualities are her resilience and social fluidity. Though a particularly ugly aspect of her personality has been exposed, she continues to make her social presence felt when she "buried the dead and prayed for the sick" (18).

"Jacob: The Story of a Faith-Healing Priest"

"Jacob: The Story of a Faith-Healing Priest" is set in the quiet, sleepy village of Makaleng, a settlement of about five hundred people situated in Northern Botswana. The village is depicted as an uncanny and intriguing locale, "one of those far-away wonders of the world which people sometimes visited but never thought of inhabiting" (19). In an arid country that experiences drought regularly, "Makaleng village never failed to receive its yearly quota of twenty-two inches of rain" (19). The mystery of Makaleng village's bountiful rainfall and agricultural prosperity is further compounded by the antics of two famous prophets of the faith-healing type active in the village. The moral universe of the tale orbits around the activities of the two rural-based faith-healers.

The tale casts Jacob as its hero while Lebojang is the villain. Jacob lives on the sunrise side of the village. He is poor and lives in a mud hut. He walks around bare-footed. His church is mostly attended by children. Although he lives in poverty, in his dealings with people he exhibits astounding selflessness. Lebojang, on the other hand, lives in a mansion on the sunset side of Makaleng. He drives around in a posh car. Lebojang is a serial ritual murderer who uses the word of God to hide his ghastly acts. At the time of his arrest he is almost a millionaire. He is sentenced to death for killing men, women, and children for ritual purposes. Together with the traditional doctor and local aristocrat who were his partners in crime, he had for twenty years been involved in horrendous activities of cutting up the body parts of their victims and selling the potions to other greedy and selfish people who wanted to increase their power and wealth. Lebojang is a killer posing as a "priest of a Christian church with a big blue cross down the back of his cloak" (36).

Jacob, the star of the tale, after years of hardship and suffering finds peace and happiness in the embrace of Johannah, a lovely, lone parent to several children whose fathers had promised to marry her and then disappeared. Jacob, whose father was a German-born cattle speculator who moved to Botswana to establish a cattle ranch, had been affected by tragedy at an early age. He was only six years old when his father and his Motswana mother were killed in a car crash. Jacob and his brother Isaac were robbed of their inheritance by a rapacious uncle assisted by an opportunistic local aristocrat. The uncle ill-treated his nephews and also tried to justify his wicked campaign by claiming that the orphans "were of inferior status because they were not pure Batswana by birth" (24). Isaac died of starvation, hard labour, and exposure to the elements. While in the throes of this suffering, Jacob heard the voice of his God. The voice said "Jacob, one day I shall call you to do my work. All the suffering you endure now is but a preparation for the work you have to do" (25).

Jacob, by dint of diligence, overcomes adversity and rises to prosperity. He establishes a thriving store and a profit-making beer-brewing enterprise in a railway village thirty miles from Makaleng. Together with his high-living spouse and children, he indulges in lavish living and wallows "in the roar of prosperity" (21) until thieves break into his shop and take his household property and almost all his money. It is during this disaster that Jacob experiences

yet another visitation from his God. Jacob's God reminds him that his prosperity turned him away from his calling. Jacob at the prompting of his God leaves his empty house and his even emptier spouse to go and establish a church in Makaleng.

Jacob in his simple and sincere manner builds "one of the oddest churches in the whole wide world" (25). Jacob receives strict instructions from his God not to canvass for membership. He is to share his daily bread with whoever comes to his hut. The majority of the members of Jacob's congregation are children. The children inform Jacob about people in distress who need his ministering. In all the cases, the ailing and sorrow-struck people recover and go about with their daily activities. Jacob is popular with many ordinary villagers because of his generosity: "No one ever left Jacob's hut without a parcel" (29). He distributes gifts he receives from grateful "seekers of help" to destitute people. Jacob supports his family by doing odd jobs in the village. Jacob is an eccentric village faith-healer whose emotional intelligence, moral integrity, and humble approach to faith-healing endear him to a lot of ordinary villagers and children. His style of ministering may be slightly unorthodox, but it is premised on the enduring principles of simplicity, humility, generosity, and sincerity. The story shows how goodness of heart triumphs over greed and moral turpitude.

The tale also sheds some light on the plight of children in Botswana society. Children are subject to all kinds of harsh treatment by adults. Jacob identifies with the struggle for children's rights because as a child he had also experienced torture, humiliation, and exploitation at the hands of his uncle who robbed him of his inheritance. His own brother died of starvation and hard labour. Children are also subject to adult cruelty as victims of ritual murder. In response to these issues Jacob establishes his church around specific physical and spiritual needs of children.

"Witchcraft"

This story deals with the phenomenon of witchcraft or sorcery. The tale's narrative voice describes witchcraft as "one of the most potent evils", "a dark thing", "a force of destruction" and "a lingering and malignant ailment" (47) that Batswana have carried along with them from ancestral times. In this tale, Head provides a critique of some of the retrogressive aspects of Setswana belief system in which "every villager believes that at some stage in his life 'something' got hold of him; all his animals died and his life was completely smashed up" (47). The narrative voice observes that the belief in witchcraft is so entrenched in Setswana society that "when an ordinary villager started a new yard and before he put up his fence, he would call the Tswana doctor to place protective charms and medicines all around the yard" (47). For almost every event, a *ngaka* or traditional doctor is consulted: when children are born, when marriage rites are performed, for protection of crops and livestock, for job-related issues, and for undertakings like embarking on long journeys.

The tale chronicles the agony of Mma-Mabele, a single parent who struggles to make ends meet by taking up odd jobs around the villages. Mma-Mabele comes from a family of regular church-goers who have deeply embraced Christianity. As a Christian, she feels no need to consult traditional doctors. She does not believe that she can be bewitched until the day her son points out to her that a patch of her hair has been shaved off. This mysterious incident makes Mma-Mabele to conclude that she has been bewitched. Her plight attracts unsavoury characters like the local quack traditional doctor Lekena, who attempts to defraud her by offering to throw bones for her and to give her some medicine for a fee. Uncanny and disturbing visions and sensations trouble her. At night she has a feeling of being strangled or being dashed about this way and that way in a high windstorm. At night she is haunted by a grotesque figure of a man who laughs at her anguish and her tormented prayers. Her affliction makes her lose a

great deal of weight and saps all her energy until she is reduced to a skeletal frame lying in bed for many days.

Villagers are taken aback when she suddenly recovers, regains her appetite, and goes about doing her daily chores. Her response to the queries of fellow villagers is that "there was no one to help, not even God. I could not sit down because I am too poor and there is no one else to feed my children" (56). Mma-Mabele's recovery suggests that she has summoned her spiritual and physical resources to discard the incubus of believing in witchcraft. Her abjection leads her to marshal her strength as a hardworking woman and to grow out of the infantilism of blaming other people for her woes. As a woman who has been betrayed by male lovers and stigmatised as a "he-man" for refusing to offer sexual favours to callous men who treat women as sexual objects; she comes to the realisation that she has to rely on her own abilities. This quantum leap in understanding implies a move towards more autonomy, independence, and liberty.

Mma-Mabele disentangles herself from the albatross of negative traditional beliefs and the stranglehold of Christianity for a spiritual identity more favourable to her interests as a poor, rural, single, female, working parent living in post-independence Botswana. She moves from the prison-house of spiritual dependence and conceptual servitude to the more congenial halls of self-determination and self-reliance. Mma-Mabele triumphs over the hobgoblins of her imagination, regains self-confidence and takes her destiny into her hands by engaging in practical activities such as fending for her children and ending her dependence on God, men, and energy-sapping belief systems. She becomes conscious of her identity as "a woman alone" and comes to terms with her existential situation.

Conclusion

This paper has considered how Head orchestrates characterisation, as a narrative appliance, to depict fortitude and resilience of the human spirit in the face of powerfully entrenched and repressive social forces as well as jaded ideological rigidities. Each of the stories deals with challenges faced by individual characters embroiled in a vortex of change. The weight of ancient traditions, the political and psychological injuries associated with colonialism, the modern pressures of newly attained independence, and the opportunities and constrictions of a patriarchal and elite-driven nationalism conspire to elicit multifarious responses in Head's characters.

Head's stories evince emergent forms of social consciousness that defy and transcend the constraints and restrictions of traditional culture and the constrictions of colonial and neo-colonial culture to more democratic "structures of feeling" that embrace change, diversity, and difference. As Huma Ibrahim puts it, Head in her work examines "power relationships, as they inform and are informed by exiled identities who seek to subvert the social and individual institutions of the nation, […]" (3). The stories also reveal the social unconscious or the darkly uncongenial aspects of the seemingly placid Botswana rural communities. Head's representation of Botswana village characters is distinguished by its abiding concern with and empathy for ordinary or non-elite and socially subordinated individuals and groups. This paper affirms the libertarian impulses inherent in Head's aesthetic.

Works Cited

Head, Bessie. *The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana Village Tales*. 1977. Oxford: Heinemann, 1992.

———. "Heaven is not Closed." *The Collector of Treasures* 7–12.

———. "Jacob: The Story of a Faith-Healing Priest." *The Collector of Treasures* 19–36.

———. “The Village Saint.” *The Collector of Treasures* 13–18.
———. “Witchcraft.” *The Collector of Treasures* 47–56.
Ibrahim, Huma. *Bessie Head: Subversive Identities in Exile*. Charlottesville and London: UP of Virginia, 1996.

The Narcissistic Personality in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*

Fani-Kayode Omoregie[1]

> How easy it was for people with soft shuffling, loosely-knit personalities to be preyed upon by dominant, powerful persons. (*A Question of Power* 12)

> The wild-eyed Medusa was expressing the surface reality of African society. It was shut in and exclusive. It had a strong theme of power-worship running through it, and power people needed small, narrow, shut-in worlds. They never felt secure in the big, wide flexible universe where there were too many cross-currents of opposing thought. (*A Question of Power* 38)

> People had their institutions, which to a certain extent protected them from power-lusting presidents for life with the "my people" cult. Africa had nothing, and yet, tentatively, she had been introduced to one of the most complete statements for the future a people could ever make: Be ordinary. (*A Question of Power* 38–39)

Introduction

A Question of Power, Bessie Head's third novel, documents her vision of the separation of the mentally sick, of the grotesque suffering of personal isolation and of the obscenities of racism. Elizabeth, like her creator, has a white mother and a black father, and has left South Africa with her son to live in the village of Motabeng ("the place of sand") in Botswana. Forever an outsider, she establishes an abnormal relationship with two men, who become the two sides of her tormented soul. Real people, they are also the embodiments of good and evil and they struggle for dominance over Elizabeth as she enters a ghastly underworld of self-loathing madness. *A Question of Power* weaves in and out of sanity, conveying the external life of an unwanted exile and the almost unbearable anguish when the mind has become a torture chamber. My paper will look at the various levels of narcissism in the novel. However, in looking at the narcissistic personalities and tendencies in *A Question of Power*, I am not saying that narcissism is a perversion or cannot be functional. The following views show that narcissism can be functional: "Narcissism may be a functional and healthy strategy for dealing with the modern world. The notion that narcissists are agile, depleted or depressed simply does not square with current research on normal samples" (Campbell 215). And, unlike cooking,

> The pursuit of psychological truths always benefits from having multiple chefs in the kitchen. For nearly a century, the narcissism construct was "owned" by psychoanalytic theorists and clinicians. Although they created a rich tapestry of theoretical speculation around narcissism, little real progress was made during this time in elucidating the nuances of the construct or documenting the intra- or interpersonal processes involved in narcissistic self-esteem management. It is our hope that an approach to narcissism that is more empirically based will be more effective in this regard. We applaud Morf and Rhodewalt for their model's contribution to this endeavor, with hopes that more researchers will add their own favorite flavors to the recipe. (Brown and Bosson 212)

My aim in this paper is to show how *A Question of Power* both validates and repudiates popular impressions about narcissism and narcissistic personalities.

Narcissism—a Freudian term borrowed from Paul Näcke, who in 1899 described a form of behavior, resembling a perversion, whereby an individual treated his/her own body as one might treat the body of a sexual partner, but drawn originally from the Greek myth of

---

[1] Fani-Kayode Omoregie is a lecturer in English at the University of Botswana. His interests cover drama, TV, film, and literature.

Narcissus—indicates an exclusive self-absorption, in keeping with the Greek myth of Narcissus. The concept was introduced in Freud's work shortly before the publication of "On Narcissism: An Introduction" (in 1914). In psychoanalysis, narcissism is considered a normal stage in the development of children. It is known as secondary narcissism when it occurs after puberty, and is said to indicate a libidinal energy directed exclusively toward oneself. A degree of narcissism is considered normal, where an individual has a healthy self-regard and realistic aspirations. The condition becomes pathological, and diagnosable as a personality disorder, when it significantly impairs social functioning. For instance, Sello (in *A Question of Power*) says, "'You will never know your power. I will never let you see it because I know what power does. *If the things of the soul are really a question of power, then anyone in possession of power of the spirit could be Lucifer*'" (199). An individual with narcissistic personality disorder tends to harbor an exaggerated sense of his/her own self-importance and uniqueness. He is often excessively occupied with fantasies about his/her own attributes and potential for success, and usually depends upon others for reinforcement of his/her self-image. Again Sello says, "'Bring an inferior into contact with a superior; he tramples you into the dust. He saw only what he thought was the milksop monk; it was so soft and tender it aroused all his savage, brutal passions. They go wild when they see something helpless, defenceless'" (199). A narcissist tends to have difficulties maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships, stemming largely from a lack of empathy and a propensity for taking advantage of others in the interest of self-aggrandizement. It is often found in combination with antisocial personality disorder.

By proposing the notion of narcissism, Freud ("On Narcissism") meant to show how four different phenomena were related: narcissism as sexual perversion, narcissism as a stage in development, narcissism as libidinal cathexis of the ego, and narcissism as object-choice. Freud postulated an original cathexis of the ego, a primary narcissism, in the infant; later, some part of this libidinal cathexis would be redirected onto objects, creating an opposition between ego-libido and object-libido. In 1915 Freud had added a section on "The Libido Theory" to part 3 of the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), in which narcissistic libido was described, using the metaphor of an amoeba putting forth retractable pseudopodia, as "the great reservoir from which object-cathexes are sent out and into which they are withdrawn once more" (218).

Freud contrasted the paths leading to object-choice of the narcissistic type with object-choice of the anaclitic or attachment type. In the case of narcissistic object-choice, a person loved "(a) what he himself is (i.e., himself), (b) what he himself was, (c) what he himself would like to be, (d) someone who was once part of himself"; in anaclitic object-choice, a person loved "the woman who feeds" or "the man who protects" ("On Narcissism" 90).

Freud's contemporaries clarified the change in his thinking represented by the introduction of narcissism. The earliest contributions of Karl Abraham, between 1913 and 1920, show that it was the difficulties he encountered in the treatment of neurotics that prompted him to consider the role of narcissism. In "A Short Study of the Development of the Libido, Viewed in the Light of Mental Disorders" (1924) however, he based his work on the study of the psychoses, and especially of melancholia, to connect narcissism with the specific quality of thought needed to transform a fantasy into a delusional idea. The symptomatology of melancholia further led him to consider overestimation and underestimation as expressions, respectively, of positive and negative narcissism related to self-love and self-hatred: "She turned her face away and said, with extreme misery: 'I don't like people'" (*A Question of Power* 51).

Several later authors contributed significantly to the discussion of narcissism. In 1963, writing on the psychopathology of narcissism, Herbert Rosenfeld was especially concerned to arrive at a better definition of object-relationships and their attendant defense mechanisms in narcissism. The study of therapeutic factors led him later to analyze the influence of narcissism

on the work of the psychoanalyst. He drew attention to the existence, alongside the libidinal aspect of narcissism, of a destructive narcissism related to the death instinct.

Heinz Kohut offered his own reformulation of narcissism, describing it as the cathexis of self-representations (and not of the ego); he defined it as an agency of the personality responsible for issues of relationship.

Since Freud, in France, there has been a particularly lively interest in the question of narcissism. Harking back to Lou Andreas-Salomé, Béla Grunberger drew attention to a double orientation of narcissism—as both a need for self-affirmation and a tendency to restore permanent dependency.

Under the evocative title *Life Narcissism, Death Narcissism* (1983), André Green clarified the conflict surrounding the object of narcissism (whether a fantasy object or a real object) in its relationship to the ego. For Green, it was because narcissism affords the ego a certain degree of independence by transferring the desire of the Other to the desire of the One that a lethal kind of narcissism must be considered, for the object is destroyed at the beginning of this process. Green describes physical narcissism, intellectual narcissism, and moral narcissism, without suggesting any analogy between these terms.

Otto Kernberg (1975, 1984, and 1987) regards as artificial the division between Object Libido (energy directed at people) and Narcissistic Libido (energy directed at the self).

What is the "Self"?

According to Dr. Sanity,

> The "Self" can be thought of as a content of the mental apparatus; a structure within the mind that has continuity in time and a specific location. The "Self" is therefore analogous to how one represents other people within the mind.
>
> A healthy Self has two fundamental and equally important parts:
>
> > Self-esteem—or a sense that one has a right to Life and success; ambition; a healthy exhibitionism and comfort with one's body. This part of the Self supplies the instinctual fuel for ambition and purpose; and for enjoyment of Life's activities.
> >
> > Ideals—a belief in something outside the "Self" that guides and gives meaning to one's Life. Having ideals make developing one's goals in Life possible. It is this part of the Self that also makes healthy interpersonal relationships possible.
>
> The development of BOTH parts is essential to psychological health. When one part develops at the expense of the other, it has grave consequences for the individual and society.[2]

What is Power?

Cecil Abrahams[3] says that "Power is a continuum and power mongers cooperate", and that in *A Question of Power* Head proves that sexism is more degrading and devastating, because it is a more intimate form of violation. Abrahams also notes that "Power rapes, as Head indicates when she writes that 'Dan' 'attacked [Elizabeth's] head the way he had attacked the vaginas of the nice-time girls' (153–54)". More important than Head's revelations of her inner degradation and contamination is the fact that power lust is inherent in every individual—including victims of power. That is probably the core meaning of the fact that even though Head sees power, on

---

[2] Dr. Sanity, "NARCISSISM AND SOCIETY: Part I—The Psychology of the Self. 5 May 2007 <http://drsanity.blogspot.com/2005/04/narcissism-and-society-part-i.html>.

[3] Quoted on the website <http://web.syr.edu/~luchan/A%20Question%20of%20Power.doc>. Accessed June 4, 2007.

the one hand, as an invasive force, Sello, Medusa, and Dan are "simultaneously products of or emanations from Elizabeth's own inner mind (155)". In other words, Elizabeth's mind contains both good and evil forces. In Head's own words, "'evil and good travel side by side in the same personality'" (98). Also worth noting is the fact that Elizabeth not only relates torturous episodes in which she is a passive screen for Sello's historical pageants or Dan's pornographic shows, but she intersperses them with many scenes of gentleness, deep trust between people, and endearing humor.

The Narcissistic in *A Question of Power*

Narcissism has come to imply more than just self-love. Though self-love may be their premise, narcissistic characters in works of fiction, as in real life, have other traits. This essay will look at such traits using Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*.

Narcissistic characters have little or no capacity for empathy. They are unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings of others. It is unlikely they will comprehend or recognize (let alone soothe) others' emotions. M. J. Daymond notes that Head's fiction draws "attention to her male characters' assumptions about their power to act […]"[4]. A perfect example of her male characters' approach to power is Dan, a cold and unfeeling opposite man, who had ambitions "like Hitler and Napoleon, to rule the world" (14). Elizabeth says Dan understands "the mechanics of power. From his gestures, he clearly thought he had a wilting puppet in his hands" (13).

For narcissists, interpersonal relationships are largely marked by exploitation. They take advantage of others to achieve their own ends. In *A Question of Power*, Elizabeth is "entirely dependent on Sello for direction and equally helpless, like a patient on his doctor for survival, [...]" (35). Elizabeth needs a mentor, a spiritual leader who will presumably help her become fully independent and realize her goal of love and respect throughout the human race; unfortunately, the power relationship is focused too much one way: Elizabeth is "entirely dependent" instead of independent.

The opposite end of the spectrum is much the same. If narcissists bestow affection, it is merely because that is the most expedient method to manipulate others to provide for their needs. To this end, narcissists will commonly use sex to advance their cause. Elizabeth describes Dan as "one of the very few cattle millionaires of the country. He ordered a fantastic array of suits from somewhere, and he was short, black and handsome" (104). His kiss makes Elizabeth feel like "an ancient and knowledgeable Queen of love" (106). Soon, the image is shattered: Dan is an insatiable sexual predator, always with a girl, or talking about being with a girl. He uses his phallus to intimidate and threaten Elizabeth. However, this act is not unredeemed torture, as Elizabeth knows: "Dan went as far as the hawk's eye. He saw in her a violent pride that could not endure humiliation of any kind. He saw the year behind of continuous unprovoked assault by Medusa and Sello of the brown suit. He saw the hidden molten lava within, the victim who is unreasonably tortured" (136). Dan is just another step in the marathon to discover her own position in Botswana and human life, he must torture her in order to allow the "hidden molten lava" inside to escape and create a new paradigm.

Narcissistic characters rarely have the ability to love, though they are nearly always consumed by the idea of being loved. Though narcissists' need of others is deep, their love for others is shallow or, more commonly, non-existent. It is not surprising, therefore, that narcissists experience tremendous difficulty in establishing or maintaining healthy intimate relationships. There is no reciprocation.

[4] Daymond, M. J. "Inventing Gender Traditions, The short stories of Bessie Head and Miriam Tlali." Quoted by Jeremy Chapman in An Analysis of Gender and Power Roles in 3 novels by Head, Armah and Dangaremba. 5 May 2007 <http://www.jeremychapman.info/cms/node/15>.

Another instance of narcissism in the novel is the incestuous union of Sello and his daughter. Here Freud can implicate Sello; "If we look at the attitude of affectionate parents towards their children, we have to recognize that it is a revival and a reproduction of their own narcissism" ("On Narcissism" 22). Head hints at Sello's capacity for incest when she scrawls in a note: "'SELLO IS A FILTHY PERVERT WHO SLEEPS WITH HIS DAUGHTER'" (175).

The Obsession

Like Narcissus, narcissistic personalities often are absorbed and consumed by their own perfection and harbor a tremendous need to keep their self-image full-blown and intact. Camilla says to Elizabeth, who was struggling to comprehend her attachment to the "incomprehensible in Camilla", "'In our country culture has become so complex, this complexity is reflected in our literature. It takes a certain level of education to understand our novelists. The ordinary man cannot understand them …'" (79). Elizabeth also observes that "The general cause of gloom among the Danes was that they were all university graduates in agriculture who found themselves teaching barely or totally illiterate Batswana students […]. They spent all their sunset hours of leisure denigrating their pupils. Apparently they had a high standard of culture and civilization in Denmark" (71).

Unmitigated grandiosity is a common key to the narcissistic personality. More often than not, narcissists routinely overestimate their abilities and accomplishments and often seem boastful and pretentious: Dan says, "'I have the power to take the life of your son. He will be dead in two days'" (14). The point here is that narcissists' primary belief is that they are superior (or, at the very least, unique) and primary beliefs should be universal.

On the surface, the narcissist may seem bold, self-assured, directed. Often they are. But are they? Head writes, "Once you stared the important power-maniac in the face you saw that he never saw people, humanity, compassion, tenderness. It was as though he had a total blank spot and only saw his own power, his influence, his self. It was not creative function. It was death. What did they gain, the power people, while they lived off other people's souls like vultures?" (19).

World of their Making

Narcissists will surround themselves with the trappings that enhance them, and they will struggle to maintain that environment. Such an environment includes the "right" people—people who will not threaten the fragile narcissistic ego. This circle is important but has little value other than adornment, as in, for instance, Dan's assortment of women:

> The women of his harem totaled seventy-one. They were a motley crew, half of them presented as goddesses with slight defects and the others as local girls. The local girls were supposed to benefit enormously from contact with his soul. They were supposed to be filled with power and sweet things they lacked and they were fillers for the time when his professionals were resting. (128)

Furthermore, he went "'with all these women because you [Elizabeth] are inferior. You cannot make it up to my level because we are not made the same way'" (147). However, he still needs Elizabeth in his world because he needs her as "his trigger" to blow up Sello's prophesies, but what Elizabeth "could not foresee was the subtle way Dan was about to blow her up" (25) with the prophecies.

Sometimes, in this world, narcissists may portray themselves as victims. Head documents the struggle between Sello and Dan, who believes "he was a much better manager of the universe than Sello" but what was "eating him up was that no prophecies had preceded him" (25). Sello, says "in a small frightened voice: 'I thought too much of myself. I am the root cause

of human suffering'" (36). Dan and Sello, as is typical of narcissists, portray themselves as victims to maintain center stage; their victimization assures them of their spotlight. Narcissists behave in these contrasting modes in order to validate their self-importance to themselves and (in their eyes) garner the admiration and attention of others.

The Idolized Self

When in a position of authority, it is not uncommon for narcissists to unmercifully demean or abuse their subordinates, particularly if they feel that their superiority is being threatened. Commenting on Camilla's attitude, Head writes, "All of a sudden, the vegetable garden was the most miserable place on earth. The students had simply become humiliated little boys shoved around by a hysterical white woman who never saw black people as people but as objects of permanent idiocy" (76), and then, "Camilla spread out her hands grandly. After all, she was here to help the natives and she couldn't miss this wonderful opportunity" (77).

Narcissistic characters have a complete lack of guilt or concern for their over-exploitative manner. Camila says, "'I don't understand these people. They don't know anything at all, and they are so lazy….'" (78). Head writes that the events of this particular day were so jarring that, "on the following morning, as she approached the tree under which was parked the white Landrover, Elizabeth stopped and peeped carefully around it […] she couldn't endure the nature walk with Rattle-tongue" (78). This woman Camilla is a great example of the average white lady in Africa at the time. She is authoritative, racist, condescending, cruel, and utterly unaware of any possible redeeming features of the native Africans around her.

Likewise, the narcissistic personality will require martyr-like devotion from their employees. To achieve such ends, praise is often used as bait with subordinates in the hope they will ensure their devotion through a sense of debt. Elizabeth has a short and astonishing contact with the girl Birgette after which she comes to the conclusion about Danes—"they were either very, very bad or so impossibly God-like that they out-stripped the rest of mankind in humanity" (80). Birgette confirms this when she says, "'People who think of others before themselves are freaks'" (85): "'I thought: Love is so powerful, it's like unseen flowers under your feet as you walk.…'" (86). This statement results in Birgette's change of attitude—such behaviour is rather unusual for the narcissist. Birgette is not the only narcissist whose attitude is altered through contact with Elizabeth. When Elizabeth meets the previously haughty and narcissistic Camilla two days later, she observes that Camilla was "a totally changed woman with a soft, subdued air, as near as a woman of her type could ever come to brooding reflection" (86). And these are not the only instances in which *A Question of Power* negates the ideas of some major psychoanalysts on narcissism.

Negations of the Narcissistic in *A Question of Power*

In spite of the numerous instances in *A Question of Power* that confirm Freud's theories, in some ways *A Question of Power* resists some of Freud's pronouncements on narcissism. According to Freud, women experience an "intensification of the original narcissism" found in children and, in place of favorable object-love choices, "develop a certain self-contentment" ("On Narcissism" 13), or self-love. Elizabeth, both woman and child, seems to deny the narcissistic type not by forming normal object attachments—she does love and thinks the world of Shorty—but by a negation of the libido, an inability to love anyone. She "turned her face away and said, with extreme misery: 'I don't like people'" (51). Speaking on the attitude of Batswana, Elizabeth says, "'I like the general atmosphere here because I don't care whether people like me or not. I am used to isolation'" (56). Human relationships with Elizabeth were "starkly black and white" (77). Freud's belief that "such [narcissistic] women have the greatest

fascination for men" ("On Narcissism" 15) is also resisted in Bessie Head's novel, as Tom and Old Mrs. Jones find themselves drawn to Elizabeth despite her inability to love them back.

Peter Brooks, in his book *Reading for the Plot*, discusses the links between narrative and its drive towards ending with Freud's speculations on the aim of life in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Freud argues that the "*goal of all life is death"* (27), a return to a previous, inorganic state. Narrative for Brooks performs that objective; it gives us "the knowledge of death which in our own lives is denied to us" (28). Though Head's narrative includes the several deaths, not least the death of Medusa (93), *A Question of Power* resists this very instinct towards death: "On Monday morning she jerked into life" (197). And then "she stood up and made tea and gave Shorty some porridge. […] The storm in her head subsided […] she swung round to Sello with outstretched hands: 'Thank you! Oh God, thank you for the lever out of hell'" (197–98).

This is not to say that the death-drive is absent from the novel. It is even possible that the death wish is amplified due to the very fact that ending is denied to Elizabeth. Elizabeth longs for a death, or perhaps a birth. She contemplates suicide: "In moments of deep depression she contemplated suicide, and started to collect the sedatives so as to swallow about sixty, one day" (182). She attempts suicide when "the prophecies became worse and worse" and when "naked women were prancing wildly in front of her and there was Dan, gyrating his awful penis like mad. She swallowed six bottles of beer and six sleeping tablets to induce blackout" (14). Later, "She drank the beer and sank down to the deep pit of depression. She was supposed to commit suicide at a quarter to one. The depression reached such a stage that by twelve-thirty she stood up and took the tin full of tablets out of the drawer" (194); however, these actions seem to stem from the desire for a "choice of ends" (31), rather than what Dan plans for her.

Conclusion

I have looked at instances in *A Question of Power* where the display of the negative aspects of narcissism are rife—especially in Elizabeth's relationships with Sello, Dan, and Camilla. Other instances in *A Question of Power* defy several of the theories of narcissism—especially regarding the expectations of victims of narcissism. Elizabeth does not succumb to the wish for her to die, or to her own initial thoughts of dying as a way out of her torture. She survives and gets better. This is why the "gesture of belonging" (206) that Elizabeth makes at the end of her period of agony is so significant. It is a dedication, a show of Elizabeth's humility, but above all, it symbolizes and provides an alternative to attitudes both of power wielding and of victimization by power. A person who can make such a movement is (as Elizabeth says elsewhere of Tom) "tentative yet secure" (122). A sense of self-worth (as distinct from the power form of personal arrogance) is also implicit in the "gesture", which recognizes simultaneously the worth and equality of others.

Works Cited

Brown, Ryan P. and Jennifer K. Bosson. "Narcissus Meets Sisyphus: Self-Love, Self-Loathing, and the Never-Ending Pursuit of Self-Worth." *Psychological Inquiry* 12.4 (2001): 210–13.

Brooks, Peter. *Reading of the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993.

Campbell, Keith. "Is Narcissism Really So Bad?" *Psychological Inquiry* 12.4 (2001): 214–16.

Freud Sigmund. "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." *Standard Edition* Vol. 18. 1–64.

———. "On Narcissism: An Introduction." *Standard Edition* Vol. 14. 67–107.

———. *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Gen. ed. James Strachey. London, Hogarth Press, 1964.

———. "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality." *Standard Edition* Vol. 7. 123–243.

Head, Bessie. *A Question of Power*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1974.

Letter by Letter: Bessie Head's Epistolary Art

Linda-Susan Beard[1]

I

Like the history of the book, the study of epistolarity[2] has become its own sub-specialization within the disciplines of literary analysis. Epistles have long been hegemonic iterations in the realms of ancient Roman poetry, Christian Scripture, Western European behavior manuals, fiction and meta-fiction, literary criticism, and [auto]biography. Ovid made extensive use of the genre of letter-writing in the *Heroides* as did Horace in his *Epistles*.[3] (The former used as models the work of two Roman women—Arethusa and Sulpicia—who wrote love letters, on the one hand, and epistolary elegy on the other.) The letters of Pauline Christianity easily outdistanced and overshadowed the simple parables of the Gospels, especially in Reformation Europe. The remarkable preponderance of epistolary manuals that characterize French social and intellectual life in the seventeenth-century culminate in Virginia Woolf's essay on Madame de Sévigné, one of the most prolific and renowned practitioners of the epistle in the 1680s and beyond. She, whom Woolf called "this robust and fertile letter writer, who in our age would probably have been one of the great novelists" (para. 1) is to be accorded "as much space in the consciousness of living readers as any figure of her vanished age" (para. 1). In establishing the large consciousness to be attributed to the woman-as-epistolary scribe, Woolf continues:

> That is partly because she created her being, not in plays or poems, but in letters—touch by touch, with repetitions, amassing daily trifles, writing down what came into her head as if she were talking. Thus the fourteen volumes of her letters enclose a vast, open space, like one of her own great woods; the rides are crisscrossed with the intricate shadows of branches, figures roam down the glades, pass from sun to shadow, are lost to sight, appear again, but never sit down in fixed attitudes to compose a group. (para. 1)

Fictive epistolary forms constitute a major genre of *liasions dangereuses* a little more than a century later as neighbors on either side of the English channel, among others, experiment with the letter as an intimate method of communication; the exchange of ideas on paper advances plot while simultaneously interrogating complex layers of human action slowed for analysis by the necessary process of repetition. The origins of the English novel trace a solid root to eighteenth-century epistolary performance. Between Richardson's *Pamela* (1740–42) through consciously twice-told avatars such as Fielding's caricatured *Shamela* (1741) and social reformist Upton Sinclair's parody, *Another Pamela, Or, Virtue Still Rewarded* (1950),

---

[1] An associate professor of English at Bryn Mawr College, Linda-Susan Beard is also a fellow with the Contemplative Mind in Society Project. The Fellows seek to integrate contemplative intelligence into their teaching and research. Bessie Head is ideal for such a vantage.

[2] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1982). In this pioneering analysis, the author provides a "working definition" for this term: "the use of the letter's formal properties to create meaning" (4). Altman acknowledges earlier historical studies of the epistolary (5–6): Godfrey Singer's 1933 thesis, *The Epistolary Novel*, Charles E. Kany's *The Beginnings of the Epistolary Novel in France, Italy, and Spain* (1937), F. G. Black's *The Epistolary Novel in the Late Eighteenth Century* (1940), R. A. Day's *Told in Letters: Epistolary Fiction before Richardson* (1966), Laurent Versini's *Le Roman Epistolaire* (1979).

[3] An oft-cited study of the role of the letter in ancient cultures is Peter Hermann's *Der Brief in der römischen Literatur* (Leipzig: Tuebner, 1901). Cited in Mary H. T. Davisson, "'Tristia' 5.13 and Ovid's Use of Epistolary Form and Content" (*The Classical Journal* 80.3 [1985]: 238) and Maurice P. Cunningham, "The Novelty of Ovid's *Heroides*" (*Classical Philology* 44.2 [1949]: 100).

the epistolary novel seems to disappear as a genre, but critics Anne Bower[4] and Elizabeth Campbell testify to a conscious renaissance of the epistolary novel in American literature. Including African-American novels in her listing, Campbell argues even more expansively for a marked resurgence of the form in post-colonial fiction from Senegal, India, Australia, Brazil, Argentina, and Canada as well: "many are written by women in post-colonial cultures, in which women have been doubly oppressed by outside forces, from outside by a chauvinistic imperialism and from within by a patriarchy which itself has felt oppressed by outside forces" (332).[5] Bower remarks on the significant inclusion of Lee Smith's *Fair and Tender Ladies* (1988), a novel in letters about women's isolation in Appalachia composed while Smith's mother lay dying, and Ana Castillo's Chicana work, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986), a series of quixotic letter-exchanges between two friends living on two American coasts who struggle to make sense of relationships. These novels, as well as one written two decades earlier by Saul Bellow—*Herzog* (1964)—and another authored contemporaneously—John Updike's *S.* (1988)—reiterate two of the characteristics Campbell notes about epistolary fiction: "the isolation of the writer is essential to the epistolary urge" (338). Earlier on Campbell notes, "Epistolary writing is subjective and emotional; it reaches out as it looks inward, opening up and presenting a consciousness to a specific sympathetic listener" (336). In addition to Campbell's focus on isolation and heightened emotional subjectivity, for example, a number of other elements seem to be requisite for fictions to be considered epistolary.[6] It has been traditionally requisite that the plot develop and turn on the exchange, actual or virtual, of letters. The letters must be an opportunity for self-discovery, self-disclosure, and invention. The text, moreover, needs be a conscious return to and rehabilitation of orature. "The most often repeated phrase in epistolary fiction, traditional or contemporary," argues Campbell, "is 'I feel I am speaking to you.' The letter writer conjures up the reader from the page. The word becomes flesh" (338). In the hands of male writers, the letter exchanges in an epistolary novel become *belles lettres*; for female practitioners, women's communications become domestic intercourse. The female epistolary novel represents an unwitting prototype for distance learning. Alienated isolates reach out in search of companionable voices.

Most of the commentary on the epistolary novel is gendered, in part, because of the centrality of a female protagonist and the genre's function as a traditionally female articulation.[7] (*Herzog* is a notable exception as a man struggles to understand his wife's abandonment of their marriage and her choice of his best friend as partner.) As such, a number of critics read the substantive contemporary revisit of the genre as "a feminist poetics" which engages in "recuperating a traditionally female genre from its secondary status within canonic literature" (Salsini 352). In discussing Dacia Maraini's Italian novels *Dolce Per Sé* (1997) and *Lettere a Marina* (1981) in relation to Susanna Tamaro's 1996 bestselling novel and film, *Va'*

[4] Anne Bower, *Epistolary Responses: The Letter in 20th-Century American Fiction and Criticism* (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1997).

[5] Campbell lists the following texts: Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, *Heat and Dust* (1975), Mariama Bâ, *So Long a Letter* (1980), Sylvia Molloy, *Certificate of Absence* (1981), Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (1982), Helena Parente Cunha, *Woman Between Mirrors* (1983), Elizabeth Jolley, *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* (1983), and Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986). In a footnote, Campbell explains that the "letter" in Atwood's novel is a tape-recording (347, footnote 1).

[6] When I delivered an early version of this essay at a July 2008 Bessie Head colloquium at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Pietermaritzburg, most of the commentary from the audience focused on proscriptive definition. I wanted to make the seemingly unorthodox leap of talking about Bessie Head's letters in terms of epistolarity, with the letter and the epistolary novel as foundations, but several of the colloquium participants were not able to move beyond traditional definitions of the epistolary novel and its seeming disconnection from a collection of letters functioning as an autobiographical narrative.

[7] Representative titles from the Golden Age of the epistolary novel include Aphra Behn's *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684–87) and Francois de Graffigny's *Lettres d'une Peruvienne* (1747). Jane Austen's *Lady Susan* was published posthumously in 1871. Footnote cited in Salsini 364.

dove ti porta il cuore (*Follow Your Heart*), critic Laura A. Salsini argues vigorously that the Maraini texts are simultaneously metafictive rewritings and a conscious "radicalizing" of the genre.[8] (*Lettere a Marina*, for example, displaces the heterosexual center of the traditional epistolary novel with a focus on lesbian and other intimate women's relationships.) For Salsini, Maraini participates in a subversive project at the very moment that *Follow Your Heart* subscribes to the proscriptions usually employed in defining the epistolary novel. Olga, the Italian grandmother writing (but never mailing) letters to her granddaughter living in the U.S., "reinforces a particularly gendered ideology based on cultural perceptions of female passivity and compliance" (Salsini 335). She insists, moreover, that in the grandmother's final letter, Olga

> symbolically passes on to the young woman a simple domestic object, a cake mold that evokes a baking session shared between the two of them in happier times. Olga points to the importance of the cake mold […]. By bestowing this object on her granddaughter, an object resonating with the weight of female domesticity, Olga promulgates the very family history she has denounced. (356)

Maraini, on the other hand, "reworks the genre by liberating its protagonist from the traditional isolation faced by the epistolary heroine […while] embracing a feminist poetics that focuses on inclusionary female relationships" (353). Salsini uses the language of Nancy A. Walker[9] to dub Maraini's works "disobedient" (351) even as she acknowledges the paradox of Campbell's proscriptive descriptions of the genre alongside her insistence that the epistolary novel "conforms (if such a word can be used in relation to a style of writing which is against conformation) to *l'ecriture feminine*, which 'undermines the linguistic, syntactical, and metaphysical conventions of Western narrative'" (Salsini 356).[10] It is the parenthetical that Salsini interrogates as she looks to the epistolary texts of Maraini as meta-fictive endeavors and touchstones for a new literary and genre criticism.

In her study of epistolarity, Altman acknowledges Vivienne Mylne's[11] 1965 work on the epistolary novel as an example of the movement away from historical study of the genre to an analysis of "the advantages and pitfalls of the letter as an instrument for creating the illusion of reality" (6). Altman speaks of Tzvetan Todorov's parallel writing on *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* in *Literature et Signification* two years later as work in which the epistolary genre "is subordinate to his interest in building a poetics of literary discourse in general" (Altman 6). François Jost's[12] work similarly contributes to a foregrounding of a "typology of epistolarity narrative" (Altman 8) that will develop into the study of comparative narratology. This is the groundwork for the study of epistolarity. The letter in a multiple of frameworks need not be subordinated to the genre of the epistolary novel.

The epistolary text-as-biographical witness has long been a common template for revelation of the first- or third-person-narrated biomythography. Boswell's eighteenth-century revelation of the character of Dr. Samuel Johnson or Upton Sinclair's collection of 250,000 items of correspondence[13] are two exemplars. The ability of a collected exchange of letters to revise historical and critical assessments of writers in shared traditions separated by centuries has been attested to by John Shields's 1989 publication of *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*

---

[8] In juxtaposing the two writers Maraini and Tamaro, Salsini creates a conversation of sorts.

[9] Nancy A. Walker, *The Disobedient Writer: Women and Narrative Tradition* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1995).

[10] Campbell here quotes Elaine Showalter, ed., *The New Feminist Criticism* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 9. Campbell's citation reappears in Salsini 356.

[11] Vivienne Mylne, *The Eighteenth-Century French Novel: Techniques of Illusion* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1965).

[12] François Jost, "Le roman épistolaire et la technique narrative au XVIIIe siècle" (*Comparative Literature Studies* 3 [1966]: 397–427).

[13] Upton Sinclair, *My Lifetime in Letters* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1960).

and the 2003 issue of *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*.[14] After almost three centuries of opprobrium because of the inability to read the coded critique of Wheatley in her poetry, the letters revealed a young slave extremely conscious of her privileged position in the Wheatley house and her opportunities to castigate "the peculiar institution" in rhymed iambic pentameter.

II

> Friday September 26 (1969)
> Bessie Head, a coloured woman who frequents Swaneng, has written a novel about Botswana. It is delightfully written but far too simple. But it has netted her a lot of money and offers of contracts. So she sat down and wrote a second novel in a month—30,000 words. She is a sad and puzzling person, is incredibly stubborn and thoughtless and with a frightful chip on her shoulder. The hero of her first novel is based on Vernon [Gibberd]—she has a crush on him and her ostensible reason for coming here is get [sic] an education in agriculture. (Bagnall 234)

Sheila Bagnall, the British-born Swaneng Hill School administrator who served as Swaneng's Vice Principal and Head of the Science Department from 1966–70 and later succeeded Patrick van Rensburg as Principal from 1970–72, captures in less than one hundred words a flat composite of Head. The 340-page epistolary diary with which Bagnall created a documentary record of the social revolution of the Botswana of the late 1960s and early 1970s is of such historical import to the nation that none other than Festus G. Mogae, President of the Republic, pens the one-page foreword complete with the national seal. Commending the text as "a compound, part a history of Swaneng and of education and part a commentary on social and economic history," the President lauds the volume as one that provides the development process "a human face": "I am delighted that this remarkable diary should not only have been saved but that it should now, in published form be made easily accessible to everyone. It is truly an invaluable record of our history just prior to Independence [1966] and in the years immediately after it" (3).

An extraordinary record of a key participant's engagement in a major cultural revolution and bloodless transfer of authority in the Bechuanaland Protectorate, the collection of letters insists on the power of the epistolary to transmit expansive rather than rigid understandings, to provide information rescued from staleness by the vitality of the letter rather than the diary, and to narrate a life experience interpenetrated, as in few other places, by the natural world. (Rain, for example, is of such importance in Botswana, whose entire western and central regions are Kalahari semi-desert, that the currency is named and *pula*, rain, consisting of one hundred *thebe*, raindrops). These are the specific claims Sheila makes for her epistolary medium and its relation to message.[15] The letters are also personal, uncanny revelations of Bagnall's opacity, her racial lenses as one of an entire cohort of white expatriates engaged in public service in Botswana, and her social prejudices. On Friday, September 12, 1969, she talks about her visit to the Catholic mission at Palapye. After a party inundated with what she describes as tasteless and "hideous" Irish plastic art, she observes, "I found the room so awful that it became fascinating"; the Swaneng administrator continues: "I have never had much to do with nuns and priests and hadn't realized that they live at such an intellectually simple level"

---

[14] John Shields, ed., *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989) and Carla Kaplan, ed., *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters* (New York: Anchor, 2003). The former is part of the renowned Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers series.

[15] On Sunday evening, 2 October 1966, Sheila notes, "If you can be bothered to keep my letters, I'll be grateful. I find it much easier to write letters than a diary, i.e. I have an audience in mind when I write. What's more, if I write things up in a diary first they seem stale when I come to put them in letters. So the diary idea has rather collapsed" (24).

(231). Bagnall is similarly taken aback by the number of mixed marriages on staff and itemizes some of the unusual couplings (35). She often counts the number or percentages of whites invited to major social functions.

For all the expanse and invaluable cultural documentation of her epistolary project, the Bessie Head Bagnall sketches is too shallow, far too superficial, and narrow—a reductive paragraph akin to the one the District Commissioner resolves to write about Okonkwo's history in the closing page of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Insofar as professional literary and historic assessments of Bessie have had their own long history, not always in the past tense,[16] of univocal constricted *judgment*, the epistolary estate of Bessie Amelia Emery Head offers a quintessential opportunity and an under-explored resource for encountering an extraordinary spirit too often reductively dismissed as an exilic sojourner, a Western feminist exemplar, an apolitical dreamer, a troublemaker, or an unmoored madwoman.[17] In addition to her narrative experiments in recognizable and cross-generic works, the chief sources for allowing Head to speak richly, and in her own voice(s), are the two thousand extant letters housed as part of the Bessie Head Papers at the Khama III Memorial Museum in Serowe.[18] These exchanges to and from publishers and agents, writers, readers, scholars, and students from every continent except Antarctica—intimates and strangers, some of the latter of whom develop with Head a life-time correspondence that ends only with death—reveal an extraordinarily complex, multi-dimensional, and nuanced portrait of the woman and her intellectual endeavors. From these exchanges emerge several selves. Among them are an indefatigable craftsman whose all-night typing is driven as much by the need to make story as to feed her only child (an ironic recall of several Victorian antecedents), a woman who spends all her adult life in Botswana simultaneously negotiating poverty and the legal complexity of overseas publishing contracts with an industry that gives her scant return on work increasingly translated into many languages, and an intensely lonely woman with what we now call "contemplative intelligence" searching for kindred spirits even as she unwillingly rides the relentless roller-coaster of bi-polarity. If we accept, moreover, Jennifer A. Law's observation from her study of autobiographical strategies for documenting life and work in South Africa—that "through the object trace, the artist's biography lies before us waiting assembly" (230)—the remarkable epistolary testament of the Bessie Head Papers provides both reader and scholar with our best approximation of, on the one hand, a relatively unmediated autobiography and, on the other, a choric testimony of a cloud of witnesses who knew multiple facets of Head's complex personae. Bessie's fictions are often complex triangulated negotiations—an understandable reaction to the claustrophobic madness of bi-polar apartheid and a contemplative redirection of binarisms. The voices that emerge in two thousand epistolary exchanges between 1967 and 1986 offer exponential complexity to the "reading" of "text", "author", and the canvas of Botswana post-colonial cultural history in a global context. In her landmark study of Head, *Living on a Horizon: Bessie Head and the Politics of Imagining*, critic Desiree Lewis provides a brilliant reading of Head's letters "as codifications of psyche and subjectivity" (45).[19] The work in which I am engaged

[16] At the Bessie Head colloquium at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in July 2007, an esteemed and aged Patrick van Rensberg reminisced primarily about the mad Bessie Head. He confessed that he and his wife often refused to answer the door to their neighbor when they could tell from Bessie's countenance as she came up the walk that she was upset or in one of her "moods". His overall recollection was of a talented woman with unstable moods who benefited from the supportive care the van Rensbergs were able and willing to afford her. Both the Bagnall and Head correspondence reveal a more complicated portrait of a checkered assessment of van Rensberg involving praise, intense respect, disillusionment, mistrust, and each woman's charge of egocentricity.

[17] Linda Susan Beard, "Bessie Head's Syncretic Fictions: The Reconceptualization of Power and the Recovery of the Ordinary" (*Modern Fiction Studies* 37 [1991]: 575–89).

[18] References to these letters will be cited in the text according to file number.

[19] See especially chapter 2, "Establishing Channels of Communication: Bessie Head's 'Imagined Communities'" (43–91).

stands as an intermediary between the two-volume *Catalogue of the Bessie Head Papers*[20] (a twenty-year collection and cataloguing project completed on site by Danish archivist Ruth Forchhammer in June 2007) and the provocative analysis of Lewis's critique. It is part of another triangulation, of sorts: an attempt to introduce the compelling importance of easy, universal access to the Head correspondence (a body of letters I am annotating) and the collection's utility in providing more sophisticated and informed readings of Head's complexly autobiographical fiction, her Botswana chronicles, and the border-crossing interplay of fiction, faction, and "autrebiography."[21]

Reading Head's prodigious extant correspondence and other papers—"left by Bessie in neatly arranged covers with the contents and dates written on the outside," Forchhammer says in her preface to the *Catalogue*, and "stored in plastic bags or in envelopes with strings tied around them"—has been extremely difficult because of the necessity of travel to Botswana, the staggeringly high cost and physical inconvenience of transportation,[22] and the reliance on leave time. It is also necessary to obtain an official research permit from the Government of Botswana indicating one's professional credentials and plans for disseminating the fruit of the research. As of the BessieFest in July 2007—the Botswana and South African month-long celebration of what would have been Head's seventieth birthday—Ruth Forchhammer indicated to me that fewer than thirty visitors since 1986 had done archival work on the Bessie Head Papers, most from neighboring South Africa, though there were North Americans, a few Europeans, and scholars from Japan and other countries on the African continent. In 2004 Howard Head gave me permission to publish his mother's letters. My goal became the publication of the letters, given copyright permission from Head's huge community of correspondents, all of whom, with few exceptions, agreed to make their letters available to researchers working with the Bessie Head Papers in Serowe, but would have to agree to their dissemination in a more public printed and electronic format. This two-volume project, *Shifting Sandscapes: Bessie Head, In Her Own Voice*, nearing completion, includes an extended introduction, and only necessary, explanatory annotations, without other interpolations.

III

> LB: Do you feel at home here [Botswana]?
> BH: You know, I'm a writer and something of me goes into my books. But then I feel, from my own experience, that I've never been able to write about South Africa. I feel that writing, in some way, is based on a feeling that roots are present in the society. I don't think that writers, who sort of grow into an environment that is fairly secure, concentrate so much on this sense of continuity of roots; I do as a South African. In that sense, I've always been drawing on something in this society: the feeling that the roots go deep and that the historical sequence was not broken and disturbed by the

[20] Ruth Forchhammer, compiler, *Catalogue of The Bessie Head Papers*, 2 volumes (Serowe, Botswana: Khama III Memorial Museum, 2007). The volumes are available from the Museum, Private Bag 008, Serowe, Botswana. It is also available in electronic form on a single CD-ROM.

[21] Margaret Lenta, "Autrebiography: J. M. Coetzee's Boyhood and Youth" (*English in Africa* 30.1 [2003]: 157–69).

[22] In 2004 when I began reading the correspondence full-time at the Museum in Serowe, the roundtrip airfare from North America to Botswana was almost $2,000. From the capital, Gaborone, it was necessary to take a three- to four- hour bus trip to the village of Serowe. Additional expenses included lodging and board, both relatively expensive, especially over the term of a visit of several months. I am thankful that a significant part of the cost of that and subsequent visits was underwritten by Bryn Mawr College and small grants from friends. I am indebted to the professional and collegial assistance of The Khama III Memorial Museum, especially to the daily assistance of Ruth Forchhammer, Curator Scobie Lekhutile, and Assistant Curator Gasenone Kediseng. Gaborone-based Bessie Head scholar Mary Lederer also sent me essential material related to this project that I could not obtain outside Southern Africa.

> British. And I think it made sense of my life. There's that aspect. And then, when the book is eventually assessed, a person says, I notice I do it myself, that it still comes down to you, your talent, what you are putting into it so that it's original. But then you also draw on your environment. *It's so many subtle combinations*. If it had only been me and my choices, as I have said, life would always have been beautiful and simple, but other things beyond your control intrude on you as a human being. (Beard 45, emphasis mine)

In death, as in life, the Serowan bard-novelist-chronicler-essayist remains a formidable and tender chameleon—intrepid and tentative, contemplative and recklessly certain, undaunted by taking on both God and the devil, yet fearful enough to use verbal shock offensives as her best social defense in that genre she coined her "drastic letters".[23] Bessie is simultaneously known, unknowable, and somehow not yet discovered in all her signature complexity, paradox, contradiction, and ambiguity. It is this untameable and irreducible richness and wildness that get addressed in a letter from her long-time intimate friend, Tom Holzinger, about his possible collaboration with a project on Bessie's life story. In a letter to future Head biographer, Gillian Stead Eilersen, written from Montréal on 19 January 1992, Bessie's former neighbor and revered soul-mate asserts with an uncompromising power characteristic of Head, "I have iconoclastic and vehement views about the entire cottage industry springing up around Bessie's literary legacy." Having emphasized these words with the indelible power of underlining, Tom continues: "Your letter used a good Bessie word, "minefield." Please watch where you walk. Please do not attempt to interpret her, to put ideas behind her outbursts, to soften her violence, to make her "good" (or "bad"), to assign her to categories, or to shoehorn her into any literary tradition. Simply supply facts and a context, and then let B. Head speak for herself" (KMM 48 BHP 120).

This is but an echo of Holzinger's note of five years earlier—1 March 1987—when the former brigade volunteer, in a reminiscence to another scholar (Professor Daniel Gover or "Gove"), offers his then-comprehensive overview of Mma-Howard,[24] one expanded and amended significantly in 2005. The 1987 letter offers this advice:

> I wouldn't avoid the question of drinking if I were you, nor her disappointment with Howard, nor her sexual hang-ups and the likelihood of some lesbian feelings, nor her disdain for cultural nationalism and cultural feminism, nor her madness—in short, don't avoid anything about Bessie. Have her as she was, or don't try to comprehend her at all. She herself saved her vilest and wildest language for those who tried to edit away truth. ("A Warrior Alone" 33, underlining in original)

This fragmented, whole, irrepressible, fearful, unorthodox, and compulsively chaste woman is the Bessie Tom loved for more than four decades. Bessie Amelia Emery Head is, first and last, an amalgamation of spirits. She saw herself primarily as Mma-Howard and tremendous energy was invested in caring for the only child of a failed marriage. The highly disciplined fiction-writing career grew out of financial desperation and the intention of providing for Howard's needs. That generosity is repeated in involvement in committees and societies designed to encourage the children of Botswana to read and to consider lives as wordspinning storymakers. Bessie's papers reveal her collegial mentoring of students from anywhere in the world who send copies of papers or theses and dissertation chapters about her work; she becomes increasingly distrustful of academics, but for a long period Bessie welcomes them to her tiny home, offering hospitality and interviews. An agricultural hybrid-

[23] Bessie Head used this language to describe exchanges that were vitriolic, biting, or that castigated others in colorful expletives.

[24] This is the traditional mode of address for many on the African continent: the recognition of one's role as a mother and the name of a particular child. Howard Head is Bessie's only heir. Many in Serowe referred to Bessie in this way.

seed developer and master gardener, she discovers ways of growing tropical fruit out of Kalahari sand in an effort to supplement her meager royalty income and to be of use to the country that admits her after an irrevocable departure from South Africa.[25] There is the Bessie who rigorously eschews public sexual performance of any kind, though *A Question of Power* (1974) dramatically enacts the taunting of Elizabeth by a torturer named Medusa whose boastful attainment is the ability to give astronomical numbers of men orgasmic satisfaction with her bionic vagina. Her "reading" of the *Ms.* magazine enterprise is but one exemplar of the contradictions that attend this woman. In a letter to Alison Kirton dated 19 August 1975, Bessie offers this succinct judgment: "I greatly admire the freedom and truthfulness with which every aspect of women's lives is discussed. [… But] They have white women sprawled all over the magazine, naked, masturbating with machines. I was only a little put off that Ms concentrates so strongly and almost entirely on sexual gratification in all forms for women" (KMM 126 BHP 4). Two years earlier, in a letter to Beata Lipman dated 28 February 1973, Bessie offers a stinging indictment of Doris Lessing's work: "I dislike her overt sexuality and gyrating hips. Both [Lessing and John Berger] too add social themes side by side with their sexual activities, but Berger handles them with masculine calm, Lessing with shrill hysteria" (KMM 25 BHP 4). The woman who is so often credited with making "use [of] Third World women's experience to create a feminist aesthetic" (Ibrahim 238) describes herself often in the correspondence as one whose power of spirit could not possibly be contained by the female persona. Confiding in her epistles that she is her character, Maru, Bessie insists that only a male character can appropriately represent her fullness. Rigorously homophobic in the epistles, she confesses to Mona Pehle in a letter of 2 August 1979 that "the Heusler woman was a horror in more ways than one" (KMM 34 BHP 120). At a writer's conference in Berlin, Bessie felt driven to talk to Taban Lo Liyong about the evils of homosexuality.

This is also Bessie, the problematically oft-uninhibited actor whom Africanist novelist and scholar Peter Nazareth describes in less than complimentary terms in his almost thirty-year-delayed retrospective about her participation in the International Writers' Program at the University of Iowa in 1977. "Path of Thunder: Meeting Bessie Head" is a poignant, bitter, and defensive recollection of that fiery and electric academic semester when Bessie had the opportunity to interact with writers from many countries and to meet a number of African American writers at various locations in the U.S. The University of Iowa seminar afforded Bessie the contemplative leisure in which to write without the overriding financial concerns that almost always dogged her impoverished life.

Nazareth's text is part of a triangulation as complex as any in Head's fictions. Its immediate catalyst—the 2005 publication of James Currey's memoir essay, "Publishing Bessie Head: Memories and Reflections"[26]—offers a refutation, rebuttal, and alternate reading of Bessie's sometimes acidic and vitriolic charges in her letters to agents and publishers. (Almost one quarter of the extant letters involve correspondence between Bessie and press representatives or agents.) Nazareth is wholly unsatisfied with Currey's revisionist memoir because of Currey's silence about Bessie's professional assessment of the Iowa professor, especially since Bessie's version of events finds its way into the Eilersen 1995 biography[27] that Currey published without, he insists, Nazareth having been able to narrate events through his own

[25] Bessie Head signed an exit permit at the age of twenty-seven in order to escape the tyranny of apartheid. In my 1982 interview with her, Bessie characterized that life as "a choking, throttling, death-like kind of world" (44). This document allowed Bessie to leave South Africa with her young son, Howard, with the binding agreement that she never return to South African soil. That ban included the Jan Smuts Airport in Johannesburg and made international travel very complicated since her itineraries had to bypass Johannesburg.

[26] James Currey, "Publishing Bessie Head: Memories and Reflections" (*Wasafiri* 46 [2005]: 19–26).

[27] Gillian Stead Eilersen, *Bessie Head. Thunder Behind Her Ears: Her Life and Writing* (London: James Currey; Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann; Cape Town: David Philip, 1995). Reprinted in 2007 by Wits UP.

lenses and recollection. After a self-imposed silence of three decades, Nazareth explains his earlier decision to forego participating in a 1977 panel discussion at the annual meeting of the African Literature Association that would have included commentary on Bessie Head's Iowa adventure. "I was conflicted," Nazareth recalls about that earlier invitation; "I did not want to draw attention to her behavior instead of her fiction because I was mindful of the dictum by D. H. Lawrence to never trust the teller, trust the tale" (211). Recalling that earlier act of misdirected generosity, Nazareth pointedly warns the reader about treating Bessie's correspondence as infallible or even factually accurate, and scholars against misrepresenting her in the name of amicable discretion. Nazareth is particularly critical of *A Gesture of Belonging*,[28] Randolph Vigne's 1991 collection of letters to and from Head, for which Nazareth wrote a review in a 1992 issue of *World Literature Today*.[29] Nazareth specifically challenges Vigne's editorial decision, announced in the prefatory material, to excise or edit exchanges that might represent Bessie poorly or cause pain. In a climate in which so many critics focus on Bessie's moody outbursts as symptomatic of her "madness", Vigne indicates that he does not want to provide any material that can be exploited to that end. In the 2006 memoir, with its unmistakable pain and defensiveness, Nazareth cites afresh the searing critique of Vigne's project:

> "Hurtful or libelous passages have been cut," says Vigne. But there was a letter about the Filipina writer with whom she shared kitchen and toilet: it was unfair because I know things about the story that put Bessie in a negative light.
>
> My point is this: now that Bessie is dead, now that we feel bad she can write no more, are we going to idealize her and every scrap of her writing? Do we accept her insights into people and not give the latter a chance to defend themselves? Is she going to whip us from the grave, or from beyond, since she believes in incarnation? Who is ahead? Bessie, because the blurb says she is "one of Africa's greatest writers"? Or people like me, who read her work, write about it, and teach it, despite knowing other good writers and *in spite of what she said*? In Iowa, Bessie showed no signs of knowing the nature of fiction. She read my novel *In a Brown Mantle* and asked me who Kyeyune was (meaning in real life). John Cheever walked out of Paul Engle's house because Bessie asked him whether he wrote pornographically to make money. (216–17, emphasis in original)

Beyond reinforcing the notion that Bessie Head is a far more complex agent than she has hitherto been given credit for, or that there are simultaneous, conflicting versions of her philosophical sophistication or authorial expertise, this interactive dance of texts, sub-texts, and contexts reveals key documents available in the Papers and necessary for an informed engagement with the spins given and multiple issues named by Nazareth *vis à vis* Currey, Eilersen, Vigne, and Head. In the correspondence, one can read Head's extended commentaries on the Iowa experience: be prepared to replace the Philippine origin of her suitemate with Eastern Europe; access Head's own ruminations about Professor Nazareth before revisiting the Eilersen telling and the Nazareth revision. One has access to Bessie's copious record of correspondence with Currey and the originals of the edited Vigne letters. The letters are also explicit in expressing Bessie's theories about matters of narrative, relationship, subjectivity, political consciousness, and universality as well as her detailed "reading" and evaluations of texts, including her own, and writers from Nobel Laureate Doris Lessing to Leo Tolstoy. Without the letters being readily accessible, there is little possibility of forming one's own independent judgment; one is caught up in a whirlwind of competing interpretations with no access to the primary articulations that produce such vibrant analyses. One has the

[28] Randolph Vigne, ed., *A Gesture of Belonging: Letters from Bessie Head, 1965–1979* (London: SA Writers; Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann; Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1991).

[29] Peter Nazareth, Rev. of *A Gesture of Belonging: Letters from Bessie Head, 1965–1979*, ed. Randolph Vigne (*World Literature Today* 66.2 [1992]: 391).

interpretation without the text; one is absolutely dependent on the analysis of the biographer or the critic who has exercised editorial judgment in selecting documents or segments of a text before or after the ellipses.

Having left us a remarkable narratological estate that also eschews easy genre codification, Bessie (or the many, many Bessie Heads) has always been and remains eminently vulnerable in the hands of readers on every continent, scholars similarly spread across land masses and far-flung time zones, as well as close intimates and former neighbors who employ, as we do, a panoply of methodologies and lenses in staking a claim for the primacy of *our* favorite Mrs. Head. With the availability of an entire articulation of self, available in two thousand catalogued epistles, and in the absence of an alternate unventriloquized source, one cannot help but think of the poignant line spoken by the blind old woman in Toni Morrison's 1993 Nobel acceptance speech. When children demand of the sightless seer whether or not the bird they are holding is alive or dead, the sage woman turns the tables by reminding the children what constitutes the most important piece of knowing: "Finally she speaks, and her voice is soft but stern. 'I don't know,' she says. 'I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands'" (para. 8).

For some, Bessie Head is the paradigmatic collector of Bamangwato, Batswana, and Basarwa treasures. Her carefully preserved correspondence is a collection of another kind. The epistles are a kind of psalter manifesting a broad range of emotions, styles, genres, audiences, transmission modes, occasions, moods, voices, and intertextualities. Without them it is difficult to encounter Bessie-the-comedian, for example. In a letter to Betty Sleath dated 1 August 1977, the new winner of the Iowa Writers' Program Fellowship observes,

> The pot/luck of a writer's life has come my way. I am way off to America quite unexpectedly. […] My name was nominated by the American Embassy here and I accepted the invitation. […] There will be a lot of temperamental geniuses around, so someone with a sense of humour must have thought up this catastrophe! I am not mad myself so I expect to have a good time. (KMM 19 BHP 14)

We can also attend to a correspondence of frustrated defeat in tracing the editorial ultimatum of a ghost editor for a chapter Heinemann finds particularly offensive in its sexual reference. This is imposed as the non-negotiable condition for publication of *A Question of Power*. Bessie includes the amendments in a letter enabling a researcher to juxtapose this to her own original (that manuscript is also included in the Bessie Head Papers) and the published text. One of the ironic commendations Heinemann provides of the editor is his extensive experience in performing similar services for other works in the African Writers Series, some of which are named as is D. M. Zwelonke's South African novel, *Robben Island*.

The letters record, in painstaking detail, the poignant relentlessness of Bessie's vigilant search for relief from enervating poverty and the tone deafness of individuals and groups soliciting her time and labor, almost always *pro bono*. The Peace Corps engages her routinely in the training of new volunteers assigned to Botswana. Generous with her time and her commitment to her newly adopted country, Bessie makes arduous overland treks to meet new classes of volunteers, but has to politely request compensation for her travel expenses and her time. The 1984 organizers of the National Women's Studies Association invite her to be a major participant, but ask her to try to locate funding for travel since they do not have such resources.

The collection of epistles forces us to attend to cries of pain. A letter to her beloved sister-in-law, Cary, written 28 June 1977 is especially apropos in light of the celebration of the seventieth year of her birth:

> I shall be forty years old on the 6th of July and it is time to look back on a very patchy life of scant achievement. I am still struggling with poverty and seem to be going downhill more than anything else. It's been a very lonely life I have had and I wonder

> how much more there is left of it and whether a ray of Sunshine will appear in all the grey and whether I will die happy. (KMM 28 BHP 17)

Four short years later, in a letter to her editor, Giles Gordon, dated 10 March 1981 Bessie confesses: "I am so sorry for the life I have lived. It has been filled with horror" (KMM 44 BHP 222).

Like the lovers in the Song of Songs, Bessie continuously searches for a kindred spirit, believing she had found her in 1974 in Alice Walker; about the same time she comes to the same conclusion about Nikki Giovanni. Receiving only signed publicity shots repeatedly from Giovanni, to whom she directs a sixteen-page, single-spaced tome, which takes Bessie a month to write, in dated segments, she uses the most extreme language of the extant correspondence in a conflagration of insults intimately tied to a sense of betrayal. She begins anew a courting of sorts of Alice Walker which includes detailed, candid comments on Walker's work:

> I don't know when these notes are ever going to get done as every now and then I have to stop typing and go and lie down on the floor, prostrate with worship. This often happens when one encounters a kindred soul, as in the ordinary way life is indeed lonely. I have to spend a lot of time trying to avoid exhausting myself with people who say "but I don't understand a word you say," when all you are saying is that life is bigger and more beautiful than the narrow world each individual is trapped in. One would keep on saying that it doesn't hurt but I have been feeling it, mostly due to that novel of mine, *A Question of Power*, which draws a lot of shitty comments and people who write delightfully telling me that they have "aesthetic" backgrounds and the source of my insanity is my rough, crude slum background. It is one thing to disdain to reply, and another to receive confirmation from some source that one's learning, one's eyes are quite right and sane. (KMM 76 BHP 3)

The Bessie Head who describes herself as a Hindu mystic shares comic meditations such as the admission in a letter dated 4 March 1977 that she thinks in two time dimensions: the present which is then overlapped "with the dim distant past and the dim unknown future"; Bessie notes with humor "that people don't quite know what I am talking about" (KMM 91 BHP 6)—except for those, one is tempted to add, conversant with the new physics. Bessie can succinctly sum up her deepest philosophical and moral beliefs—ideas that permeate her fiction. In a letter to Pat Spann dated 26 June 1985, the émigré observes,

> But it is easy to answer your question: what is the definition of a human being? A human being is most precious. Last week I fell down and hurt my knee. It was so painful that I had to walk with a stiff limp. The Taxi driver always brings me home and charges me 60t. So he said: "I can only charge you 50t today Mrs. Head. I am sorry about your sore knee." There is a lot of that sort of thing in people. (KMM 45 BHP 12)

(One recalls almost immediately the 2003 text birthed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission experience: Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela's *A Human Being Died That Night: A South African Woman Confronts the Legacy of Apartheid*.[30]) This is the Bessie whom Yoko Ono Lennon invited to take part in the Strawberry Field Project honoring the late John Lennon's commitment to a universal brotherhood of all peoples (KMM 010 BHP 1–17).

The epistles are indisputable resources for understanding both teller *and* tale. The most compelling criticism of Head's texts in the last decade has been that thoroughly informed by the correspondence. The published Vigne volume of Head's letters has been easily available to researchers since 1991. Scholars who made reference to Bessie's epistles depended on that collection or the letters selected and edited in the Eilersen biography. A new volume of letters, hitherto unavailable to researchers at the Serowe Museum without special permission from Patrick Cullinan, appeared in 2005 as *The Imaginative Trespasser: Letters from Bessie Head to Patrick and Wendy Cullinan, 1963–1977*. In July 2007 I asked Gillian Stead Eilersen if she

[30] Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died That Night: A South African Woman Confronts the Legacy of Apartheid* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003).

had read through the entire collection of epistles and her response was that she had not. Desiree Lewis, whose doctoral dissertation at the University of Cape Town focused exclusively on Bessie Head's works, organically integrates Bessie's epistles into her analysis in *Living on a Horizon*. Such an infusion results, for example, in a significant corrective to reasonable assumptions by significant commentators on the Head oeuvre. Cecil Abrahams, Huma Ibrahim and Rob Nixon,[31] among others, had argued compellingly that Bessie's physical isolation in a remote rural village of the Bechuanaland Protectorate translated into an estrangement from international discourses about post-coloniality and diaspora, for example. In the face of that exilic consciousness argument, Lewis offers a counter-thesis based on Bessie's record of correspondence:

> Yet the long correspondence Head maintained with writers like Alice Walker, Giovanni and Morrison, often about their writing and the literary worlds they inhabited, suggests a somewhat different story. However indirectly, Head was offered a place in diasporic literary domains that accommodated her exploration of the connected politics of gender, race and class. But she also covertly and occasionally insistently refused to identify with these writers and the traditions they represented. (71)

Situating Bessie Head in such a timely and global conversation is nothing less than a template change with provocative ramifications for twinned enterprises: the ongoing development of Bessie Head criticism and a burgeoning interest in African epistolarity studies.

This collection of epistles promises to reward studies of self representation, self construction, and self performance in a lively exploration of Bessie Head's exploitation of autrebiography as a personal and a national phenomenon. Her hybridized experiments in narrative have counterparts and first drafts in one of the largest collections of extant African epistles. Ruth Forchhammer told me in 2004 that Bessie deleted almost one thousand letters shortly before her death because of the limitations of space in her tiny Serowe home. Putting aside the poignancy of loss, what we have is a final collection that represents Bessie's own editorial logic. (I was deeply overjoyed to discover that my own correspondence to Bessie in May 1978, requesting an interview and offering an honorarium, remained in the final collection.)

In some reviews of *The Imaginative Trespasser*, a text in which Patrick Cullinan speaks back to Bessie's letters posthumously, critics have suggested a new avenue of exploration: Bessie's epistolary acumen. So much of the collection addresses the chronicling of the writing process of each of Bessie's major works. One can hear a writer's mind in the process of thinking aloud through the unfolding of the current narrative challenge. A woman who is almost religious in her attention to the epistle interrogates the nature, form, and significance of the letter as a tool for communication. Perhaps it is the very remoteness of Serowe and her global reading audience that permits Bessie to recognize the epistle as the connective link the internet has become. Bessie loved writing letters. Through the post, the whole world came to P. O. Box 15, Serowe. She viewed epistles as sacred objects in her life. In a letter to Mrs. Meissler dated 30 January 1986, Bessie proudly proclaimed: "You can be sure that I always reply promptly to letters. It is an honour to people to do so" (KMM 16 BHP 14).

The correspondence record also opens up challenging new possibilities for future research. The Papers include all of Bessie's publishing contracts. In July 2007 one of the BessieFest participants, an attorney specializing in publishing law, read through these. I can imagine a fascinating book on Bessie's actual economic returns based on those contracts *vis à vis* the extensive correspondence in which she pinpoints the multiple ways in which she feels financially exploited by firms too far away and too well-funded for her to challenge legally. In

[31] See Huma Ibrahim, *Bessie Head: Subversive Identities in Exile*; Cecil Abrahams, ed., *The Tragic Life: Bessie Head and Literature in South Africa* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990); and Rob Nixon, "Border Country: Bessie Head's Frontline States" (*Social Text* 36 [1993]: 106–37).

a very short time Bessie develops a remarkable expertise in understanding the nuances of such matters as retaining world rights. There is a major case study in these epistles of the high cost of globalization to those Bessie describes, in a 20 April 1973 letter to Betsy Stephens, as the "poverty stricken species of mankind—a writer trying to live on writing" (KMM 77 BHP 23).

On 25 June 1973, in a letter addressed to Mondi, Bessie articulates the ways in which her epistles may be a key to understanding the writer and her oeuvre. "I never have any objection to replying to a letter," she admits, "as I spend a lot of time with myself, and in a way letter writing helps to clarify my own thoughts quite a lot" (KMM 162 BHP 2). Two years later the contemplative power of the letter and the epistolary process are affirmed in an 8 July 1975 exchange with Patrick Cullinan. As Bessie agonized over her sense that publishers consumed ninety per cent of her income while tax revenue agents appropriated the remaining ten per cent, she concluded philosophically: "So this space," said Bessie about the letter at hand, "is for re-thinking" (Cullinan 229).

Works Cited

Bagnall, Sheila. *Sheila Bagnall's Letters from Botswana, 1966–1974*. Ed. Sandy Grant. Odi, Botswana: Leitlho Publications, 2001.

Beard, Linda Susan. "Bessie Head in Gaborone, Botswana: An Interview." *Sage: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women* 3.2 (1986): 44–47.

Campbell, Elizabeth. "Re-Visions, Re-Flections, Re-Creations: Epistolarity in Novels by Contemporary Women." *Twentieth Century Literature* 41.3 (1995): 332–48.

Head, Bessie. *The Imaginative Trespasser: Letters from Bessie Head to Patrick and Wendy Cullinan, 1963–1977*. Ed. Patrick Cullinan. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2005.

Holzinger, Tom. "A Warrior Alone." *Writing Bessie Head in Botswana: An Anthology of Remembrance and Criticism*. Eds. Mary S. Lederer and Seatholo M. Tumedi. Gaborone: Pentagon Publishers, 2007. 30–34.

Ibrahim, Huma. *Bessie Head: Subversive Identities in Exile*. Charlottesville and London: UP of Virginia, 1996.

Law, Jennifer A. "Genealogy and the Artist's Archive: Strategies of Autobiography and Documentation in the Work of a South African Artist." *Rethinking Age in Africa: Colonial, Post-Colonial and Contemporary Interpretations of Cultural Representations*. Ed. Mario Aguilar. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007. 227–66.

Lewis, Desiree. *Living on a Horizon: Bessie Head and the Politics of Imagining*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007.

Morrison, Toni. "Nobel Lecture, December 7, 1993." 31 March 2008 <http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-lecture.html>.

Nazareth, Peter. "Path of Thunder: Meeting Bessie Head." *Research in African Literatures* 37.4 (2006): 211–29.

Salsini, Laura A. "Maraini Addresses Tamaro: Revising the Epistolary Novel." *Italica* 78.3 (2001): 351–66.

Woolf, Virginia. "Madame de Sévigné." *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*. 1942. 20 March 2008 <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/w91d/chap9.html>.

Bessie Head, the Liberation Struggle, and Personal and Political Transformation

Cecil Abrahams

Memories of Bessie Head's Tshekedi Memorial School Pupils

Seatholo Masego Tumedi[1]

> You don't have to travel far from yourself to produce a book.[2]

Bessie Head's experiences in relation to the first job she held when she first arrived in Serowe, a teaching post at the Tshekedi Memorial School,[3] has, as far as I know, remained unresearched and unexplored, yet the Tshekedi experience was her first close contact with the people of Serowe in particular and the Batswana in general. The following interviews, therefore, represent an attempt to recreate Bessie Head from the memories of her former pupils of Tshekedi Memorial School in Serowe where she briefly held a teaching post upon arriving in Botswana from South Africa in 1964. [4] The interviews with Bessie Head's former pupils broadly and loosely capture some of the issues the writer came to grapple with as she moved into an alien territory. These issues range from cultural differences and linguistic barriers to the stereotyping, racialisation, and alienisation of her experiences, which also arouse curiosity in relation to the question of identity. Some semblance of the "nervous condition" of a stateless person also surfaces from the pupils' experiences. It is worth noting that Bessie Head's uniqueness, especially as someone who had the capacity and ability to listen to other people, emerges from these interviews, as does the sad fact that her books remain largely unread by the people she lived amongst, wrote about, and even taught during her early days in Serowe. Above all, the stories of these Tshekedi Memorial School pupils of the 1960s reveal the kinds of materials she might have borrowed in order to enrich the context of her own stories.

Material for this paper was collected through recorded interviews. A lot of prodding and jogging of minds was necessary to aid recollection. A majority of the interviews were in Setswana, thus making translation inevitable.

Notwithstanding the translation and transliteration challenges consequential to a multilingual project, I present the former pupils' impressions more or less as they were rendered to me and leave it to the reader to make whatever connections and conclusions s/he may wish. Five of the interviewees are Bessie Head's former pupils; the sixth belongs to a different category—Bessie Head's fellow teacher at Tshekedi Memorial School. Finding Bessie Head's Tshekedi pupils was an extremely difficult exercise as the few contacts made could not readily remember who were their former classmates over forty years ago at Tshekedi Memorial School. The interviewees were Joyce Mello, Habuji Sosome, Semolemo Yvonne Oitsile, Kebabope Bikani, Gobopamang Mapulelo, and Mma-Jennings Masabazi.

---

[1] Seatholo Masego Tumedi a journalist and lecturer in the English Department at the University of Botswana. She writes on Bessie Head, Southern African literature, Botswana literature, and (popular) culture.

[2] Bessie Head, "Collecting Oral History." *Mmegi* 23 March 1985: 6.

[3] The school was named after Kgosi Tshekedi Khama (1905–59), Bangwato regent from 1926–49.

[4] I owe the inception of this project to two of my friends: Mabel Phemelo Selato (also a former Tshekedi Memorial School teacher from 1971–73) for suggesting the topic to me and Mary Susan Lederer (co-editor of this publication) for encouraging me to work on the project.

Mma-Head Smoked One Cigarette after Another

Joyce Mello (née Sekukuni) is a Botswana Power Corporation employee in Gaborone. She was interviewed in June 2007 in Gaborone.

Mma-Head[5] taught me around 1965 when I was in Standard Five. She took me just for one term. I think she inherited us from Mrs Seretse who had taught us during the previous term. I was one of the pupils who used to sit on the bare floor in the front section of the class.

That year there were lots of teachers from South Africa but by then I didn't know exactly where Mma-Head came from because she was the only white/coloured lady teacher at our school. And she spoke English only and so we had a challenge trying to communicate with her. Most of the time she would just write on the board and we would take down notes.

I remember Mma-Head as a very quiet teacher. She was a good listener, maybe a good observer too. She was also different from the other teachers because she never beat us in class. We used to compare her with other teachers like Mrs Phirinyane who would beat the hell out of us. As a result we used to make a lot of noise in Mma-Head's class and she would just do her marking amidst our noise.

I particularly remember Mma-Head's attire. She used to wear a black skirt which was decorated with a floral pattern at the bottom and a khaki shirt with two pockets and she looked boyish. She wore the same clothes over and over again. She walked hard, like a man, and indeed she looked like a man. She also used to smoke one cigarette after another and we would wonder, "Is this a woman or a man?" She always carried cigarettes in the pockets of her khaki shirt.

I have excitedly read one of Mma-Head's books titled *Maru*. I could match what was happening in the book with the situation in the Botswana culture, especially the Sengwato[6] culture. But when I tried another of her books I could not understand it.

Last year a cousin of mine brought "a pure white guy" to the unveiling ceremony of my mother's tombstone. The man told us he was Bessie Head's only relative, so we got him to meet Howard. But it was a very sad situation because they seemed to be afraid of each other. They were very quiet, they had nothing to talk about.

I Befriended Bambie

Habuji Sosome is a communications engineer and former Director of Information and Broadcasting, currently managing director of Tru-Tek in Gaborone. He was interviewed on 28 February 2008 in Gaborone.

I cannot remember clearly, but Mma-Head must have come to Tshekedi School in 1964–1965. By then I was doing Standard Four or Five. She took me for only six months because I remember that I was later taught by Mrs Phirinyane. She was known as "the new teacher who did not speak Setswana" and it was difficult for us to cope with her. By then I only knew two languages—Setswana and Sekalaka (Ikalanga)—and that was it. But it was to our advantage to be taught by Mma-Head because she encouraged us to learn English which we had already started picking up from the radio lessons broadcast by Radio Botswana.

By then we had just been transferred from Western School to enroll at Tshekedi which was a fairly new school. It was about four or five years old then. I remember that the school facilities were still in good condition. The desks were not yet broken; the window panes were still intact.

---

[5] Setswana for Mrs Head.

[6] Serowe and the surrounding villages are generally referred to as Ga-MmaNgwato, named after one of the of the ancestors of the people called Ngwato. Sengwato is the adjective used to describe the people's culture and the dialect of Setswana language used in that area.

One of the things I remember clearly about Mma-Head is that she would never beat us. We would come late, or make noise in class (which I was good at) and she would never apply corporal punishment on us. All she would say would be, "Don't do that!" and from the way she would say it, we would not repeat whatever mischief we would have been engaged in. Surprisingly, we made more noise in classes where the teachers used to beat us. The teacher would beat you for making noise but the minute she moved out of the classroom you would already be laughing. Then you'd get lashed again; she would walk out of the class again, and you would make the noise again. But Mma-Head used to just convey her message verbally and we would obey. Maybe it was because from the way she said it we could see that if she were to apply corporal punishment there would be big trouble.

Another recollection of Mma-Head is that she used to be the only lady smoker amongst male colleagues and during those days it was not common to see a woman "puffing". But she never smoked in class; neither would she hide her smoking habit.

I later came to befriend Mma-Head's son whose name then was Bambie. Mma-Head lived at Mr Mazebe Sebina's[7] home and being relatives of the Sebinas, my mother used to send me to fetch one thing or another from Mma-Madala's (Mazebe Sebina's wife's) place. Then Mma-Head being my teacher would invite me to play with Bambie who was then just a toddler. That is how Bambie and I discovered each other. But in recent years he told me that he was no longer called Bambie and that his proper name was Howard.

One of the things I regret is the fact that I'm not into literature, and as such I have never read any of my teacher's books.

It Was Very Important for Keba to Capture Our Fear in Mma-Head's Language

Semolemo Yvonne Oitsile (née Moleseng) is a former Botswana Book Centre employee, currently political officer at the Botswana Democratic Party office in Gaborone. She was interviewed on 18 February 2008 in Mogoditshane.

Mma-Head was a white person who came to our school at Tshekedi. As you know during that time we were not used to seeing white people. Even if somebody came from the south and thus used the *tla-tla* dialect instead of the Ngwato *ta-ta*,[8] we would all gather around her at play time. We would regard such person as a white person at whose home no sorghum porridge could be found. We would think that only maize meal porridge could be found at such a person's place. So I can't find the right words to describe the way we marveled at Mma-Head. Those days she was an object of wonder; she was "Mistress[9] Head", and she had a son called Howard. And they were really white.

I can't remember the year Mma-Head came to Tshekedi, nor what standard I was in, but I remember that she spent only three days in our class. During those three days she would walk into the classroom and we would be awestricken. She would greet us, "Good morning class!" We would answer, "Good morning Mistress!" Then she would ask us to read. But generally we did not understand her language. Afterwards we used to meet her during the singing period where she would laugh and seem to thoroughly enjoy our singing. She would even dance with us even though she did not understand our language. One of the songs we used to sing then was "Dikeledi! Dikeledi!"[10]

---

[7] Peter Mazebe Sebina (1890–1962) from Sebina ward in Serowe was Tshekedi Khama's secretary.

[8] Setswana dialects from the Ga-MmaNgwato area can be identified by the *ta* sound as opposed to the *tla* used in the southern part of Botswana.

[9] Traditionally the English word for a female teacher in Botswana.

[10] "Dikeledi" is one of the communal songs that have been popularized by George Swabi and other modern singer-artists.

I really wished Mma-Head could have taught me because I wished to know how to speak English like her. However, even though Mma-Head took us for only three days, I can tell you a story that serves as a testimony of the extent to which she influenced pupils at Tshekedi to learn to communicate in English. This is the story of Kebabope[11] who was my schoolmate at Tshekedi and my neighbour at goo-Sebinanyana ward in Serowe. Even when we were sent from home to fetch water from the *motobetso* (stand pipe) which was at goo-Malela ward, Kebabope would refuse to converse with us in Setswana and would insist on speaking to us only in English. And she would break the English, and she would closely monitor each one of us. One day we were sent to a *hotel*[12] to buy a pot of gravy to be used as relish for eating porridge. It was dusk and on our way back from the *hotel* we were seized by fear and we decided to run all the way home. Upon reaching home the adults quizzed us as to what it was we came running from. In response Keba just blurted out, "The lion is coming at the back of us"—a statement which was greeted with great laughter from those of us who were not daring enough to attempt speaking in English. [13]

What Keba was doing then was to try and capture our fear and it was important for her to capture it in Mma-Head's language because *Mistress* Head encouraged her students to always communicate in English.

I have read almost all of her books. I have also worked briefly with Howard, Mma-Head's son, at the Botswana Book Centre in Gaborone.

I Did Not Think Mma-Head Was Normal

Kebabope Bikani (née Mooko) was a primary school teacher for twenty-eight years; she currently teaches at Tati Primary School near Francistown. She was interviewed on 1 March 2008 in Tati Siding.

Mma-Head taught me for a year at Tshekedi Memorial School. It must have been in 1964 when I was doing Standard Four. I remember there were several other teachers—e.g., Mistress Simane, Mistress Molefe, and Mr Mankga, the school principal—who, like Mma-Head, came from South Africa, but Mma-Head differed from all other teachers in that she taught only in English.

I found it difficult to understand Mma-Head. Maybe it was because she seemed to me to be an unstable character. I will never forget the incident when she came to class one rainy day, wearing a baby shawl *e na le makaka a ngwana* ("smeared in a certain kind of way").[14] We were puzzled by this incident and some of our fellow pupils even took advantage of the situation to become rowdy as they perceived the teacher to be abnormal.

Another incident which made me wonder whether Mma-Head was normal was when she would fiercely beat her table and shout, "Gobopamang! Gobopamang! Go outside!"[15] And Gobopamang would leave the classroom. Gobopamang was an extremely naughty girl. She knew that Mma-Head did not understand Setswana, yet she would respond to her in Setswana. Mma-Head would beat Gobopamang or throw her out of the class for her mischief and she

[11] Kebabope Bikani's interview follows.
[12] Butcheries, cafés, and any eating place used to be referred to as *hotel* in the Ga-MmaNgwato area.
[13] Kebabope herself did not remember this incident.
[14] Kebabope explained that the baby shawl was actually smeared with some baby excrement.
[15] Gobopamang Mapulelo's interview follows.

would shout from outside, "*Wena Mma-Head o sebono*!"[16] ("Mrs Head, you asshole!"[17]), and the class would roar with laughter.

I know Bessie Head is a writer but I have never read any of her books.

Mma-Head Encouraged Me to Escape an Arranged Marriage

Gobopamang Mapulelo (née Gwapela) is a hawker-trader in Mochudi. She was interviewed on 3 March 2008 in Mochudi.

I think Mma-Head taught me at Tshekedi Memorial School in 1963[18] when I was doing Standard Four. She took me again at Standard Six. She was a good teacher and a loving person. She used to find time to sit down with her pupils, counseling them on life's issues. You may remember that then it was not uncommon for teachers to just say to their pupils, "*Le ta a nna le ipona bomma*" (roughly translates as "I'm least bothered by you girls") and then leave the students when they desperately needed help. But Mma-Head was different. She was our friend. Mma-Head and I befriended each other at Tshekedi despite the fact that I used to be an extremely naughty girl. I mean naughty to both students and teachers. Maybe it was on account of my character that she became close to me so that she could mould me into a better person. She used to tell me that I was a future parent and that I would in future need to be a role model for my own children.

Back then we did not even know where Mma-Head had come from. We only knew she was a white person. To us she was white because she only communicated in English. It was only later that we learnt that she had fled to Bechuanaland from South Africa. Perhaps we even learnt about her place of origin purely by accident. It could happen that she would beat some mischievous pupil who in his stubbornness would remark: "*S'oo se se tang se tshabile se tswa ko ga sone se*!" ("This refugee thing which came here running from its place of origin!").

Another factor which confirmed for us that Mma-Head was white was her smoking habit. As you know, our fathers used to smoke Horseshoe tobacco which they would roll into the traditional *zolo* using brown paper. But Mma-Head smoked cigarettes and when we compared cigarette smoking with our fathers' smoking of the Horseshoe tobacco, we became convinced that indeed Mma-Head was white because a cigarette comes already rolled. And back then a cigarette could not be smoked by just anybody.

The bit I remember most about Mma-Head is that she actually helped and encouraged me to escape an arranged marriage. When I was in Standard Four and ready to write my final tests, my parents instructed me to drive the family's goats to the lands at Segakwaneng. The ulterior motive behind my parents' instruction was that there was some man who wished to marry me. So they thought that since summer time was also ploughing time, they should start training me on how to plough in preparation for my future life as a married woman. This meant that school attendance had to be terminated. What pained me most was that I was an extremely intelligent pupil and yet here I was—driving goats on a long distance from Serowe to Segakwaneng instead of writing my Standard Four tests. I remember crying all the way because I liked and enjoyed going to school. I spent only one night at the lands and on the second day, when I was supposed to drive the goats out for their grazing, I decided to secretly leave for Serowe.

Since I was one of Mma-Head's favourite pupils, I went straight to Tshekedi Memorial School upon reaching Serowe and I told her my story. Hearing my story, she cried with me and

---

[16] Kebabope was extremely uncomfortable when revealing this information. Also, although Gobopamang admitted that she did at times insult Bessie Head in class, she skillfully dodged providing any illustrations of such insults, preferring instead to blame her conduct of those years on childishness.

[17] I acknowledge my nineteen-year-old son, Omang Tumedi, for providing this translation.

[18] Bessie Head actually came to Botswana in 1964. See *Bessie Head. Thunder Behind Her Ears: Her Life and Writing* (1995, Johannesburg: Wits UP, 2007).

eventually took me to the principal. I think Mr Machologwe was the principal then. The principal showed great understanding of my circumstances so I was allowed to write at Mma-Head's place the tests I had missed, and I did so well in those tests that it was generally rumoured that Mma-Head had shown me the answers when in fact there was no cheating whatsoever. I was simply intelligent, so I beat all my classmates and came first in class despite the circumstances I had found myself in.

Then I found time to sit down with Mma-Head and further explain my circumstances. I told her how much I hated the marriage that was being arranged by my parents, my mother in particular, and she encouraged me to reject this marriage. She told me that it was alright for my fiancé to marry me but she made me imagine a situation where an accident could happen to my miner-fiancé, if for instance he could lose all of his limbs, what would life be like for me and the many children I was likely to have with the man. I would simply be a helpless housewife who had dropped out of school.

And the fiancé himself, I did not even love him. I did not want him. Mine had been a situation whereby the man's parents would just come to my parents and tell them they wished to take their child to become their daughter-in-law. I used to pray to God to take pity on me concerning this marriage. As fate would have it, one day on the eve of a formal introduction ceremony, my husband-to-be fatally stabbed another man with whom he had fought over a girlfriend. So on the appointed day, instead of a formal introduction of the future bride and groom, there was the formal announcement of the fatal incident. The announcement enraged my father as he had never wholeheartedly agreed to this marriage arrangement. So I was now freed from the marriage but I later failed my Standard Six because I had become increasingly playful and less serious with my school work.

But one thing I must reiterate is that I was impossibly naughty. In my mischievous mood I would even insult Mma-Head. But that was just childhood behaviour. More than anything else I cherished situations where I had to be involved in a fight. I would enjoy beating the boys because they had a tendency to oppress us girls, but I was so strong and tough that everybody knew it for a fact that nobody played with me. I don't even know how it came about that I could share a bed with a man. I used to beat up all the boys who attempted to propose love to me. I would punish them just for that.

I have never read any of Mma-Head's books. I've never come across them. But I heard that she was a writer.

Mma-Head Was Married to a Man from the Thogo Family

Mma-Jennings Masabazi is a retired primary school teacher who taught with Bessie Head at Tshekedi Memorial School in Serowe. She was interviewed in June 2007 in Serowe.

I came to know Mma-Head when she came from Johane[19] to live in Serowe. She was married to a man from the Thogo[20] family. We taught together at Tshekedi Memorial School for a couple of years before she went to Swaneng Primary School. At Tshekedi she taught the higher classes where she could communicate with the pupils in English.

Mma-Head was a friend of mine. We used to take packed lunch to school. She liked mayonnaise very much. She would apply it on her food. She used to call me Jennie for Jennings,

[19] Johane is the Setswana name for Johannesburg. At that time, Johane also stood for South Africa, but more than anything else, when referred to as Makgoeng (the place of white people) it was regarded as mine labour migrants' destination and a centre of cosmopolitan developments. As Gauteng (the place of gold) it was a symbol of wealth.

[20] Both Masabazi and Joyce Mello insisted that the original name for the Head family from which Harold (Bessie Head's husband) came was the Setswana version Thogo/Tlhogo (the Setswana word for Head). It is up to future researchers to prove these informants right or wrong.

because I was named Mma-Jennings[21] after Reverend Jennings. Mma-Head's husband even came here for some time. I remember seeing him with his child, Bambie, in his arms. I don't know whether eventually he went to Rhodesia or to America.

[21] Eilersen also refers to Mma-Jennings, a teacher who lived next door to Bessie Head at the Sebina ward in Serowe (see *Thunder Behind Her Ears* 78).

Homage to Bessie

Motsomi Marobela[1]

Like other Batswana, I did not know much about Bessie Head until late. It was after her death that I began to know more about this prolific writer who walked unnoticed in our daily lives. My empathy and keen interest in her works was provoked by a review of her life in one South African newspaper. I was greatly touched to learn about the torment that her mother went through and the subsequent troubled birth and upbringing of Bessie. This opened my eyes to the realisation of just how this woman suffered the injustice of apartheid ideology. It was the barbarism of this capitalist racial segregation that ultimately drove Bessie to seek refugee status in Botswana's Serowe, a village she loved so much as she was to describe it in her book *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*.

Despite her early brutalisation, Bessie of Serowe remained an ordinary person. It was in her mode of transport that her simplicity was expressed. Twice a week or so we would meet Bessie on what was then generally referred to as a "woman's bike". At the time it was a unique bicycle because there was no frame connecting the saddle with handles. Also peculiar was the front carrier, where Bessie put her goodies. This was before the introduction of taxis and mad rushing kombis in Serowe, so for a person staying five or more kilometres from the shopping mall or the market at that time, a bike was an indispensable instrument of journeying, as were cattle sledges, donkeys carts, and the Serowe brigade horse cart, which was a common feature of Serowe, with its milk and *madila* sales around the village.

This picture was familiar for many students who went to the only secondary school of village, Patrick van Ransburg's Swaneng Hill School. Occasionally from a tiring but fulfilling education blended with production, we would meet Bessie in the afternoon coming from the village market. We would greet her from our bumpy Humbers[2] with "Dumela Mma Head". I adopted my Humber from my father. I guess he must have bought it when he worked the mines in South Africa. He was one of the vanquished and exploited African men who had to be sacrificed for a hut tax imposed by the colonists acting with Cecil Rhodes to fuel the burgeoning mining industry down south. The quest and rush for gold came dripping with the sweat and blood of an African child (if I may borrow from Marx).

I met Bessie when one day her son Howard invited me and other friends to their house. Howard was close to buddies like Alfred Diblind Lefaphane and Sebue Dudu Sosome and others who were a class ahead of me. Bessie was engrossed in her typewriter facing west to the sunset in what I believe was a small verandah, only chipping in to ask her son, Howard, "When are you going to study?" Howard would simply answer, "Later mum I am still with friends". Even then I had no clue that she was Botswana's best writer. We left the house soon for a joint or *nxozi*, which was a common remedy for the stresses that the process of acquiring education caused young people.

But it was a misty-drizzling Saturday morning at the post office where I met and spoke with Bessie. She had her usual basket in her hand, which I assumed was her groceries. She came towards me, and I tried to take another direction, but she said, "Come here." I obliged and she greeted me. "Don't you want a dog?" she asked softly. I said I did, and from the basket, which was covered with soft cloth, she brought a dog and said, "You can have it." And she

[1] Motsomi Ndala Marobela was born in Serowe, where he grew and met Bessie. He currently lectures in Behaviour in Organisations at the University of Botswana. Though he teaches management he takes a keen interest in diverse fields such as sociology, political science, philosophy, and literature.

[2] A Humber was a bicycle.

explained, “It strayed into my house and I don’t know its owner.” I was glad to have the dog, which later died despite my mothers attempt to cover it with sacks and give it milk.

Recently when the issue of Basarwa’s forced relocation from their ancestral lands in the Central Kgalagadi Game Reserve surfaced, I read Bessie again. Her book *Maru* is one of the golden pieces she has left for this country. It is a scathing attack on racism and prejudice against Basarwa. I wish government officials would read it and deeply consider why they have committed such a horrible act. If only they had understood the life of Bessie and heeded her warning. Botswana’s liberal democracy would not have gone to the dogs so cheaply. I would have liked to go to Bessie’s village, the village of the rain wind, before I scripted this but I failed. I would have loved to visit Bessie and be touched by that ordinariness of her tombstone. Above all I would have loved to get inspiration from that choreography lacing her stone: “Selflessness, Love and Courage”. That, I feel, is what Bessie stood for.

PIETERMARITZBURG SYMPOSIUM
12 JULY 2007

Celebrating the Life and Writing of Bessie Head (1937–1986)

Introduction

Bessie Head was born in Pietermaritzburg on 6 July 1937, and so it seems fitting that, seventy years on, she should be celebrated there by a one-day conference hosted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal's new Centre for African Literary Studies (CALS), and by the unveiling of a plaque at the city's newly-named Bessie Head Library. These civic and scholarly celebrations were organized in tandem with those at the University of Botswana in Gaborone, and at the Khama III Memorial Museum in Serowe.

The conference was opened by Mbulelo Mzamane, Director of CALS, whose friendship with Bessie Head began when he was a teaching assistant at the University of Botswana in Gaborone. Two other speakers focused on Bessie the person. Patrick van Rensburg, the founder of the Swaneng School in Serowe near to which Bessie Head built her home "Rain Clouds" after leaving South Africa, remembered their sometimes tempestuous neighbour, with her young son and her love of gardening. Gillian Stead Eilersen, who never met Bessie Head, spoke about the complexities of tracking down Bessie's maternal family during her research for the biography.

Veronica Samuel, who was the granddaughter of Nellie Heathcote, Bessie Head's foster mother, and who also lived in the household in East Street, Pietermaritzburg, as a child, was persuaded to speak during discussion time. She remembers her cousin as an admired older friend, one who was kind but inclined to be solitary, serious, and book-loving. Her memories led to a lively exchange, after which the conference delegates went into the centre of Pietermaritzburg where a magnificent new wing has been added to the building that houses the old Natal Society Library. This wing is a children's library, richly supplied with books and furnished with state-of-the-art equipment (including a Bessie Head Lecture Theatre), and which, on the day of the conference visit, was filled with contented children absorbed in books and quite oblivious to the visitors being conducted around by the Librarian, John Morrison. He spoke with passionate conviction about the Carnegie-funded project of making the Library a welcoming book centre, not just for the city but for the region. The plaque naming the Bessie Head Library was unveiled by the Mayor of Pietermaritzburg, Mrs Z. Hlatshwayo. After admiring the inscription of Bessie Head's words, "Look! Don't you see? We are the people who have the strength to build a new world!" (chosen by Bessie Head's life-long friend, Randolph Vigne), on the outside of a Library wall, the delegates lunched at the Library's restaurant. This too was arranged and hosted by Rob Haswell, who is the Msunduzi Municipal Manager.

Papers continued during the afternoon sessions. As the conference was a small one, discussion could often be wide-ranging, and for this reason it was particularly valuable that delegates had come from far and wide: from various cities in South Africa, a large contingent from Gaborone and Serowe, as well as those from even further afield—Denmark, Germany, India, and the United States.

The day closed with the launch of a new edition of Gillian Stead Eilersen's biography, *Thunder Behind Her Ears*, which has been brought out by Wits University Press. Besides updated information, this handsome volume has a several recently discovered photographs in it. A photographic display of places in Pietermaritzburg with a Bessie Head connection was arranged in CALS by Ashnee Peters and made possible by the generosity of the photographer, Tom Holzinger, and by the Khama III Memorial Museum. Some photographs taken by Ann

Langwadt during this memorable day of celebration are posted on the Bessie Head website <www.bessehead.org>.

M. J. Daymond, Conference Organiser[1]

[1] M. J. Daymond is Professor Emeritus and Fellow at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. She has edited several volumes of fiction by African writers and has published and edited many critical, feminist studies of writers.

Memories of Bessie Head and her Admiration for Sol T. Plaatje

Mbulelo Vizikhungo Mzamane

Bessie Head and Doris Lessing: Reading and Influence in Fiction and Autobiography

Cheryl-Ann Michael[1]

The autobiographical writings of both Bessie Head and Doris Lessing are characterized by an enjoyment of eclectic reading, and by their recognition of the influence of this eclecticism upon their development as writers. Yet some of their fictional works appear to suggest a distrust and rejection of Eurocentric writing in favour of a focus on African realities. How do we account for this seeming disparity? A closer reading of the relationship between their fictional and non-fictional writing reveals ambivalences and negotiations at a remove from simple opposition.

In Bessie Head's early work of fiction, *The Cardinals*, the variously named protagonist (Miriam, Charlotte, Mouse), abandoned at birth, finds solace and new worlds in books. With the help of the old letter-writer, she learns to read a picture book, *The Adventures of Fuzzy Wuzzy Bear*:

> The picture showed a gaily attired bear with the sea in the background. Suddenly the words "sea" and "holiday" leapt out at her and associated themselves with the picture. […] They read the whole book in this way and she identified words he read out with the objects in the picture. Some of the objects, like roller-skates, were new to her and the old man had a hard time trying to explain what a roller-skate was. At last he said: "Never mind, little one. I will try to find a roller-skate when next I go to town. It is better if you can see it and know how to use it." […] In less than a week she could read the simple captions beneath the pictures and understand the meaning of the words. The adventures of the bear became real too and she spent many hours sharing his experiences with him. When he ate an ice-cream, it was as though the melting cream dripped over her fingers. When he swam in the sea, she felt the wave rising to swamp her. (7–8)

Making connections between pictures and words is significant in the process of her learning to read. When an object such as a roller-skate is new to her, the old man promises to try to find one: "It is better if you can see it and know how to use it." The assumption here appears to be that the concrete object must be seen and known before it might be understood imaginatively. It should be noted, though, that he resorts to this promise to find a pair of roller-skates in frustration at being unable to explain the object satisfactorily. We are not told whether the old man does find roller-skates for the girl, but instead we learn of her rapid progress in reading; of her immersion in the fictional world of the story and identification with the bear's experiences. Presumably, some of these fictional "experiences" which "became real" and which she "shar[ed]" with the bear, may well have been new to her too. In the description of the process of learning to read, the weight of significance shifts from the linking of picture to word to the illumination provided by the words themselves. It is then that the imaginative identification achieves the intensity of the "real". In this, Head's early work, the lack of a personal knowledge of an object or experience is not an insuperable stumbling block to a readerly empathy.

Another reading experience, described in almost epiphanic terms, is the girl's discovery of Darwin, through a foster parent who tries to introduce her to Communist ideas:

> Communism itself had no meaning for her but when he encouraged her to read the protest literature he had accumulated, she read avidly because of the excitement words

[1] Cheryl-Ann Michael is senior lecturer in English at the University of the Western Cape. Her research interests include autobiography and biography, nineteenth-century literature, children's literature, and aesthetics.

> and books had always stimulated in her. One day, among all the pamphlets and protests, she found Darwin's theory of evolution and after that, in spite of the man's protests, read nothing else. The precise and logical arguments and the quiet, ecstatic beauty of the language never failed to awaken a delirious response in her. She absorbed it word for word for six months. (11)

Clearly, for her foster-parent, Darwin was not "relevant" to the struggle for justice in South Africa. At this point in the story, the girl's response to Darwin's language appears to be purely, and defiantly, aesthetic. Her "delirious response" is suggestive of a desire to escape, rather than to find points of connectivity with her world. Towards the end of the narrative, we return indirectly to her reading of Darwin. Johnny, who renames her "Mouse", is bent on drawing out and shaping the intriguing possibilities he glimpses in her, and orders her first to draw a picture of the city, and then to describe in writing what she has seen with an artist's eye:

> The town below is a strung-out, pendulous expression of power petrified into irregular concrete and steel structures. Its mass, form and plan are the result of a conscious, working harmony in the minds of many men. The interweaving patterns of its streets, roads and alleys are blood vessels and gigantic arteries conducting minute particles of life to and fro. Its purpose is to sustain human life. Its destiny is perpetual expansion. (135)

Mouse's description disrupts as it acknowledges the attempts of an apartheid state to control the lives of its people. "Power petrified" into seeming order is "pendulous" in its "expression"—the alliterative force of the sentence falling upon the explosive potential of "pendulous", rather than upon the coercion of "petrified". The sense of threat is further diminished by the "concrete and steel structures" whose "irregular[ity]" tilts them away from the intended grid-like ordering towards the pregnant possibilities of "perpetual expansion". That this expansion is irresistibly organic is emphasised in the metaphors of the patterns of "streets, roads and alleys" as "blood vessels and arteries". As Desiree Lewis has argued,

> In relation to the context in which Mouse has grown up, Darwin's theory clearly has a distinctive revolutionary force; countering long-established stories of origins and society, Darwin questions laws fixed by uncritical belief. But his texts seem to offer Mouse more than a straightforward political message. The allusions to her exalted response imply that she is able to confer impersonal scholarly texts with a subjective intensity. Although she depends on others' texts to discover a form of self-knowledge, it is suggested that she can transform these "repeated" texts. (112)

This subtle evocation of Darwin's language and ideas is resonant beyond its fitness for exposing the outrageousness of apartheid planning. Gillian Beer observes that "Darwinian theory will not resolve to a single significance nor yield a single pattern. It is essentially multivalent. […] It has no place for stasis. It debars return. It does not countenance absolute replication (cloning is its contrary), pure invariant cycle, or constant equilibrium" (9, 11). In her letters, Head refers to her own reading of Darwin as significant: "something like Darwin said, that all beautiful things ought to progress according to general laws. I am misquoting, but there's something in general laws that is quiet and steady" (*Gesture* 154). General laws allow for variation; for an ordering elastic, rather than rigid.

Mouse's ambivalence towards Johnny's near-violent will to remake her finds expression here in her language of organic expansion beyond the confines of submission. Mouse's finding of forms of self-expression owes something to Johnny's force of mind, but embedded in her creative offerings is a quiet recognition of her own imaginative capaciousness. To note these resonances is to question the readings of critics such as Craig Mackenzie who finds Mouse disturbing:

> Like Margaret in *Maru*, Mouse is passive and inert—a tendency she shares with some of Head's other female protagonists and that feminist critics have found disturbing. Here we have character as palimpsest, a slate-like surface on which assertive male characters inscribe their wills without, however, ultimately being able to penetrate

> (Mouse remains both passive and chaste until the very end). […] In defence of her passivity it can be said that her identity and sense of self are in a constant state of evolution—a state common to most young adults perhaps, but one that is especially acute in the case of a person utterly bereft of the orientating matrices of a family history. […] Nonetheless, that she is never able to evolve beyond being the hapless victim of another's manipulations makes her an ambiguous heroic figure. (21)

The imaginative possibilities opened up by Mouse's eclectic reading suggest that for Head, the experience and value of reading is more rich and textured than a simple correspondence of textual and lived "realities". Ambiguity, instead of signifying hesitation or withdrawal, might signal the productive tensions of multivalency.

It is intriguing therefore, that in her later novel *Maru*, written and set in Botswana, Margaret, the "Masarwa" child adopted by and named for the English missionary Margaret Cadmore, finds herself unable to understand the poetry of W.B. Yeats:

> There was nothing on earth that was not human, sensible, and beautiful that had not been fearlessly thrown into the mind of the pupil, from Plato to W.B. Yeats. It was W. B. Yeats who had made the pupil cry. She could not grasp him.
>
> "Damn it!" her educator had exclaimed, impatiently. You can't understand him because you can't hear and see the lake water lapping," and out whipped the sketch pad. Yeats had to be there too even though he spoke of a land other than her own arid surroundings. (20)

In the context of the novel the invited reading appears to be one which requires an acknowledgement of the difficulties of imagining that which is outside one's experience. Margaret Cadmore's picture fails to bridge the imaginative gap; her projected frustration is evident in the impotent but insistent "Yeats had to be there too" in a sentence which focalizes the perspective of the young Margaret. Margaret's rebuttal "even though he spoke of a land other than her own arid surroundings" reads ambivalently as both a refusal of Cadmore's sense of her wilful failure, and a miserable consciousness of her own lack shadowed in "arid".

Is this about not being able to imagine a lake? Is the picture insufficient to stimulate this imaginative connection, or does it reinforce the emotional distance between the image and the reader? Johann Degenaar notes that since "the imagination involves all five senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching […] metaphor also remains close to the senses; that means close to nature. […] In stories, objects in nature and animals can become steps on the way to human awareness" (5). It is this appeal to some form of sensory recognition which enables metaphor to "transport" meaning, creating connection and similarity between different images and ideas. Is Yeats's poetry representative here of a kind of metaphorical language which appears to Margaret to shut down the possibilities of an imaginative connection by reflecting, through its hermetic self-referentiality, her own world as lack? Does Head mean, through the experience of her protagonist, to point to a colonial heritage of the imposition of ideas, and the erasure of indigenous perspectives and values? If we remember the careful exploration of the process of learning to read in *The Cardinals*, it seems unlikely that Head intends simply to suggest that the differences between the landscapes of Botswana and that of Yeats's imagined world refuse any potential for empathic connection.

In her non-fictional writing Head questions any simplistic definition of what it means to be an African writer: "What is an African writer? Too bad. […] B. Head is just B. Head now. See how grim you can get? Fighting like mad for your own integrity however worthless this may be to others" (*Gesture* 19). She discusses at length the influence of the works of writers such as Boris Pasternak and D.H. Lawrence upon her own work:

> the process of suffering creates something big. Pasternak grasped the stuff of which spiritual giants are made and what applies to him applies to every spiritual giant. He was talking about giants of the soul, not the petty torturers and how they would shape the future. He could afford to end the book … "To the two ageing friends sitting by the window it seemed this freedom of the spirit was there (already), that on that very

> evening the future had become tangible …They felt a peaceful joy for this holy city (Moscow), and for the whole land and for the survivors and their children…"
>
> That land [South Africa] is being made holy by all the tears of the black man which have dropped on to the soil. They made giants of ordinary people and one day, quite soon, the unfoldment will be reached. I make a parallel of it all in my own life because I can feel this process of unfoldment and growth. (*Gesture* 74–75)

> I learnt to look beyond all illusions and delusions to that which is real. There is nothing left now but a love which includes others as my own self. […] It is something deeper than brotherhood of man. It is the oneness of the soul with all living things, whether human or animal or vegetable. […]
>
> D.H. Lawrence achieved this vision. I did not understand what he was saying but when you reach it—this unity of soul with life, you say: "all things changed. The blossoms of the universe turned and looked another way." (*Gesture* 76)

These writers offer the "parallels" and the possibility of alternative "visions", rather than models to be copied. Head's comparisons of her own works with that of canonical western writers yield a robust sense of the appropriateness of their differences. There is no dread of what Bloom has termed "the anxiety of influence":

> You can't as a writer in Africa go in for such delicate, detailed descriptions of landscapes the way English writers do. The land is too vast and monumental. The power of the carvings of ancient Egyptian civilization comes nearest to an expression of Africa. (*Gesture* 70)

> I don't think I'll manage to create "Heathcliff," "Rochester" or the gentle atmosphere of Jane Austen's drawing room books. The men of my books have been too victimised by me. […] People feel some impact, they are deliberately majestic because, so often the rhythm and flow of my feeling needs a masculine expression. I can't seem to make it feminine because the power of my own feelings is like a permanent sledgehammer blow. (*Gesture* 151)

How then to read Margaret's "inability" to understand the poetry of Yeats? Do we read it as a form of resistance on the part of Margaret to Cadmore's insistence that she learns to appreciate in her terms:

> Her mind and heart were composed of a little bit of everything she had absorbed from Margaret Cadmore. It was hardly African or anything but something new and universal, a type of personality that would be unable to fit into a definition as narrow as tribe or race or nation. (16)

> No one by shouting, screaming or spitting could un-Bushman her. There was only one thing left, to find out how Bushmen were going to stay alive on the earth because no one wanted them to except perhaps as the slaves and downtrodden dogs of the Batswana. That half she would be left alone to solve. Margaret Cadmore succeeded in only half her experiment—that if an environment provided the stimulus and amenities of learning, any human mind could absorb knowledge, to the limit of its capacities. (18)

The recognition that she cannot be "un-Bushman[ned]", that Margaret Cadmore's teaching does not provide the answers to her dilemmas, might have created in Margaret an anxiety about linking read experience with her inescapable reality. Is the "problem" of Yeats's poetry not so much a failure or an inability of the imagination, but a fear of the possibility of such a leap creating more distance between the self and context? That she expresses her dilemma not in the form of a retreat to a trenchant reiteration of any simple idea of "Africanness" suggests her positive acknowledgement that she represented "something new" that eluded "narrow" definitions. Nonetheless, the psychic cost of this "experiment" troubles its utopian potential in the shadowing of "the limit" of "the human mind's capacities". We are reminded painfully of

Sartre's phrasing of Fanon's insight in *The Wretched of the Earth* into the "nervous condition" of the native.

It is interesting, at this point, to turn to the autobiographical source of this fictionalised "problem" of reading. According to Eilersen, at St. Monica's Home, the mission school to which the young Bessie Emery was sent once she was removed from the care of her foster-mother,

> "Bessie was a bookworm, that's what she was." One of the first results of this experience [being informed rather callously that she was adopted] was to make Bessie choose, blindly now, later consciously, "to live with books". And this is one thing St Monica's provided for her. She "ran through the whole library" and afterwards fed on Plato and anything she asked for out of private libraries because she "had become 'Teacher's Pet' and remained persistently top of the class." (26)
>
> Bessie later described her teacher's [Margaret Cadmore] efforts to get her to understand the poet W. B. Yeats: "He [Yeats] used to totally defeat me. One day I told her I could not understand him and she flew off the beam and grabbed the book from my hands: 'You're reading him the wrong way. Now hear the lake water lapping.'" She also encouraged Bessie to sketch. "She would stand behind me and shrill: 'Life isn't like that, harsh outlines. It's soft round curves. Caress it with your eyes.' I translated this advice to my writing." (30)

The autobiographical account is more ambiguous than its later fictionalised rendering as the experience of Margaret in *Maru*. The past tense in "used to totally defeat me" more than hints at the successful throwing off of "defeat". The real Margaret Cadmore's violent impatience is here recounted with, perhaps, an admiring and even affectionate allowance for the eccentricities of a teacher ("she flew off the beam") who recognised and fostered Bessie Emery's talents. In this account, there is no description of the pupil reduced to tears. Sketching is encouraged; it is not the instrument through which her failure is embarrassingly reinforced. The confident assertion "I translated this advice to my writing" also shifts the emphasis of this anecdote from inability to achievement. We are not offered any explanation of what it was about Yeats's poetry that "used to totally defeat me". Certainly, the distinction between the landscape of Margaret's Botswana, and that of Head's Natal does not allow for a similarity of argument in this regard. As Head herself observed of her own reading experience, "I enjoyed the description of the English country-side very much. In fact I spent part of my childhood in an English mission orphanage in Natal, read all things English so England as a country is familiar to me as a mental picture" (*Gesture* 70). How might we read Head's own difficulties with Yeats's poetry, and her later fictional transformation of this experience into that of her "Masarwa" protagonist in *Maru*?

The "lake water lapping" suggests that the poem in question might be "The Lake Isle of Innisfree". The speaker expresses a longing for retreat to the seclusion of an island on a lake, far from the invasive demands of a city and its people: "alone in the bee-loud glade" he will "have some peace" (4, 5). The "lake water lapping" becomes a strong metaphor of the necessity of seclusion for poetic genius. To an abandoned child, however, whose claim on "family" and people was at best precarious, the choice of seclusion might be incomprehensible and terrifying in its Romantic implications of a writer's isolation. To refuse to hear the "lake water lapping" might be to ward off, not the pleasures of a writerly solitude, but a nightmare that haunts too closely the surface of a lived reality. The homely image of a hut on an island, meant as the obverse of the loud emptiness of the everyday life of a city, might then take on the quality of Freud's notion of the uncanny, the *unheimlich* or unhomely. The recurring presence of "the island" in South African literature is not unrelated here.

The need for her teacher's approval and affection, the special status as "Teacher's Pet", takes on a more desperate shade if read in this light. The repression or sublimation of

resentment at the real Margaret Cadmore becomes vital, as does the need for glossing over the "difficulties" of empathy in a leap of effective "translation". It is possible to read the transformation of autobiographical experience as a form of containment of the instability which threatens Head's anecdotal narrative of her own development. Margaret's inability to read Yeats's imagined landscape is concretised and given explanatory weight in a striking difference between the "real" landscapes of the poet and the reader. The psychic terrors of the symbolic meaning of Yeats's island might be evaded through the device of a lack of correspondence. Yet at the same time, Head is able to explore, through the character of Margaret, the turning away from Yeats's metaphors of a psychic landscape of solitude towards a desire for human connection which is itself marked by instability. The turn to creating pictures to express what she, Margaret, cannot articulate might be read in these terms. The inflation of individual "Masarwa" people and their world into visual symbols of dignity, threat, and promise, may offer here the comfort of direct connection, a concentration and focus on the disregarded and invisible (*Maru* 107).

Head's need for approval and the accompanying anger at abandonment could find expression in Margaret's ambivalent response to Margaret Cadmore's attempt to shape her thinking. In the novel, the relationship between Cadmore and Margaret is determined by their roles as coloniser and colonial "experiment". That the relationship might exceed these historically determined roles is posed ambivalently, and simultaneously shut down by this context:

> The old white-haired lady was retiring to England. […] The old plump lady pretended to cry, dabbing at dry eyes with a dry handkerchief. […] (19)

> A month later the young girl received a curious post-card from England. The ink was smudged in a number of places, as though the postcard had been posted during pouring rain, or the writer of the postcard had been crying profusely. It said, simply: "I had to do it for the sake of your people. I did not want to leave you behind. Margaret Cadmore." (21)

The pretence of grief paints a hard picture of the old lady. The "curious" postcard implies something of an emotional distance with which Margaret regards the possible signs of real grief. Her surmise, "as though the postcard had been posted during pouring rain", suggests a careful guarding of her feelings, as if from the pain of repeated disappointment. The possibility that the writer might have been crying, relegated as it is to the latter half of the sentence, seems to bear this out. The sentence, however, ends on "profusely", a troubling excess. Cadmore's words themselves, with their stress on sacrifice, reassert the distance of "behind". Head's own patterns of behaviour with friends, evident in her letters, almost inevitably led from intense intimacy to hostile rejection fuelled by a sense of betrayal. That these patterns find their source in early experience is scarcely to be denied. Her deeply felt expressions of the lasting damage of the colonial encounter shape both her fictional and non-fictional writings. This sense of the over-determining stamp of colonial histories leads, in part, to Head's exploration of Hindu concepts of reincarnation. Reincarnation enables the imagining of relationships in spaces and terms which elude the constraints of colonial legacies. Connections between souls which lie beyond the grasp of linear time figure as imaginaries of hope across Head's writings. It is beyond the scope of the present essay to offer a detailed reading of the function of reincarnation in Head's writings. Desiree Lewis' *Living on a Horizon* provides a full and rich discussion of this influence.

Questions of how one might belong to people and places, of the dilemmas of exile and isolation, also characterize the works of another African writer, Doris Lessing. In the autobiographical *Going Home*, Lessing expresses her own ambivalent desire for a sense of belonging in Africa:

> This was my air, my landscape, and above all, my sun.

> Africa belongs to the Africans; the sooner they take it back the better. But—a country also belongs to those who feel at home in it. Perhaps it may be that the love of Africa the country will be strong enough to link people who hate each other now. Perhaps. (12)

Here we have an expression of the conflict between desire and conviction. The hesitant "but" and repetitive "perhaps" rupture the confidence of the first sentence, making it appear a wish, a desire, rather than an assertion. A similar ambivalence pervades the short story "The Old Chief Mshlanga". The protagonist is

> a small girl whose eyes were sightless for anything but a pale willowed river, a pale gleaming castle—a small girl singing: 'Out flew the web and floated wide, the mirror cracked from side to side…' […] the Northern witch, bred of the cold Northern forests, would stand before her among the mielie fields, and it was the mielie fields that faded and fled, leaving her among the gnarled roots of an oak, snow falling thick and soft and white, the woodcutter's fire glowing red welcome through crowding tree trunks. (13)

An encounter with the old chief shatters this fictive erasure of the African landscape, as she learns that her father's farm is land appropriated from the chief:

> slowly that other landscape in my mind faded, and my feet struck directly on the African soil, and I saw the shapes of the tree and hill clearly, and the black people moved back, as it were, out of my life: it was as if I stood aside to watch a slow intimate dance of landscape and men, a very old dance, whose steps I could not learn.
>
> But I thought: this is my heritage too; I was bred here; it is my country as well as the black man's country; and there is plenty of room for all of us, without elbowing each other off the pavements and roads. (17)

This new "direct" connection with the African soil is achieved only through a rejection of the imagined landscapes of European fairytales. A history of "elbowing" each other in a fight for ownership leaves no room for some form of connection to be made between imagined and actual landscapes.

In the novel *Martha Quest*, the first in the *Children of Violence* sequence, Martha's reading of the classics of western literature is fuelled by her Utopian project of finding a means to harmony in Africa:

> her parents' bookcases were filled with the classics, Dickens and Scott and Thackeray and the rest […]. These she had read years before, and she now read them again, and with a feeling of being starved. One might equate the small black child with Oliver Twist—but what then? (35)

> She was thinking—for, since she had been formed by literature, she could think in no other way—that all this had been described in Dickens, Tolstoy, Hugo, Dostoevsky, and a dozen others. All that noble and terrific indignation had done nothing, achieved nothing, the shout of anger from the nineteenth century might as well have been silent—for here came the file of prisoners, handcuffed two by two, […]. (184)

> And as she read she asked herself, What has this got to do with me? Mostly, she rejected; what she accepted she took instinctively, for it rang true with some tuning fork or guide within her; and the measure was that experience (she thought of it as one, though it was the fusion of many, varying in intensity) which was the gift of her solitary childhood on the veld: that knowledge of something painful and ecstatic, something central and fixed, but flowing. It was a sense of movement, of separate things interacting and finally becoming one, but greater—it was this which was her lodestone, even her conscience; and so, when she put down this book, that author, it was with the simplicity of perfect certainty, like the certainties of ignorance: It isn't true. And so these authors, these authors, these philosophers who had fed and maintained (or so she understood) so many earlier generations, were discarded with the ease with which she had shed religion: they wouldn't do, or not for her. (220)

Her rejection of these writers is not because they are not African, but because the utopian promise of their work had long since failed in their own contexts, and appears now to hold out little possibility of hope for an African reader who read for models of redemptive transformation. To find "equations" between the African conditions and the worlds the classics sought to transform is to achieve "nothing", since the writers were not able, in her estimation, to move beyond expressions of "indignation". In her own context, she feels, indignation achieves nothing but a smug self-deceptive stasis. Reading backwards from this impasse, "these writers wouldn't do, not for her". The third person narrative voice, interspersed with, and almost drowned out by, the focalization of Martha's perspective, does manage a wry reminder of her limited ways of reading. This reminder, though, is in itself ambivalent, restraining itself with a simile, "like the certainties of ignorance". The Romantic "simplicity of perfect certainty" appears far more compelling in its pull towards something "greater". The over-tones of Shelley and Wordsworth are no doubt meant with ironic intent, but the seductive integrity of utopian dreaming remains overwhelming.

In the first volume of Lessing's autobiography, *Under My Skin*, we learn that the "astonishing variety and number of books" ordered from London "refin[ed] [her] knowledge of [her] fellow human beings" (88):

> I read, I read, I read. I was reading to save my life. […] I was reading poetry, chanting—silently as it were, under my breath—lines of Eliot, of Yeats, like mantra. I read Proust, who sustained me because his world was so utterly unlike anything around me. […] We are invited to observe the ever-repeated process—one of the long, slow, rhythms in society—how the rejected and despised rise, and how they in turn despise those who will supplant them. I could have used this exemplary story to cheer myself up about the apparently indestructible structures of "white supremacy" but I was not so intelligent. (399–400)

Reading for connections with African dilemmas occurs retrospectively. This celebration of reading draws attention to the "sustaining power" (in the sense of "saving a life"), of reading for difference.

We learn, too, in the same volume, how

> the family became characters in A.A. Milne, just as if we had never left England. My father was Eeyore, my brother Roo, my mother—what else—Kanga. I was the fat and bouncy Tigger. I remained Tigger until I left Rhodesia, for nothing would stop friends and comrades using it. Nicknames are potent ways of cutting people down to size. […] This personality was expected to be brash, jokey, clumsy, and always ready to be a good sport, that is, to laugh at herself, apologize, clown, confess inability. An extrovert. In that it was a protection for the person I really was, "Tigger" was an aspect of the Hostess. (89)

Although Lessing notes the playing at being in England invoked by the assumption of Milne's characters, the focus here is not the wilful blindness to African landscapes and contexts—the "play" does not seem to have affected Lessing's attachment to the land—but the not so subtle workings of social dramas. Role-playing here is not about the expansive potential of imagining; its purpose is the opposite—social restraint. Nicknames discipline, punish, "cut down". The pretence of "play" implicates the victim almost inescapably, in the making of an acceptable social persona. That this persona might have a double purpose, and serve as a form of protection for the "real" self, is at the very least ambivalent. The only safe form of protection seems to be exile, whose safety is itself ambiguous. Like Head then, Lessing turns to modes of perception in which linear historical time cannot figure as determinant. Her espousal of Sufi beliefs in the human potential for mental evolution allows for the transcendence of both the "racially" marked body, and the need to belong to a specific space.

In the works of both writers, what appears to be a distinction between the more open-ended, expansive form of autobiography, and the kinds of emotional or structural neatnesses that the

novel form invites, is troubled by the negotiations of ambivalent meanings across both genres. Questions of reading and influence cannot then be reduced to simple readings of the workings of ideology or inclination. The answers to these questions reflect instead an intriguing multivalency.

Works Cited

Beer, Gillian. *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1983.

Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1973.

Degenaar, Johan. "Imagination, Fiction, Myth." *Towards More Understanding: The Making and Sharing of Children's Literature in Southern Africa*. Ed. Isabel Cilliers. Cape Town: Juta, 1993. 1–12.

Eilersen, Gillian Stead. *Bessie Head. Thunder Behind Her Ears: Her Life and Writing*. Cape Town: David Philip. 1995.

Head, Bessie. *Maru*. London: Heinemann, 1971.

———. *The Cardinals*. Ed. M. J. Daymond. Cape Town: David Philip,1993.

———. *A Gesture of Belonging: Letters from Bessie Head 1965—1979*. Ed. Randolph Vigne. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1991.

Lessing, Doris. *Going Home*. London: Michael Joseph, 1957.

———. *Martha Quest*. London: Grafton, 1958.

———. "The Old Chief Mshlanga." *Collected African Stories, Vol.1*. London: Triad Grafton, 1986. 13–23.

———. *Under My Skin: Vol.1 of My Autobiography, to 1949*. London: Harper Collins, 1994.

Lewis, Desiree. *Living on a Horizon: Bessie Head and the Politics of Imagining*. New Jersey and Eritrea: Africa World Press, 2007.

MacKenzie, Craig. *Bessie Head*. New York: Twayne, 1999.

Yeats, William B. *Collected Poems*. Ed. Augustine Martin. London: Vintage, 1992.

"Everyone Had a Place in My World": Bessie Head's Utopia in *When Rain Clouds Gather*

Modhumita Roy[1]

In analyzing utopian fiction, Raymond Williams identifies four distinct strains: the paradise that exists elsewhere; the externally altered world—an alteration made possible by some unexpected natural event; the willed transformation—that is, a world changed by human agency and effort; and, lastly, the technological transformation wherein science intervenes to solve all earthly problems (196). This last category has been the purview of much energetic and imaginative science fiction in the past century while the first has resurfaced with deadly force in the imaginings of religious fanatics in various parts of the world. Though analytically separable, the forms of utopian fiction often overlap to produce visions of a future world where science and human agency are inseparable.

In looking at South African fiction in the 1960s and 1970s, one would be hard-pressed to find experiments with utopian fiction. In fact, apartheid fiction is full of dystopian narratives that capture with force and accuracy the unfolding horrors of a police state. As Lewis Nkosi and others have stressed, the fiction of apartheid felt its first duty to represent the reality of dystopia—leaving implicit/unspoken the desired future. In this paper, I argue that Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* is a lonely and notable exception to the fiction of apartheid. Critics have noted the parallels between Head's own life story and the narrative trajectory of *When Rain Clouds Gather*. The autobiographical echoes are undeniable. As is well known, Head had fled the legalized segregation and repression of apartheid South Africa in 1964, and so, mimicking Head's own departure from South Africa in search for a place to belong, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968) opens with Makhaya's exit from a nightmarish world of barbed wire, violence, and destruction into a settlement of people who have all gathered together to make a "new" world. The Golema Mmidi of the novel is based on the Botswana village where Head had settled. Unlike Makhaya, however, who finds a niche in his adopted village, Head's disenfranchisement continued in Botswana where she remained a stateless refugee for many years. But that was still in the future. Her first published novel reflects the hope and optimism she had harboured in her early years. Writing in "Preface to 'Witchcraft'", Head had already indicated her own, very personal description of a "new world" and the centrality of a tiny Botswana village in the conception of re-making the world:

> I took an obscure and almost unknown village in the Southern African bush and made it my own hallowed ground. Here, in the steadiness and peace of my own world, I could dream dreams a little ahead of the somewhat vicious clamor of revolution and the horrible stench of evil social systems. My work was always tentative because it was always so completely new; it created new worlds out of nothing; it battled with problems of food production in a tough semi-desert land; it brought together all kinds of people, […] everyone had a place in my world. (28)

My paper analyses the particular version of utopian fiction that Head is able to create—one which is precariously poised between the "vicious clamour of revolution" and the "the horrible stench of evil social systems". Among the most notable features of the novel is the making of a "feminist" hero—Makhaya—long before the feminist movement had articulated such a possibility. The novel locates itself in this ambivalent space, attempting to acknowledge the consequences of human evil as well as those of compassion and generosity. My point is not to

[1] Modhumita Roy was educated in India and the U.S. She is a member of the English Department at Tufts University in Boston, where she is currently the Director of the Women's Studies Programme. She writes on the literature and cultures of empire.

argue that the novel is a straightforward imagined utopia—a "primitive" place "out there" that exists as a counterpoint to the messiness of contemporary life and fulfills the yearnings for a "simpler" world. The novel is a complicated, somewhat compromised attempt at imagining cooperation as the life-blood of utopian living: utopia is place that humans labour to engender. Head's utopia, thus, deviates from the familiar formulations: Golema Mmidi is not heaven on earth, nor has it been brought into being through revolutionary change. It is not the futuristic world of science fiction, nor a world from which pain and suffering have been effectively eliminated. It is, as Head herself writes, only "a little ahead" of its time and "tentative". It is, in fact, a novel experiment in creating what might be seen as a contradiction in terms—a realist utopia.

Utopian fiction has had a long and complex history and it would not be possible to do justice to its history in the limited space of this article. However, it is important to provide a schematic summary of some of the variations of utopian fiction in order to situate Head's novel within it. Utopia, first and foremost is a work of *imaginative* fiction in which, unlike other such works, the central subject is "the good society". Utopia gestures towards a positive future, it oversteps the immediate reality to depict a condition whose desirability is beyond question. As the meaning of the word itself suggests, it is both nowhere (*outopia*) and somewhere good (*eutopia*). Utopia, therefore, simultaneously indicates its absence (no place) while marking the desire for its existence. Krishan Kumar defines utopia as "to live in a world that cannot be but where one fervently wishes to be: that is the real essence of Utopia" (1). Unlike Plato's *Republic,* which left out the mass of citizens who are not "guardians" (not to mention slaves on whose labour, after all, the "good life" would be secured), More's *Utopia* (1516), generally accepted as the inaugural text of the genre, encompassed all housekeepers and husbandsmen. *Utopia* is dedicated to a life of common labour and the homely pleasures and not, as in Plato's *Republic*, a selective communism of consumption. Here, unlike in the *Republic* which accepts a fundamental inequality of labour, work is not to be left to the private producers while rulers devote themselves to philosophy and politics. Equality is the central value of *Utopia*. There is, of course, a more flamboyant utopian tradition which takes it cue from the idea of Cockaygne—a place of hedonistic extravagance, exuberance and excess. Cokagyne turns upside down the notions of fastidious simplicity of More's communism. Cockaygne is the poor man's heaven—everything here is free and freely available: youth, abundant food, and promiscuous sex. One of the notable features of this version of utopia is the complete freedom from work. The familiar descendants of More's *Utopia* are to be found, most especially in the nineteenth century utopian socialists who proclaimed, "Let cheerfulness abound with industry", in the *Communist Manifesto* and perhaps more generally, in communism's central dictum of "to each according to his need, from each according to his ability". One encounters the same desire in the demand for "bread and roses", which insisted on the inseparability of life free from want and a life filled with beauty. But for all utopian experiments—fictional or otherwise—the question of labour, that is, who will have to work in order for the community to enjoy "the good life" has been one of the key issues. Though Head distanced herself from explicit political ideologies, *When Rain Clouds Gather* seems to combine the aspirations of socialism without adhering to its politics.

Critics have noted the utopian impulse of the novel though most have found it too romantic. Arthur Ravenscroft, for example, finds the novel "excessively romantic", its attempted solutions "rather elusive even mystical" (179). Similarly, Huma Ibrahim calls the novel "utopian nostalgia" and reads Head's intention as "a tendency to create a utopic and euphoric space, namely a small rural village" which is "a wondrously idyllic, almost utopian place" exemplifying an exile's nostalgia for "old Africa" (55). Head herself describes the village as "consisting of individuals who had fled there to escape the tragedies of life"(16). But even a cursory reading of the novel would contradict Ibrahim's conclusions. Golema Mmidi is a much more ambivalent space than "euphoria" would suggest. The title itself is indicative of this

ambivalence: *When Rain Clouds Gather*. The conditional "when" gestures towards possibilities without specifying what they are, and in the temporal dependence of the clause, "when" is open-ended, disallowing any easy or straightforward euphoria. We do not know what might happen when (and perhaps "if") rain clouds gather. The harrowing description of death at the novel's end, though outside the boundaries of the village, nonetheless is within the space of the novel and counters all impulses towards unqualified ("excessive") romanticism. Unlike much utopian fiction, especially in the contemporary moment, which are exercises in fantasy (and would fall within the rubric of "science fiction"), Head's novel is firmly anchored in the realist mode. It explores the modalities of what *can* be achieved through collective will and cooperative labour, here and now, rather than in some unspecified future time. Makhaya, after all, is not fleeing some hypothetical calamity or dystopia (as the Smales family do in Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*, or as Michael K does in J. M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*). Nor does he arrive at a futuristic world, altered beyond recognition. The novel's "now" is clearly delineated as a historical "present": Botswana's imminent independence from Britain tells us the year is 1964 which, of course, is also the year of Head's own flight from South Africa. In this delicate play between the actual and the possible, the real and the imagined, Head achieves what H. G. Wells called "domesticating the impossible hypothesis" (Kumar 25).

Kumar usefully reminds us "Utopia's value lies not in its relation to present practice but in its relation to a possible future. Its 'practical' use is to overstep the immediate reality to depict a condition whose clear desirability draws us on, like a magnet" (3). Fanciful and fabricated though these imagined worlds maybe, it should be remembered that all utopian documents are historically determined; that is, the form of the desired future is deeply influenced, even shaped, by the realities of the society in which they are imagined. It is not difficult to see that Head's ideal village is, indeed, a reaction to lived realities. The shadow of a brutal, racialised state—apartheid South Africa—is clearly the dystopia whose modular opposite is the "imagined community" of Golema Mmidi. Collectively, the "wayward lot of misfits" (*When Rain Clouds Gather* 17) that make up the core of the utopian community allows us to imagine—even see—a possible human alternative to South Africa, "that cold and loveless country" ("A Gentle People" 10) as Head once described it. By contrast, Golema Mmidi is imagined as outcome of composite desires, which each individual has contributed to realize; it is the place where racialism, sexism, the effects of poverty, and neglect *may* indeed come to an end—though nothing is guaranteed.

The little village stands as an anti-thesis to the logic of a segregationist state. Not only is there friendship and co-operation among races, the marriage of Gilbert and Maria stands as an audacious challenge to apartheid's Mixed Marriages Act—the law that, at least in one version of her own life story, had resulted in her mother being committed to an asylum: "I was born on the sixth of July, 1937, in the Pietermaritzburg Mental Hospital. The reason for my peculiar birthplace was that my mother was white, and she had acquired me from a black man. She was judged insane, and committed to the mental hospital while pregnant" (qtd. in Gardner 114). It is one of Head's achievements that the novel pointedly rejects such an outcome. No such cruel fate can exist in a village where strangers are welcomed and where foreigners are accepted as "sons". Gilbert, the white, middle-class British exile accepts the poor "as though they were his blood brothers" (18), and Dinorego without hesitation accepts both Gilbert and Makhaya: "Just as I take you [Makhaya] as my own son, so do I take Gilbert as my own son" (21). The very wording of Dinorego's acceptance of white and black, of foreigner and stranger, "I take you", is an audacious echo of the marriage vow "I take thee" and a deliberate challenge to the ideology of racial separation.

The novel opens with the yet-to-be named Makhaya fleeing South Africa to an ambivalent freedom. Makhaya, however, flees across national borders, not across time (as fantasy literature is apt to do). It is not the *imagined* nightmare of a dystopian present that propels him cross the

barbed wire fence. Indeed, the continuity and contiguity of the two worlds—the one he has left behind and the one towards which he is running—is emphasized from the outset. Though this place is distinguished from prison, the inside and outside of barbed wire fences is not easily separated. He escapes to "whatever illusion of freedom" lies on the other side of the barbed wire fence (7). The "little Barolong village swept right up to the border fence" we are told and the hut where Makhaya is hiding "touched the barbed-wire fencing" (7), thus making the escape—and the distinction between the two places—uneasy and ambivalent. Though he has fled from "a country where black men were called 'boy' and 'dog' and 'kaffir'" (16) to what he escapes remains unclear: "I *might* like it here" (16, emphasis added) Makhaya thinks before he falls asleep. His decision to follow the road north is similarly qualified: he hoped it would lead him somewhere (10). Although he feels he has come to the end of his journey, he has arrived not at a pastoral Eden but in a "landscape of dryness and bleakness" (11). It is "a vast expanse of sand and scrub" that invokes no poetic flight of fancy. The uncertain "perhaps" repeats itself in each of his reflections:

> *Perhaps* he confused it with his own loneliness. *Perhaps* it was those crazy little birds. *Perhaps* it was the way the earth adorned herself […]. Or *perhaps* he simply wanted a country to love and chose the first thing at hand. But whatever it was, he simply and silently decided that all this dryness and bleakness amounted to home and somehow he had come to the end of a journey. (16–17, my emphasis)

This ambivalence and uncertainty will characterize the rest of the narrative.

Fragile and tenuous though the distinction is between what is on either side of the barbed wire fence, it is one of great moment. The village is immediately contrasted to South Africa, "that terrible place", which "the good God don't like". The village, instead, is "God's country" (15). Within the first few pages of the novel, the specialness of the village is remarked upon by a number of people. The village is a "unique place" (16) and a "whole new astonishing world" (29). It is a place where miracles occur (34). As Makhaya stands with Gilbert, looking at the sparse landscape, Gilbert remarks, "This is Utopia, Mack" (31). If, for Gilbert, the specialness of Golema Mmidi has something to do with the possibilities it offers ("I have great dreams for it"), then to Makhaya, in the first instance, it allows a step into freedom: "I just want to step on free ground. […] I just want to feel free what it is like to live in a free country" (4). Makhaya, after all, is not only a "stateless person"; he has daily experienced "the terror of rape, murder and bloodshed in a city slum" which has "bred a horror of life" in him (93). It is not till the novel's end, and not till he has witnessed both the extra-ordinary deprivations that are part of life in the villages as well as the remarkable resilience of spirit that allowed them to forge ahead, that Makhaya comes to terms with his own yearnings for utopia. It is only then that he sees Golema Mmidi as an "enchanting world".

But it would be shortsighted to argue that Golema Mmidi is the answer *only* to South Africa's nightmarish reality. Head is keenly aware of the consequences of sedimented inequalities based on race, class, and gender. Her indignation and anger at corrupt politicians, avaricious chiefs, and degrading social arrangements also find their way into the novel. The "deadly chilling society" of "tribalist" Africa which "kept out everything new and strange" (96) is part of Head's withering critique. Head's novel makes a serious attempt at imagining human enterprise that is not vitiated by greed or by power. The communal philosophy of the village stands in striking contrast to the boundless consumption of "hereditary" chiefs, symbolized with telegrammatic precision in the image of Matenge's huge cream Chevrolet. Chief Sekoto who loved "fast cars, good food and pretty girls" (49), and whose lifestyle is underwritten by slave labour, is immediately contrasted to Golema Mmidi's experimental cattle cooperative which "belongs to the people and each member is to get a fair price" for their livestock (20). Though the novel includes the fallibility of humans, it nonetheless holds on to a fundamental

assumption that each person, man or woman, black or white, can transcend socially or politically imposed restrictive boundaries to make common cause.

Golema Mmidi is an exercise in imagining "a deep horizontal comradeship" in Benedict Anderson's memorable phrase (7). The village is not the "natural" outcome of biological descent; rather, it is the result of disparate elements coming together. We are told at the outset that it is "not a village in the usual meaning of being composed of large tribal or family groupings" (*When Rain Clouds Gather* 16). The village community directly challenges the stultifying rigidities of race and class, tradition and tribe, of political affiliation and national belonging. Everyone here is a stranger or a newcomer. The question of the indigene and therefore the question of first or original claim to land and to belonging are overturned; everyone belongs *precisely* because no one can claim belonging. The novel eschews the involuntary community of the "tribe" where social relations are fixed and reproduced through a grammar of naturalized obligations. Here, too, one can easily see Head's own desire for a belonging that is not determined by birth or by genealogy reflected in the novel. Again and again in the novel, Head enacts what, following Rob Nixon, we can term the "compensatory matrix of allegiances" that are based on voluntary acts of acceptance (123). In place of the filiation of nation, tribe or family, Head offers the possibility and recompense of affiliation "as the alternative sources of lineage and belonging" (Nixon 102).

A "village of commoners", Golema Mmidi is the desired alternative to the abysmal darkness of traditional hierarchies. The comradeship forged through meaningful acts of solidarity, exemplified in Appleby-Smith's quiet assertion "I will still stick my neck out for you" (57), is directly contrasted to the flamboyant but empty sloganeering of political parties with their easy mouthing of "workers of the world unite". It is not as though the novel (and especially Makhaya) repudiates politics altogether. What he (and the novel) seems to be against is a dogmatic ideology which is bankrupt and misleading, and whose purpose is to exploit. Though the narrative is deeply skeptical about organized political movements and has little faith in revolution as the utopian horizon, on being asked directly whether he will leave politics, Makhaya's answer is an unequivocal "no" (56). In direct contrast to the politicking of Joas Tsepe, the novel offers the sincerity of individual characters. The transformation of the individual is seen as the key to the programmatic transformation of the collective. Whether it is Gilbert whose oddly conservative gender politics need to be overhauled, or the villagers' collective prejudice against millet or maize, it takes *work*, the novel argues, to create an egalitarian communal life.

Set in rural Botswana, with its central preoccupation of land and agriculture, *When Rain Clouds Gather* brings to mind the popular *plaasroman* (the farm novels of South Africa). The dominant Afrikaans genre in the 1920s and 1930s, these novels, especially in the context of Afrikaner politics, were nostalgic and utopian in their ways. The pl*aasroman*, as critics have noted, reflected Afrikaner settler ideology, functioning to justify the fiction of "natural" ownership of land, obscuring thereby the contentious history of land appropriation and eviction of peoples. The rural farm, idyllic and pastoral, was of course a fantasy of racial homogeneity and of genealogical continuity. For many a *plaasroman,* "farms are places of freedom" (*Boyhood* 22). I have mentioned earlier the ways in which Head carefully counters the logic of filiation. Golema Mmidi is no pastoral refuge and no appeal is made for a separate/separatist cultural identity. The novel should be seen as a meticulous undoing of the tropes of the *plaasroman*: of birthright and belonging, of inherited claims of ownership of land, of the racially pure collectivity whose claims are secured by barbed wire and guns. The novel eschews the legitimizing trope of farm/land as place of "origin". Though land has to be fenced in Golema Mmidi, the fencing, in fact, turns the usual association of privatization on its head and is reproduced as a necessary component for better collective farming. Unlike, for example, Coetzee's third person memoir, *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life,* whose narrator claims

that "through the farm he is rooted in the past" (22), what the motley group in Golema Mmidi can claim is a shared "unbelonging". Instead of rootedness, what is emphasized is the *uprooting*, though the hope of rooting of both people and plants is everywhere present. Golema Mmidi, after all, is a place of strangers and none can claim a stable and historic connection to the place. Coetzee reminds us that the *plaasroman* held out the "transcendental justification for ownership of the land" (*White Writing* 106), where "inherited ownership of the farm […] becomes a sacred trust: to alienate the farm means to forsake the bones of ancestors" (*White Writing* 85). In Head's novel, by contrast, it is not the bones of ancestors but those of a child that have to be buried. The bones of Paulina's dead son are not symbolic of a sacred trust but the evidence of incalculable human tragedy. Suffering and death bestow no transcendental spiritual meaning. Instead they are incorporated into the difficult business of living and lend the impetus for overcoming the circumstances that lead to needless death. What is emphasized is not the past but the importance of the present and the desire to create possibilities for the future. The novel, as well, forces us to re-think the generic conventions of the pastoral form, replacing the usual romantic descriptions of nature with harrowing descriptions of drought and famine, dislocation and death. Head rarely reproduces the sentimental yearning for a vanished idyllic past that is a constitutive feature of pastoral romances. To be sure, there are moments of deep lyricism in the descriptions of the landscape, but these are invariably tempered by the pain and suffering of those who inhabit that space.

If the blood, sweat, and tears that went into making the farm fruitful was the legitimizer of (white) ownership in the *plaasroman*, then black labour had to be erased: "If the work of hands on a particular patch of earth, […] is what inscribes it as the property of its occupiers *by right*, then the hands of black serfs doing the work had better not be seen" (*White Writing* 5, emphasis in original). Head counters the figurative and literal erasure of a black presence by poignantly writing them back into the landscape. Human labour itself is shown to be above and beyond race and gender. The novel pushes the logic of the *plaasroman* to its limit to include labouring hands, black and white, male and female, young and old.

Head's novel stresses the value of making, that is, the role that active labouring plays in creating the possibility of a utopian space. This small village of foreigners is no Cockaygne. Nothing here is free, nothing can be taken for granted. Certainly, there is no abundance, everything has to be worked for, wrested from the sparse landscape. Unlike other villages that are named after "important chiefs or important events", Golema Mmidi was named "from the occupation the villagers followed, which was crop growing" (16)l A village of subalterns, the place is named for the work they collectively perform. Head had once remarked of the village in which she had sought refuge that it had "a sense of wovenness; of wholeness in life" ("For Serowe: A Village in Africa" 30). The metaphor of "weave" and of fabric that is thus created is a telling one. It centralizes the process of labour in creating ("weaving") wholeness and brings to mind the warp and weft of the loom. In Golema Mmidi it is the quotidian but necessary work of growing crops, the naming suggests, that weaves the growers together into a cultural fabric. The meaning of life, we are told, is a combination of love and work, and for Gilbert, the very meaning of existence resided in work and the "lack of work meant death" (82).

The centrality of work—especially collective work—is nowhere more emphasized than in the chapter which describes in detail the women getting together to build the tobacco sheds. The scene carefully delineates the *making* of a collectivity out of a disparate group. On the morning of the important day, each woman arrives bringing with her provisions tied up in bright, checkered cloths:

> One of the women stood up and collected small helpings of tea leaves and powdered milk from each bundle, and then both the powdered milk and tea leaves were poured at the same time into the boiling water. By the time Paulina emerged, […] tea was ready and poured. […] Then they all drank the tea with clouds of vapour rising up from

> the mugs into the cold air. Each woman then carefully rinsed her mug and tied it up once again in the checkered cloth. They arose and walked in a brisk, determined group to the farm. (101)

The description of the women making tea oscillates between the singular and the plural, moving from seriality to collectivity, in a careful choreography till a "determined group" walks away to start the crucial work of building the shed and therefore of building a future. Each of the ten women contributes towards the effort, bringing with them their individual portion of tea, milk, and sugar. This they gather together to make the communal tea which "they all drank" together. The almost ceremonial making and drinking of tea inaugurates the moment of coming together for a common purpose. It is a ceremony of cooperation and solidarity. The sentences alternate between the singular and the plural—"each" giving way to "they", leading back to the individual "each"—thus keeping in exquisite balance the individual and the collective. The description ensures that both the individual contribution and the collective outcome are preserved and that one is not subsumed into the other.

Trivial though the purpose may appear (making tea), it stands as a synecdoche for the larger effort of building the first tobacco curing sheds and, by implication, for the cooperative that the entire village is engaged in creating. Like the Botswana goats "who just walk about eating all this dry paper and bits of rubble and then turn it into meat and milk" (25), the village of foreigners change the stark desert landscape and, through their collective labour, create a viable cooperative market garden. The novel carefully delineates the interdependence of talents and abilities. Thus, though Makhaya, an urban journalist, knows nothing about village life and even less about agriculture, and though Gilbert knows all about cultivation and has radical new ideas about making it work in Golema Mmidi, he admits that unlike Makhaya, "I can't teach. I can't put my ideas over somehow, and not only because my grasp of Tswana is poor" (28). But while Makhaya might be able to teach using Gilbert's ideas, it is the women, "the traditional tillers of the earth, not men", who will have to become partners in this experimental enterprise. To this must be added the interdependence of cattle production and crop cultivation; that is, in an ever-growing circle, the entire community will have to pool their talents, resources, knowledge and labour to create "a whole new astonishing world" (29).

It is no accident that women are the central figures in this description. "No men" we are told, "ever worked harder than Botswana women" (100). In keeping with the mood of the entire novel, which hesitates on the threshold of euphoria, the women's efforts are presented within a larger patriarchal frame. Despite Paulina's bold leadership, only ten women have joined the tobacco-growing project while twenty more, though willing to join, "had to get the permission of their husbands" (100). It is hardly surprising that the rapid changes taking place in Golema Mmidi occur in the absence of the patriarch. Matenge, struck down by high blood pressure, spends a month in the hospital and in his absence "a number of rapid changes took place in Golema Mmidi" (70). It is for most of the year "a village of women with all the men away at cattle posts" (29). But Head's purpose is not to create a separatist feminist utopia. Instead, what she presents is the interdependence of women and men of good will. Thus Paulina, who is "daring and different" and an obvious leader, is matched with Makhaya's explicitly egalitarian gender politics. He speaks to the women as equals and each accepts the other as a person, neither male nor female: "once it struck them that he paid no attention to them as women, they also forgot he was a man and became absorbed in following his explanations" (102). If Gilbert and Makhaya are seen as the pioneering spirits in the enterprise, the novel is quick to point out that "perhaps all change in the long run would depend on the women of the country" (38).

In a remarkable scene where the women begin the hard work of making the sheds, Makhaya stumbles upon a little girl's efforts at creating a model village, carved out of mud: "there were mud goats, mud cattle, mud huts and mud people, and grooved little footpaths for them all to walk on" (103). As the women labour to create the drying sheds, Makhaya sits in a corner

carving out the last details for the model village. Head juxtaposes descriptions of work with descriptions of art and in so doing produces both as instances of labour, and as part of the effort to make a perfectible world. "The women, with pickaxes and spades, scraped out the foundation" while Makhaya "had a few short sticks in his hand and took out a pocket knife and began slicing away at the wood" (103). The alternating descriptions of labour and carving suggest both the inseparability and desirability of the two efforts. The child's attempt at carving an entire village out of mud was almost perfect. All it lacked was a palm tree which Makhaya took upon himself to add. He carefully and meticulously carved out trees, "placed the foot of each tree into the pitch bucket to prevent its future damage by the white ants" and added them to the model village (109). The child's imagination is supplemented by the adult's vision. Once again, what is emphasized is the collaboration—here one of youthful enthusiasm and mature wisdom. It is this combination that makes the model village perfect. As Makhaya finishes his carving, Gilbert, the original proponent of cooperative farming walks in and "stood gazing at the complete tobacco sheds with the same delight in his eyes as Makhaya looked on the minute village of mud people and animals" (109). The fungibility of the two villages, miniature and real, is further emphasized when Gilbert, taking the finished palm tree from Makhaya, crouches down, and places it in the most suitable spot, saying, "'Each household will have a tap with running water out of it all year round, […] And not only palm trees, but fruit trees too and flower gardens. It won't take so many years to turn Golema Mmidi into a paradise'" (109).

"I was born in South Africa," Bessie Head was to say, "and that is synonymous with saying that one is born into a very brutal world" (qtd. in Gardener 114). The burden of my argument in this paper has been to show that *When Rain Clouds Gather* was Bessie Head's attempt at writing herself out of the brutality and into the possibility of a kinder world. Though it is not a utopian in the more familiar idiom of futuristic narratives, it is nonetheless an attempt to counter "what is" with "what might be". Head acknowledged the flaws of her first published novel which she called her "most amateur effort" ("Some Notes on Novel Writing" 64). It is a notable effort, nonetheless, a literary antidote to the harshness that had surrounded her life. In "For Serowe: A Village in Africa", Head poignantly writes, "I have lived all my life in shattered little bits. Somehow here [in Botswana] the shattered little bits began to come together" (30). Makhaya too finds his world shattered, but if for Head wholeness remained elusive, she certainly allowed her fictional counterpart to put the pieces back together. It is in the midst of others who have fled their past that Makhaya is able to see the shape of an "enchanting world". For Makhaya, too, the world had shattered into fragments but he learns to put his world back together. He realizes that through the act of generosity and human compassion the world is made whole: "If there was anything he liked on earth, it was human generosity. It made life seem whole and sane to him. It kept the world from shattering into tiny fragments" (57). Throughout the novel what is seen as redemptive, even in the face of unrelenting nature, death and destruction, is the human act of compassion and kindness. The co-operation that is central to the success of Golema Mmidi stands in direct contrast to the greed and selfishness of hereditary chiefs and upstart politicians.

But the future is not guaranteed. It appears only as a possibility. Golema Mmidi is not a Christian paradise of redemption, nor is it a millenarian fantasy where a saviour inaugurates a new world for the chosen. Head places her trust squarely on human agency in the making of "no place" into a "good place": one which, like the child's attempt at creating a perfect village, is incomplete and needs to be improved. Even if never perfect, the attempt at perfectibility is seen as a worthy goal. The entire novel is cast in the subjunctive mood: tentative, hesitant, conditional. "Perhaps" and "maybe" echo through the novel and the possibility of utopia remains tantalizingly available but tenuous: "Maybe even utopias were just trees. Maybe" (162). Rain clouds *may* gather and when they do *perhaps* good things will happen. Though we do not know what they are, we imagine what may flow from such a gathering. On closer inspection

we realize that within the space of this tentative and tenuous utopia where rain has not fallen and clouds have not yet gathered, good things *have* already happened. People have gathered and we know that "all good things and all good people are called rain". It is as if, here in Golema Mmidi, apartheid's inhuman laws have been overturned and the Freedom Charter's bold declaration "The land will belong to all those, black and white, who live on it" has come true.

Works Cited

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* 1983. London: Verso, 1991.

Coetzee, J. M. *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*. New York: Penguin, 1997.

———. *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa.* New Haven: Yale UP, 1988.

Gardner, Susan. "'Don't Ask for the True Story': A Memoir of Bessie Head." *Hecate* 12 (1986): 110–29.

Head, Bessie. "For Serowe: A Village in Africa." *A Woman Alone* 29–31.

———. "A Gentle People." *A Woman Alone* 9–13.

———. "Preface to 'Witchcraft.'" *A Woman Alone* 27–28.

———. "Some Notes on Novel Writing." *A Woman Alone* 61–64.

———. *When Rain Clouds Gather.* London: Heinemann, 1969.

———. *A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings* Ed. Craig Mackenzie. London: Heinemann, 1990.

Ibrahim, Huma. *Bessie Head. Subversive Identities in Exile.* Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1996.

Kumar, Krishan. *Utopianism.* Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1991.

Nixon, Rob. *Homelands, Hollywood and Harlem*. London: Routledge, 1994.

Ravenscroft, Arthur. "The Novels of Bessie Head." *Aspects of South African Literature.* Ed. Christopher Heywood. London: Heinemann, 1976. 174–86.

Williams, Raymond. *Problems in Materialism and Culture*. London: Verso, 1980.

Epistolary Transgressions

V.M. Maqagi[1]

Bessie Head's letters are significant in understanding her deeply personal and open responses to the painful conditions of the exiled writer that she had to endure. While her fiction and her essays have a wider, public readership in mind, her letters, both those posthumously published (*A Gesture of Belonging*, 1991; *Imaginative Trespasser*, 2005) and those unpublished and kept in the Bessie Head archive in the Khama III Memorial Museum in Serowe,[2] are private and addressed to particular recipients. Thus their sense of immediacy and quality of direct dialogue offer a dramatic contrast as well as a complement to her other writings. In addition, and most importantly for this paper, some letters can be considered as transgressive in that their contents locate them in the interstitial spaces before and/or after the publication of the fiction and essays. This paper examines a selection of Bessie Head's letters in which she transgresses boundaries in order to negotiate meaning for herself as a writer and as an individual.

In response to a suggestion by Giles Gordon, her editor at Gollancz Publishers, that she should publish her letters in a book, Bessie Head said, "I wouldn't like my letters published" (KMM 44 BHP 222). Not only did she want to keep them private, but at that time she also had reasons to believe that she was being spied upon: "My mail is opened and examined" (KMM 44 BHP 222). Indeed, in *Imaginative Trespasser*, Patrick Cullinan observes that a letter from Bessie Head had a hole torn out of it and he assumes "that it was tampered with in Bechuanaland [Botswana]" (*Trespasser* 51). No doubt she felt insecure at the invasion of her privacy and the fragmentation of her control over her life. However, much as she wanted to keep her private dialogues private, her own insinuations of aspects of her personal life into her fiction and of her fiction into her personal letters seem to prompt further exploration of the relationship between her fiction and her letters.

In examining her letters, I wish to highlight their function as transgressive strategies that mediate between her life as a private individual and her public image as a writer, between herself as a writer and other writers, between herself and her publishers and agents. In her struggles, her letters perform multiple functions that helped to transcend the desperation caused by factors such as her poverty, her loneliness, and her being a refugee, and its impact on her writing. Randolph Vigne states that "the letters [were] often the transmutation of despair into optimism" (*Gesture* 7). Writing letters was also a creative way of mediating between different polarities within herself, as well as between herself and the outside world. Reinforcing this idea, Nancy Walker argues that "other forms of writing not traditionally considered 'literature' may be equally revealing of the writer's vision and relation to the world" (273). This is true of Bessie Head as her letters reveal her own perceptions and ideals.

My understanding of the notion of transgression is gleaned from Michael R. Clifford's elucidation: "That which is transgressed is […] always a limit, a line, a boundary which circumscribes, which delimits a space, an order, a mode of thinking, a way of being, and beyond which it is forbidden to go" (226). Thus, transgression signals the writer's refusal to stay within a circumscribed category of writing or area of activity, and it indicates the agency present in transcending prescribed boundaries. It does not deny difference, but creates a bridge between differences. Simon During explains this process when he states that

---

[1] V. M. Maqagi is lecturer in English Studies at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University and was an associate editor of *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region*. She writes poetry and has collaborated in running poetry workshops for women in the Eastern Cape. She is working on a collection of critical articles on Ellen Kuzwayo.

[2] References to these letters are given in brackets in the text using the file number.

> Strict divisions between texts, genres, thoughts, persons, for instance, break down because, for transgressive thought, what lies outside each unit or totality (and which defines it as a unity) also works within it (in order to delimit it). This is one sense in which transgressive thought occupies the open rather than the closed border at which the same and the other interact and repeat each other. (82)

Bessie Head's letters about her novels break down generic divisions, for they occupy the interstices between the novels as published literary texts and her private, personal thoughts. These letters compromise or undermine strict divisions through her comments, elucidating, revising, and reinforcing aspects of her fiction to her various addressees. What lies within the letters impacts on the novels and vice versa. These letters function as "those discursive modes [that haunt] the borders or margins of established literary taxonomies" (Cook 7). The scripted, unpublished commentaries in her letters lie outside each printed and published text, but work within them too. In pointing to the interconnection between Bessie Head's letters and her novels, Randolph Vigne states that "Her books are the carefully worked product of the gift and dilemma and much in the letters is their product too, but before recollection in tranquility. Perhaps the letters are at times the equal of stories" (*Gesture* 7). Substantiating this view Giles Gordon thought that "her best writing, the sheer prose and perceptions, is in [her] letters; what he [would] call [her] day-to-day journal writing" (KMM 44 BHP 221).

For Bessie Head, letters were extremely important for her survival, for they provided her with mental stimulation. In a letter to Nikki Giovanni, an African-American poet, she explains her life as "this quiet everyday round 'that makes' every sort of contact with someone else […] a real communication" (19 February 1975, KMM 75 BHP 28). She distinguishes between the value of personal privacy in her letters and an impersonal commercial form of writing in the public domain: "I do write letters some times so long they run into 16 pages, but I pace them very sensitively against the person to whom I am communicating, because it is something outside of what you can buy and sell and it is intended to give happiness to the recipient. It is something that's free" (KMM 75 BHP 28). This excerpt indicates the conventions and fundamental principles on which Bessie Head bases her letter-writing. She was fully aware of such epistolary concerns as "to whom, for whom [and] why does one write? What is the letter's destination and destiny and how is that determined? What criteria of value shape [its] writing and reception?" (Kauffman xxii). Head says that her carefully constructed letters, their purpose being directed to a specific reader, become not just a means of communication, but instruments of education through which she attempts to shape (for example) Nikki Giovanni's attitude toward letter writing and to sustain the relationship with her. Bessie Head also takes Randolph Vigne to task about his sometimes not responding to her letters. In a letter of 31 December 1975 she complains, "I wonder who is rude about sending postcards. You keep silent for months on end and then scrawl: 'Here's the heather in Scotland. What's the news …'. That's no way to communicate with a person" (*Gesture* 195).

Not only is Bessie Head an avid letter writer, she also uses them to transmute her despair into optimism. At the end of 1965, she was at her lowest ebb and feeling alienated from the community; her sanity was being questioned, her life was threatened and she was under police surveillance. On Christmas Eve in 1965, she confided to Randolph Vigne, "When life is a dreadful pain and bleak, you sort of counter this with an opposite feeling. […] Something that is created out of intense despair has a swing and flow of its own. You make a COMPLETE statement" (*Gesture* 18–19).

As a process of self-healing, Bessie Head performs another act of transgression in her letters. She deliberately breaks the division between despair and optimism by accentuating the link between these opposed feelings, seeing them as complementary to each other. She moves beyond the limits of despair to re-create herself in a short story or a character so as to help

herself to cope. In a critical review of her own nervous breakdown, for which she was confined to Lobatse Mental Hospital, Bessie Head writes to Randolph Vigne on the 13 August 1971:

> I have learnt so much. It is like saying that really bad experiences create a new perfection. I wouldn't have known the depths of feeling if I had not been dragged down to them and disliked them. I think there is something wrong with superficial goodness and most people are protected by that. I was not allowed that covering and if in the future I say: I can harm no one, I can do no wrong—it is only because of experience, which was real in its way. (*Gesture* 146)

Thus her transgressive thought is demonstrated for she sees her own experiences of crisis as a process that engenders self-reflexivity and transforms her perspective. For her, crisis becomes a self-enriching process in which the convergence of despair and optimism seems to manifest survival. Communicating this experience in her letters to friends reinforces both the experience and her own mechanisms of coping. On 22 January 1972, in a more sanguine mood, she reveals, "I am that much richer by having lived for a while in a death-grip of darkness and having been cursed and mocked by a vehement version of Satan. […] in many ways I have been enjoying a new lease on life, reflecting" (KMM 24 BHP 34).

In other instances, Bessie Head's letters manifest their transgressive qualities by blurring the divisions between her fiction and those letters that document the texture of her experiences. The fact that her experiences are fundamental to her fiction means that her letters occupy an indeterminate space. While their authenticity is not disputed, they put into question the dichotomy between personal letters as concerning strictly confidential matters, and published literary texts as involving only matters of public interest. Bessie Head disrupts the neat dichotomy between the category of literature and that of letter-writing. What is contained in the fiction, a "recollection in tranquillity" (*Gesture* 7), is repeated and reinforced outside it, in the letter. This repetition occurs when Bessie Head explains, in a letter, the transformation of her experience that is caused by the demands of literary representation. These repetitions are not identical as they tend to be framed by contexts, variously shaped by the addressee, the purpose of the letter and her own disposition at the time of writing. Thus, the multiplicity of the letters reveals the different perspectives and emphases that the contexts necessitate.

Some letters reveal Bessie Head's ambivalence in their merging and therefore transgressing the boundaries that circumscribe the roles of the creative writer and of the critic. Sometimes she is able to stand back in objective assessment of her work. At other times, she is too close to separate these roles successfully. In a letter written on 16 January 1966, she makes general statements praising and criticising some of the early pieces that she had sent out to publishers. She cites the short story "Earth Love" (1993) as the "most goddam best bit of writing I ever did" and an untitled sequel to "Beautiful Dancing Birds" (1993) as "ghastly writing" (*Gesture* 23). Her acute awareness of being an isolated outsider does not prevent her from attempting to breach generic barriers in her short stories and essays. In assessing some new stories that she is sending to Vigne, she highlights her sense of not belonging: "I guess, I grope, I guess at some goddam unfathomable life I'm not really part of. But one does not know where one belongs" (*Gesture* 24).

When Rain Clouds Gather

While many of Head's remarks so far have been broad generalisations about writing, her extensive comments on her longer fiction establish her also as a sensitive reader of her own writing. A letter dated 25 January 1967 briefly outlines of the thematic concerns of *When Rain Clouds Gather*, and their arising from the educational and agricultural development of the community on the experimental farm at Radisele to which she has learnt to adapt (*Gesture* 46–

47). Through this letter, Randolph Vigne is made to participate in the process of shaping *When Rain Clouds Gather* and to share in her convictions even before it is published.

To David Machin, her literary agent, who first suggested that she should write a book "on what is happening in Bechuanaland" (*Gesture* 40), Bessie Head explains in a letter of 5 January 1968 the representation of certain characters in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. In allaying his fears of libel on account of her using recognizably real people in her novel, she explores the issues of boundaries;

> The three characters likely to be identified with any number of people in Botswana are Gilbert, Matenge and Joas Tsepe. […] So there would be so many people who would howl at this characterization and yet he would not be they. […] Then again with Gilbert. Most of the volunteers walk around in short khaki pants and great hobnailed boots. […] In the end Gilbert is an expression of what most volunteers are like because he is a bit of all those I knew. Matenge […] is like at least a dozen chiefs in Botswana. […] they are so broad, encompassing whole social attitudes. (KMM 60 BHP 1)

Both of these letters (to Vigne and to Machin) are transgressive, respectively occupying the spaces between Head's reader in 1967 and the agent-reader in 1968, and the book after publication. Each letter re-writes, with differing emphasis, what lies outside of it. Furthermore, what is contained in *When Rain Clouds Gather* is also transgressive, figuring Bessie Head's transmutation of the real into the fictional. Bessie Head thus blurs the opposition between the actual and the imaginary. As she says, in her fictional discourses she transmutes the particularities of real historical people into generic figures that represent broad social attitudes. Only those with access to these letters may be privy to Bessie Head's explanation of this transgression.

Maru

The publication of *Maru* is accompanied by similar interchanges of letters to and from friends and agents alike, before and after publication. In insisting on the retention of the title of the novel and the names of characters, in a letter of 9 February 1970 to Giles Gordon, Bessie Head highlights the significance of names in an African context. Her assertion that "I do not write only for white people" (KMM 24 BHP 16) indicates that she is particularly sensitive to the material socio-historical and political context of her writing as well as to the potential readers of her books. The implication of her disclaimer is that she writes for Africans/blacks too, an implication that resonates with the conditions of her exile and the reasons for her alienation. In an earlier letter to Giles Gordon, in which she discusses reviews after the publication of *Maru*, Bessie Head elucidates her misgivings about readers' facile and unexamined assumptions:

> Something tortures me slightly. I am dependent on an audience, seemingly hungry to comprehend "the real Africa" and over-eager to take a writer as the epitome of everything African. How much I am the displaced outsider, I alone know. […] People who are on the road to strenuous learning are dependent on their societies for their soul evolution and each society has something to teach, […]. (22 January 1972, KMM 24 BHP 34)

She articulates the profound irony that her readers' search for authenticity leads to a false iconic status for her, whereas she is engaged in a process of learning and writing in order to ameliorate her displacement and exclusion. Projecting her as epitomizing "the real Africa" misidentifies the transformation that is occurring in her. It is both a simplified and reductive representation of her and it diminishes the complexity and heterogeneity of Africa.

The transgressive quality of the letter of 9 February 1970 lies in its placement between the manuscript and publishing. Not only is the letter handwritten, it also explains the Tswana names that she had researched. The second letter (of 22 January 1972) reveals how the reviews of *Maru*

after its publication are transmuted into a deeply personal experience. She repudiates the erroneous public image of her in this letter, replacing it with personal experiences. She reiterates: "I am discomforted by the title 'genuine African writer', because I approach my concerns with a knowing that I am the learner […] I am not directly pushing against the social grain". In another letter, dated 24 March 1972, to a fellow writer and friend, Betty Fradkin, Bessie Head explains the delicate process of balancing the inner and outer world and thereby contradicts the title "genuine African writer" in another way. She marvels at "the way a novel really gets put together from all directions. Because the bulk of *Maru* was my fascination for inner things. The Margaret personality was what I felt like at a certain stage of inner perception or development, as though I might be on a threshold of my own inner peace" (KMM 1 BHP 5). Here, Bessie Head assigns herself multiple functions in connection with her novel, referring particularly in "the way a novel […] gets put together from all directions" to the technical aspects of thematic and character development.

The letter to Betty Fradkin seems to continue the elucidation that Bessie Head began for Giles Gordon in the previous letters. In both, Bessie Head projects the tentative and speculative inquiries that underlie the writing of *Maru*, thereby placing her letters in between public, social utterance (in the character of Margaret) and the private, personal thoughts of Bessie Head. Both "learning" and being "on a threshold" point to the process of transforming the Self from a level of inner turmoil to another of inner peace. Thus letters written to different addressees set out the significance of *Maru* in different but related ways.

A Question of Power

Bessie Head was not only excited about *Maru* being 'hailed as a masterpiece" (KMM 1 BHP 5), she thinks *A Question of Power* would be her next best-seller—a sentiment that she also expresses to Gordon Giles and Jean Highland. Her assurance is, however, plagued by her misgivings. Her explanation of these feelings is couched in the style of a review as she quotes excerpts from her own novel:

> [*A Question of Power*] is almost entirely a record of the inner life, the setting is almost entirely internal, the characters move in a long dream that is actually a waking and sleeping nightmare […] the key line to it reads… "If the things of the soul are really a question of power then anyone in possession of power of the spirit could be Lucifer …". (KMM 1 BHP 5)

This letter is a site on which the quick, dialogic intersection between her roles as writer and critic is played out at the same time that the letter is being directed to a specific addressee, Betty Fradkin, who becomes the reader of Bessie Head reading herself. Thus a complex layering of writing and reading roles is created within the same letter. Linda Kauffman's idea of a "dialogic frame of reference" in which the writer is represented as a reader approaches what is happening, but whereas Kauffman's dialogue occurs between two writers, Bessie Head's dialogue is not only with Betty Fradkin, but also with herself.

Sometimes Bessie Head writes letters of such intense personal introspection that they cease to provide just a context for the novels, but become philosophical contemplations about her past experiences and how these have shaped her individuality or identity. Nancy Walker's perception of the role of letter-writing for fiction writers seems useful here: "the writing of […] letters [is] a way of defining and presenting themselves to a world outside the self—a world that they could suppose to be alien or hostile to their experiences and aspirations" (278). Countering hostility is not however the attitude of a letter that Bessie Head writes to Jean Highland, an editor at Simon & Schuster, on 13 July 1971. On the contrary, Bessie Head reveals the delicate inconclusiveness of insights gained or decisions taken in unstable moments, to

someone whose support and understanding she can rely on. The opening of the letter bears the classic confessional characteristics of an epistolary relationship:

> I write to you again because an inner pain makes me long to communicate with someone and because I have sent you some things that belonged to a private world. I also wanted this letter to cancel everything I wrote to you and Austin. Nothing I ever said to you and Austin was accurate because what is truth unfolds slowly, bit by bit, with twists and turns and jolts and shocks. (KMM 43 BHP 9)

The mediating intention of this letter reinforces the transgressive quality of its contents. Bessie Head transgresses the boundaries between Self and Other by presenting to Jean Highland "things" that belong to her private world. She also expresses a sense of regret at having gone too far in self-revelation in an earlier letter and thus, in presenting herself to Jean Highland, she also puts into question the notion of authenticity. This is because the nature of "writing-to-the-moment" in personal letters "highlights the partiality" (Kauffman xxii) of individual perceptions even at the moment of insight. Philosophical and moral insights into the relativity of truth and the intermingling of good and evil within oneself, as well as the conflict between them, also become the focus of this communication. Not only is Bessie Head repudiating the self that she presented in earlier letters, she is constructing and presenting a new and wiser self. Her letter stages this renunciation and highlights the process of growth in her own development. Bessie Head continues:

> You might not like me if you knew me, but many things I said in my letters show this up only too well, especially the wild letters I wrote to Austin. I wish them destroyed as my formal [sic] personality has been destroyed and something quieter, sorrowful and more thoughtful takes its place. (KMM 43 BHP 9)

This letter is a strategy for coming to terms with the harm she did when displacing her inner turmoil onto other people. This private review of the period of her nervous breakdown becomes an apology that is then transmuted into *A Question of Power*.

It is this process of transmutation that she explains in a letter of 30 August 1972 to James Currey, of the Heinemann African Writers Series. No longer contemplative, she gives directions, as it were, on how to interpret the unfolding complexity of her characters and thematic concerns. It is significant that she herself sees the epistolary discussion of *A Question of Power* as a re-writing:

> In many ways I have already re-written the book or explained it to people who have written to me quite hysterical letters [so] that your queries—can you stand back and look at it? made me laugh. I have done nothing else—everything bad had happened so far, letters of disgust, race, despising and abrupt indications of the end of friendships, through that book. (KMM 59 BHP 5)

Bessie Head perceives re-writing and explaining as performing an identical function: that of filling in the gaps and silences that now arise around the text of *A Question of Power*. It is not, however, so much a revision as it is a deepening of the scope of interpretation that she finds lacking in some of her readers. Explaining the motivation for writing *A Question of Power*, Bessie Head articulates its transgressive intent when she says that her novel is an elaborate answer to her own question: "WHAT DO YOU DO WITH SILENCE AND HORROR? Elizabeth's experience is of a person really outside the story. […] The horror […] is in many ways incomplete because she can only record what was thrown at her, […]" (KMM 59 BHP 5). Reinforcing the link between silence (and horror) and Elizabeth's marginalisation, foregrounds Head's struggles to break through the barrier of being an outsider. Seeing what her character records as "incomplete" conveys the contingent connections between her life and what was thrown at her. This letter goes on to draw a link between the turmoil in the protagonists and the contrasting tranquillity of the garden workers, the temporal and moral opposition between Sello and Dan, and Elizabeth's "shuttling movement" between the external and the internal worlds. In an earlier letter (1 April 1972) to Giles Gordon, and breaking out of

the category of writer, she anticipates the difficulties that this shuttling movement might cause the reader, because

> it needs a sort of gymnastic mental performance to make it coherent, a constant leap from reality to unreality and at times the two merge so totally that confusion can arise […] half the reading problems can be solved if one is able to put oneself [sic] into the weird, flexible dream-like qualities of Elizabeth's mind. (KMM 24 BHP 35)

The breakdown of boundaries referred to here reflects a comparable process that this letter is performing in relation to the text. When Richard Lister, a reader for Heinemann, writes to Bessie on 30 November 1972 that he has "finished [his] work on *A Question of Power* […], with the aid of [her] answers" (KMM 59 BHP 21) he is, by implication, responding to the multiple re-writings or explanations that Bessie gives. Her letters exemplify the animated and submerged exchanges that inhabit the space in-between and represent "the historical moment between manuscript and print, private correspondence and published text" (Cook 2).

Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind

The writing of *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* is also announced, discussed, and explained through letters to a variety of Bessie Head's correspondents. In one of her deeply contemplative moods, she writes to Giles Gordon a letter which is undated but which must have been written in 1974. She reveals the significance of the *Serowe* book to her, saying that it was "really a temporary retreat from [her] own tortures" (KMM 44 BHP 84). Referring to the positive remarks that readers have made about *Serowe*, she muses at their unawareness that it is important to her for completely different reasons:

> They wouldn't know what "the other world" cost me. They wouldn't know that for three quarter part of the time it is anguish to stay alive and that I am not writing to please them or relieve them but perhaps waiting and waiting to get beyond my own crossroad and perhaps finding my heart still alive. (KMM 44 BHP 84)

The idea of writing as waiting, a form of inactivity marked by the absence of creativity, is as unusual as it is transgressive. It locates the nature of *Serowe* on a threshold between the crisis of her nervous breakdown and full recovery. Whereas the nervous breakdown is an intense internal turmoil, *Serowe* is the result of an external interaction with the community of Serowe. On 4 January 1975, Bessie Head explains to Nikki Giovanni that she "chose it deliberately as an antidote to power" (KMM 75 BHP 13). As a restorative measure *Serowe* intervenes to ensure that she "finds her heart still alive". Thus, getting beyond her crossroads suggests breaching the barrier of internal turmoil. The letter to Giles Gordon is transgressive not only in exposing the significance of *Serowe* to Bessie Head, but also in blurring the boundary between intimate epistolary communication and the professional, business relationship that would usually exist between a writer and her agent. She states that

> I don't mind exposing myself and I like it that you feel close to me. Because, in an intuitive sense I believe lots of people travel together for centuries and they've always shared chores. We might have shared intellectual chores? I certainly feel so because I always tell you everything there is to tell anyway. (KMM 44 BHP 84)

Baring her thoughts and feelings goes beyond "intellectual chores" and into a personal relationship. In fact, she writes to Randolph Vigne on 29 October 1972 explaining that "a writer confides more out of the way things than other people might and no one really remains impersonal and unknown" (*Gesture* 169). Because letters like these communicate "out of the way things", they are transgressive, for they deliberately flout conventional rules and categories.

Bessie Head announces and explains the writing of *Serowe* in various letters. In 1972, she tells Randolph Vigne that she has "agreed with Giles to do a profile—one of those 'around the world' series on village life in Serowe" (*Gesture* 170). She explains that the theme is "one of

social reform and educational advance and people tell it to me in their own words. I link story to story with a slight historiographic narrative" (*Gesture* 177).

Years later (23 July 1981), she was to unravel the intricacies behind the writing of *Serowe* to Mary Benson: "I certainly had the best interviews in the Tshekedi section of the book. The work was a little difficult as I was entirely dependant on what people could contribute in their own words and the focus had to be on what people were doing" (KMM 84 BHP 35). She makes the transgressive nature of the *Serowe* book apparent in this letter in that she discloses that she had to traverse multiple boundaries to write it. Not only did she have to interview mainly old, rural, and illiterate people who could communicate only in Setswana, a language she could not speak. She also had to find an interpreter to make that communication intelligible to her. In a letter to Tom Carvlin (14 August 1976), she confesses "I am afraid I struggle eternally with the Setswana dictionary and phrase book and after eleven years, I've not succeeded in speaking Setswana" (KMM 7 BHP 2). She then transcribes the interpreted oral interviews into a printed script in which she weaves her own voice and her imaginative vision to forge a continuous line of historical development. For instance, she also mentions to Mary Benson that, in order to create continuity, she used "Tlhoka-Ina's" (Mrs Thato Matome) information that Tshekedi Khama's "times were famed for educational progress in Serowe" (KMM 84 BHP 35) as a link between Tshekedi and Patrick van Rensburg's work in initiating educational and development projects in Serowe. Bessie Head presents the advancements in education of these personalities as transgressing the boundaries of time and racial difference.

Working on the *Serowe* profiles makes her break the barrier of isolation from the community and it leads to her decision to stay in Botswana after many years of attempting to get out of the country. She confesses to Vigne that she has "such a grasp of our way of life here and it could never be perfect anywhere else" (*Gesture* 177). To Paddy Kitchen (6 July 1974, KMM 74 BHP 84) she confirms that "it was the *Serowe* book that made me stay here. One does not have a very long life and I put so much effort in my stay here that I thought I might as well die here". Her decision to stay can be seen as going beyond her unsettling intention of emigrating from Botswana.

At this time too, she describes writing by associating it with her unsettled state, "my writing is like looking at a landscape in haste with a fearful anxiety to leave it. Each year I was going to emigrate somewhere and I have not yet left and now I am 43" (10 March 1981, KMM 44 BHP 222). She seems to contradict herself however when, in telling Betty Fradkin about *Serowe*, she quotes a beautiful description of landscape from it and says triumphantly "Now it takes hours to write a poetic description like that! They are all there in my books" (KMM 1 BHP 12). As a figure of speech, landscape reflects her anxiety to leave, but as a description of what is actually there, it manifests her attachment to Serowe in spite of her intense suffering. In a sense these extracts reveal the vacillations of her position as an exile. Long before she was finally granted citizenship of Botswana in 1979, her writing, almost inexorably, ensures that her hesitation at her "own crossroad", her uncertainty about her direction (KMM 44 BHP 84), is transformed into final resolution in which she finds her "heart still alive". In a letter (26 August 1974) she also communicates her decision to Vigne: "I think I have told you that I had decided to stay in Botswana, come what may. I really belong here in spite of refugee status and other things, so I'll see what happens. […] Everything is so uncertain" (*Gesture* 187).

When discussing the *Serowe* book with her publishers, her letters become less contemplative, more given to instruction and directives. On 18 January 1979, Bessie Head explains her own perception of the book, to Penelope Butler at Heinemann, as focussing on the continuity of constructive growth and says that as the producer of the book she censored some interviewees' responses in order to maintain that focus. She insists that the three men around whom her book is organised (Khama the Great, Tshekedi Khama, and Pat van Rensburg) "hold together well at least that aspect of their work that I deliberately selected" (KMM 59 BHP 188).

What, in the same letter, she paradoxically terms a "complete naturalness in this accident" is important in its apparent contradiction, for it underlines the transgressive nature of Bessie Head's vision of continuity as progressive transformation. This makes her interrogate the mis-readings of the book made in the reports she refers to. The rest of the letter is taken up by careful responses to particular questions that Penelope Butler has raised, responses which are in essence a re-statement of what she had already included in the Introduction to the book. These restatements emphasize the astonishing, unexpected, pioneering forms of education in this village. Its going beyond the limits of the usual distinguishes Serowe as a unique village for Bessie Head.

In her responses about the worries she experienced, Bessie Head reveals an ability to be critical about her own work. She mentions that she re-wrote one of the interviews because on a closer study of Khama, she found her interposed comments to be inaccurate. Rewriting in this context means she might have erased other previous interviews in order to confront and project the complexity of Khama's personality as well as his methods. She says that she eliminated another interview because the interviewee lied. She also found that she had to revise the section on the Matebele to reflect more effectively the disruption of Cecil John Rhodes's conquest of the land (KMM 59 BHP 118). All these revisions clearly show that far from being mere transcriptions of interviews, *Serowe* is the result of her conscious interventions, interpreting and manipulating her material in a way that suits her overriding concerns.

A year later (20 January 1981), Bessie Head writes Paddy Kitchen a letter that is both informative and critical. She tells her about the *Serowe* book and its structure, and she expresses her sadness at the ironical coincidence of the collapse of the brigade projects with the imminent publication of a book that commends them. This letter interweaves the material value of the projects with the discursive recording of that value in her book where "a genial and expansive world has been depicted" (KMM 74 BHP 95). She also reveals the politics of foreign donor involvement in the projects. Much as she appreciates their research in and funding of the brigade system, she disapproves of Serowe being "possessed by international aid donors" and their deep resentment against "a [Botswana] government take-over of the brigades as they regard the village by now as their possession" (KMM 74 BHP 95). Her interrogation of colonialist ambitions is evident in her amazement that a Dutch researcher "claimed a village so far away from his own land" (KMM 74 BHP 95). In this way Head highlights the gravity of the foreign donors' blindness to having overstepped the limits between giving assistance and taking complete control.

A Bewitched Crossroad

When Bessie Head becomes interested in making Khama the Great the subject of her next book, she informs Randolph Vigne in 1973. She says that she discovered Khama when she was researching John Mackenzie who was a missionary in Botswana. She became interested in Khama because he "has the drama of a man who goes against the grain and he is a rare species indeed—[he has] natural genius or intelligence, *without book learning*' (*Gesture* 180, original emphasis). Similarly she tells Paddy Kitchen that "Khama had reversed the tragedy of Southern Africa in this area" (6 July 1974, KMM 74 BHP 84). It becomes apparent that Bessie Head the transgressor is fascinated by what she perceives as Khama's oppositional attitude. As Clifford puts it, "the act of transgression is an act of opposition, of contrariety, of going against the inviolable" (226) and thus, in focusing on Khama, Head brings out a transgressive aspect that inspires her. She observes to Mary Kibel that "he never does the expected thing in any situation. I couldn't take on the work otherwise; he is a big light to me" (20 December 1975, KMM 70

BHP 10). As these excerpts indicate, it was Khama's complex and enigmatic personality that Bessie Head manipulated for her historical fiction.

Writing to Mary Kibel in the same letter about the experience of researching the Khama book, Bessie Head states that

> Research is vastly different from the distilled stuff that is forced on one at school. It's an in-between world where a lot of wonder is uncovered. Half of the magic of that time, even in the official British administrative reports, is that Africa was being discovered; maps were made on the road and the land and its people were a continuous astonishment to the early explorers. (KMM 70 BHP 10)

As Bessie Head's comments indicate, letters are, like research, located in "an in-between world" in that they haunt, at various levels, the margins of established literacy categories. Research occupies the space between the gathering of information from historical documents and the production of a novel; these letters intervene between the novel and its publication. Both function as submerged and vibrant processes that connect with the "distilled stuff" that is finally published.

These vibrant processes involve Bessie Head's tampering with the limits of the factual and historical in quite a different way from her earlier fiction. Whereas she modelled some of her characters in the earlier novels on real personalities, in *A Bewitched Crossroad* the process is reversed so that Khama the Great, a real historical figure, is made to resonate ironically with the qualities of Bessie Head's fictional characters. She tells Giles Gordon that

> his main fascination for me was that I stumbled upon the male type I had deliberately created in some of my other work. Once you've worked at something that's not there, you pick up the clues very fast when you fall upon the real thing. […] he's the male type I've concentrated on for a long time. (28–29 December 1974, KMM 44 BHP 124)

The self-congratulatory air is unmistakable as her earlier literary imaginings seem now to be transformed into reality. Thus the blurring of the margins of reality and fictionality foregrounds Bessie Head's idealism which prompts her to soften what she sees as the grim official image of Khama.

In her re-characterising the "humourless and tense" historical Khama, she "creates other images around him to provide warmth and humour for [her] novel" (KMM 15 BHP 29). Bessie Head reinforces this idea in her letters to Tim Couzens (14 August 1976) and Giles Gordon (10 March 1981). To Tim Couzens (one of the people who introduced her to the writing of Sol T. Plaatje) she expresses her philosophical interest in Khama and discusses both general issues and the significance of her research on Khama. Then the discussion shifts focus to a critical assessment of the research by the historian Neil Parsons on Khama. Her criticism of Parsons's apparently negative portrayal of Khama's role in the British defeat of Lobengula is substantiated by reference to Plaatje's portrayal of the terror of the Matebele people in his novel *Mhudi*. This intertextual discussion is of sources that reside in different discursive categories: Parsons's history and Plaatje's fictionalized history. The interweaving of these texts in this letter underlines what Bessie Head saw as the importance of an author's ideological perspectives, in that they inform the author's organization and projection of the available material.

In the letter to Giles Gordon, Bessie Head elucidates how she infuses her own vision into the characterization of Khama: "I always have him off focus in the novel and a more bendable flexible personality to the forefront through whom I can present history and whom I can use more" to present the "image of a leader who preserved his dignity as a black man" (10 March 1981, KMM 44 BHP 222). This letter reinforces Bessie Head's dialogic sense that in *A Bewitched Crossroad* she is writing back to Parsons's projection of Khama. It is this "(re)presentation of history" that was to prove as much a forcible homecoming as it was an interrogation of South Africa's rejection of her. She states that "story telling needs a long thread of continuity [which] is broken in South Africa. I latched onto a continuous history here in

Botswana because it has a different political history […]. That is why I went so far as to attempt the historical novel" (KMM 44 BHP 222). Bessie Head uses "story telling" and "history" interchangeably thereby enabling each genre to transcend its boundaries to form a historical novel. In addition, the desired "continuity" is internally formed when a "A Brief History of Botswana", an appendix to *Serowe*, adumbrates *A Bewitched Crossroad*, straddling the boundaries of these two texts: "a rough resume of research I had done for an historical novel […] is printed as an appendix note to the *Serowe* book" (KMM 44 BHP 222).

Thus the textual linking has temporal significance in that it traces this "long thread of continuity" into the past. This way she transgresses the barrier of being an outsider and foreigner, of being "someone who is looking in on a birthday party to which [she] will never be invited" (KMM 44 BHP 222). Writing a historical novel is, as it were, a self-invitation into the party, for she restates to Tim Couzens in 1976 the same sense of belonging that she had earlier confessed to Paddy Kitchen and Randolph Vigne: "Once I started my Khama research I felt I belonged finally. Khama has a long shadow which lingers to this day" (KMM 7 BHP 2).

Conclusion

The selection of some of the letters for this paper manifests the wide range of correspondents, the varying depth of the exchanges, as well as the multiple subjects that intersect in their pages. One of the most important issues that is brought out in these letters is the collaboration between Bessie Head and her editors and agents, and how these subverted various customary divisions. In his definition of an author, Jeremy Hawthorn refers, among others, to Jerome J. McGann's *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism*, asserting that

> Jerome McGann has drawn attention to the gap between the author seen as sole creator of the work, and the real process of literary composition involving negotiation between historically located individual author and a range of other individuals and institutions—publishers, editors, censors, collaborating friends, critics, etc. (24)

Bessie Head's letters expose this submerged and often ignored process. Her repeated and sometimes long-drawn explanations of her fiction, her well-motivated resistance against certain suggestions, and the offers of assistance to which she submits, reinforce this idea of the interrogative and collaborative work that results in the publication of a text. Thus her letters fulfil the transgressive function of blurring the neat divisions between her published fiction perceived as completed products and the "real process of literary composition".

Works Cited

Benstock, Shari, ed. *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Woman's Autobiographical Writings*. London: Routledge, 1988.

Clifford, Michael R. "Crossing (out) the Boundary: Foucault and Derrida on Transgressing Transgression". *Philosophy Today* 31 (1987): 223–33.

Cook, E. Heckendorn. *Epistolary Bodies: Gender and Genre in the Eighteenth Century Republic of Letters.* Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996.

During, Simon. *Foucault and Literature: Toward a Genealogy of Writing*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Hawthorn, Jeremy. *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory.* London: Arnold, 1998.

Head, Bessie. *A Gesture of Belonging: Letters from Bessie Head, 1965–1979*. Ed. Randolph Vigne. London: SA Writers; Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1991.

———. *Imaginative Trespasser: Letters between Bessie Head, Patrick and Wendy Cullinan 1963–1977*. Ed. Patrick Cullinan. Johannesburg: Wits UP, 2005.

Kauffman, Linda S. *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992.
McGann, Jerome. *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism*. Chicago and London: U of Chicago P. 1983.
Plaatje, Sol T. *Mhudi*. 1930. London: Heinemann, 1978.
Walker, Nancy. "Wider than the Sky: Public Presence and Private Self in Dickinson, James, Wolf". *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*. 272–304.

INTERVIEW
WITH
PATRICK VAN RENSBURG

Interview with Patrick van Rensburg, Friend of Bessie and Founder of Serowe's Swaneng Hill School and the Brigade Movement in Botswana.

Gillian Stead Eilersen and Seatholo Masego Tumedi[1]

Gillian Stead Eilersen/Seatholo Masego Tumedi: *Mr Patrick van Rensburg, can you tell us a bit of your life history in South Africa, your place of origin, and in Botswana, your adopted home?*

Patrick van Rensburg: I was born in Durban and lived in Maritzburg,[2] where I grew up. I went to school in Maritzburg and Durban, and I later did my degree while training with the Supreme Court of South Africa as a civil servant. I was later transferred to Foreign Affairs, where I was posted to the Congo [later Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo].

It was in the Congo where I met the world and consequently found it impossible to defend Malan's apartheid government. I was set to have a bright future as a diplomat—I had a good job, I had money, and in Pretoria I was told I could have been a Permanent Secretary—but meeting people in the Congo, especially diplomats from other countries, I found I could not continue to serve the apartheid regime. I just said, "No, I can't do this." And I resigned and joined the Liberal Party where I worked with Alan Paton and other liberals until in 1960 I decided to leave South Africa as I was attracting a lot of police attention.

How did you subsequently reach Bechuanaland?

I traveled on a boat to England, and upon reaching London I helped set up a boycott movement [against the South African apartheid regime] and became its director. But I decided I did not want to live in England, so I made my way into a place called Bechuanaland in 1961 or 1962.

How did you reach Serowe and why did you choose to settle in this village?

Serowe was Seretse's place[3] and he had been consulted for permission. He was happy to receive us [South African refugees] on the condition that we would stay there for two or three weeks and that we would later be flown to Ghana. All that happened, and I spent a month in Ghana before I got a ticket to the UK. But I did not want to live in England, and Liz[4] and I decided we would go overland from Europe to Africa. So we hitched, caught buses, took trains, and it took us three months to reach Africa. We traveled through Greece, France, Egypt, Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, and Rhodesia [now Zimbabwe] before we finally landed in Francistown.

---

[1] This interview is based on questions drafted by Bessie Head's biographer, Gillian Stead Eilersen, for an earlier interview at the Pietermaritzburg colloquium on 12 July 2007. The original interview was never transcribed. Seatholo Masego Tumedi modified and expanded the original questions where necessary, and interviewed van Ransburg in Gaborone on 12 February 2008.

[2] A shortened form of Pietermaritzburg, a city in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa.

[3] Sir Seretse Khama (1921–80) was the first president of Botswana (1966–80) and the father of Ian Khama, who is set to succeed Festus Mogae as Botswana's next president on 1 April 2008.

[4] Liz Grissin, van Rensburg's wife.

In Francistown we did not like the attitude of the police. Many of them were hostile towards us because they were mostly of Rhodesian or South African origin. We were, therefore, forced to hitch-hike to Palapye where we knew someone who was anti-Smith. Here we stayed for a couple of weeks before we went to Serowe, where we got employment as teachers at Simon Ratshosa School in 1962. In Serowe we lived with Mr Mataboge who had a house next to the plot where we later built Swaneng Hill School.

You are a writer yourself[5]*. Tell us about your first book, Guilty Land.*[6]

I wrote *Guilty Land* at the time I quit my diplomatic job and left South Africa.

What is the message in Guilty Land*?*

Well, South Africa was a guilty land, and I called for international sanctions against the country.

Briefly tell us about your productive life in Serowe.

Fundamentally, we opened Swaneng Hill School. Swaneng was a multinational or international school. We had teachers from Malaysia, India, and even from European countries including the United States and Canada. We also enjoyed Seretse's support. Financially, we got a lot of help from the Swedish aid agency SIDA. It was Swedish money that built Swaneng and its sister schools.[7]

How did you start the Brigade Movement in Serowe?

In 1965 we realized we had hundreds of students we couldn't enroll into the secondary school. Then I remembered that when I had earlier passed through Ghana, I had seen some youngsters working in the streets, building pavements. I had enquired as to who they were and what they were doing in the streets. They had explained that they belonged to a brigade. So using this experience borrowed from Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana, we took in the young people who could not be admitted to the secondary school and established a brigade. The first brigade we set up in 1965 was a builders' brigade whose primary role was to build Swaneng. The second was a farmers' brigade.

Mr van Rensburg, tell us about your first contact with Bessie Head.

In the early 1960s I received a letter from friends of mine in Cape Town who knew Bessie. Two of these were Randolph Vigne and Alan Paton who were in the Liberal Party. They were supporters of Bessie.

They said she had potential to become a great writer and they were writing me letters whilst I was very busy doing all sorts of things in Serowe, and I had to tell them, "Hey, hang on! There is only so much I can do." After Bessie came to live in

[5] At the time of this interview, van Rensburg reported that he was working on the seventh chapter of his autobiography.

[6] Published in 1962 in London by Jonathan Cape and Penguin, and in New York by Praeger.

[7] The three sister schools were Swaneng Hill School in Serowe, Shashe River School in Tonota, and Madiba Secondary School in Mahalapye.

Swaneng, Alan Paton actually visited Swaneng. They were even thinking of establishing a management training unit for black South African students who could not be enrolled into learning institutions, but the government [of Botswana] never gave them support.

How did you help Bessie?

I built her a house through the builders' brigade and I gave her support. Liz and I would invite her to our house. We took care of her young son. But she was naughty because she wanted more support from me so she would tell everybody that I was not supportive.

What kind of support then did she need?

I think she wanted more attention.

Tell us more about "Rain Clouds"—the house you built for Bessie.

Well, the brigades built the house, and we decided to do the same for other people who were members. So in addition to Bessie's, we built several other houses in Serowe.

To what extent did Bessie contribute towards the development projects at Swaneng?

She worked in the Boiteko garden with Bosele Sianana and other women, and she got it going well. We had a barter system at Boiteko which everybody thought was ridiculous. We justified it by saying that if people could exchange the goods they produced with each other then we could have everything we needed including food and housing. We used an internal currency called *dirufo* in our exchange system.

She did well in the project despite her breakdowns?

Her breakdown was not immediate. But we could tell every day what mood she was in. We would see her coming to our house and if we saw that she was in a good mood we would stay and say "hello", and we would talk and laugh. But sometimes she could be rude and accuse you of all sorts of things.

What has she accused you of, for instance?

She could make up things about me. I never took note of them because they could be silly things. I believe that a part of her problem had to do with the fact that the people of Serowe were rather worried about her because she had had breakdowns.

Do you think the people of Serowe contributed to her unstable mental health?

I wouldn't like to say that because I didn't know much about her personal background.

Maybe you could tell us how instrumental you were to her writing.

I wouldn't like to claim I was instrumental to her writing. I could only say I gave her a typewriter and that seemed to have an enormous effect on her writing. But still I continued to receive letters which were saying I wasn't doing enough for Bessie Head.

We're interested in the letters which were saying you were not doing enough for Bessie Head. Was this concern expressed only in relation to Bessie Head? If so, what was so special about her?

Randolph Vigne couldn't write to me without mentioning what great potential she had. Alan Paton was aware of it, too.

In other words, she was special as compared to other South Africans?

There weren't many South African refugees in Serowe then. Anyway, Bessie Head had attracted a lot of attention by her reportage, which was regarded as exceptional.

Who were some of her friends from Swaneng?

Martin Kibblewhite and Tom Holzinger.

How much did your work at Swaneng influence Bessie's writing?

I wouldn't want to claim that [influence]. I think what we gave her was things to write about. There were all those people at Swaneng who were helpful to and interacted with her. And, well, you also know what she did to Seretse. I remember Lenyeletse[8] telling me how he had said to Seretse, "Did you see what Bessie wrote about me on the post office wall?" Reportedly Seretse in turn said, "Did you see what she wrote about me?"

So they knew?

You know, I used to say with a straight face, "Bangwato don't crush their nuts." I'll tell you why I said this. I could be having a meeting in Serowe at the Brigades or at Swaneng Hill School and some funny guy would come into the room and [utter nonsensical things] and everybody would just sit quietly. It happened several times—not just once—and with different people.[9]

What was Bessie's relationship with the royalty?

I had a feeling that she felt that when she experienced her breakdown they didn't want to be involved. Rasebolai[10] wasn't going to have anything to do with her, for instance.

---

[8] Lenyeletse Seretse (1920–83), Seretse Khama's cousin, was Botswana's vice president from Seretse's death in 1980 until 1983, when he himself passed away.

[9] Here van Rensburg refers to the Bangwato tolerance of and reticence about unusual behaviour in a public place.

[10] Rasebolai G. Kgamane was a Ngwato royal who took over the Ngwato leadership (in 1963, according to historian Neil Parsons) as Native Authority (later Tribal Authority) after Thshekedi Khama's death.

Did she want to be involved with them? Did they reject her?

> They didn't think that she had the right to go and talk to them. But they weren't cruel. They weren't cruel.

But you also helped Bessie in another important way, which you first spoke about publicly in 1998. (See Mmegi*, 19–25 June 1998) You appealed to President Seretse Khama to grant her citizenship.*

> Yes. Perhaps this was the greatest help I gave her. Bessie Head had now become an internationally acclaimed author, who had trouble with leaving and re-entering Botswana when she travelled abroad. I approached the president, explained the circumstances, and asked him for help. He reacted immediately. He set the process going which resulted in the issuing of a passport to her in 1979.

What would you say the reception of her books in Serowe in particular, and in Botswana in general, is like?

> I have written about this matter before.[11] I've said that Batswana could not read English. Therefore, they could not realize her greatness. The ordinary Motswana could not. It's only those people who are involved with literature or somehow had managed to read her books who would appreciate her work. And there was nothing about her that the ordinary person could say set her apart and thus made her different. Her greatness lay in her writing, but the people could not read her works. I have advocated for a translation of her books into Setswana elsewhere in my own writings. I feel it would be good to capture her creativity in Setswana and I hope that will happen for it would really open the doors wide for the ordinary people to experience that greatness that we all sense from reading her writings in English. It would be wonderful, and the best tribute that could be paid to Bessie

[11] See Patrick van Rensburg, "How I Remember Bessie Head," in *Writing Bessie Head in Botswana: An Anthology of Remembrance and Criticism*, eds. Mary S. Lederer and Seatholo M. Tumedi (Gaborone: Pentagon Publishers, 2007. 26–29).